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In Boston, a welcome and then a walk with Little Amal

By **Noah Schaffer** Globe correspondent,
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A crowd greets Little Amal on a visit to Staten Island. THE WALK PRODUCTIONS/RESPECTIVE COLLECTIVE

What can we learn about hope and empathy by walking with a 12-foot-tall puppet?

Little Amal, who represents a 10-year-old Syrian refugee searching for her mother, may offer an answer to that question when she comes to Boston and Cambridge for a series of events next week. The puppet has become a beacon of goodwill, interacting with more than a million people in 13 countries over the last two years. On Sept. 7, [Amal's Walk Across America](#) will begin in Boston and stretch over 6,000 miles before it ends in San Diego in November.

Amal's visit to Boston is uniting nearly 40 local arts organizations that are co-producing the free events. She'll begin her sojourn Sept. 7 with a [pair of ArtsEmerson events](#) downtown and in Chinatown before heading to Harvard Yard for a ["finding friends" event hosted by the American Repertory Theater and Harvard University Committee on the Arts](#). Over three days, she'll appear at Egleston Square, Franklin Park, the ICA Watershed, and in East Boston, concluding her visit to the city Sept. 9 by throwing out the first pitch at Fenway Park.

While the Amal events feature everything from nighttime projections to boisterous brass bands, they're structured as a narrative that invites conversation about migration, the refugee crisis, and the broader themes of what it means to be welcoming. "Amal is the best ice-breaker. She can shine a light on so many stories," says Khadijat Oseni, artistic associate for Little Amal's US team. "The audience is invested in following why she's traversing from A to Z. There's something that instantly clicks in people's hearts and minds, and they forget she's a 12-foot puppet."

Before she was transformed into a roaming puppet, Amal was a character who had just one line in a play called [“The Jungle”](#) that was set in a Calais, France, refugee camp. “While the play was running we met many people who had left the Syrian war, heading west, journeys out of terrible danger, poverty, and violence. We asked as theater people, ‘How do we respond to this vast experience of millions of people crossing enormous territories in danger?’” says David Lan, producer of “The Jungle” and “Walk with Amal.” “One idea was to honor and draw attention to this experience by re-creating it.”

Lan concocted a “very naive” plan where he would walk to the United Kingdom from a humanitarian crossing in southeast Turkey. He shared the concept with “Jungle” director Stephen Daldry. “He said, ‘That’s a terrible idea. It shouldn’t be you.’ And then we somehow had the idea of it being a puppet representative of someone who was making the journey not because they wished to, as an artist, but because otherwise they’d die. So it became this crazy idea to walk a puppet from the Syrian border to Manchester.”



Little Amal has met crowds in 13 countries over two years. IGOR EMMERICH

Amal was [constructed by the Handstring Puppet Company](#) of South Africa, and requires three puppeteers: one working inside her who is on stilts and controls her feet and facial movements, while two others animate her arms. Amal's first walk drew widespread attention from both traditional and social media, but, more importantly, Lan says "right when she started it was clear that she had a powerful effect, especially on young people — and there are millions of them — who have had anything like the experience that she evokes."

Each organization helping to bring Amal to Boston will tell a different part of her story. At the start of her journey, she'll meet with local Indigenous leaders. "It is important that as we celebrate and fully embrace the spirit of welcome that we also acknowledge the Indigenous people who in many respects are treated like refugees on their own land," says Ronee Penoi, director of artistic programming for ArtsEmerson. "That is important to underscore in a city like Boston, which has many layers of history that are not always present."

Amal's first hours in Boston will be spent in Dewey Square on the Rose Kennedy Greenway and at the Chinatown Gate. "Amal is a girl from Syria, and Chinatown is now being recognized as the [former Little Syria](#)," Penoi says. "It's not just that Syrian people were there, but also that there was collaborating and shared organizing that happened between Syrian and Chinese immigrants."

Later that Saturday, she'll be back in East Boston where she'll be joined by mariachi master [Veronica Robles](#) and her students at an event co-presented by the Institute of Contemporary Art and the ZUMIX arts and music youth organization. She'll walk from Orleans Street to the ICA Watershed, where the El Salvador-born artist [Guadalupe Maravilla's installation](#) "Mariposa Relámpago" will be on view for the final time.



Little Amal arrives in Paris in 2021. RAFAEL YAGHOBZADEH/ASSOCIATED PRESS

After leaving Boston Amal's next stop will be Western Massachusetts, where she'll appear Sept. 10 at both [Mass MoCA](#) in North Adams and [in Ashfield](#), a town of fewer than 2,000 people. "There are migrants and immigrants and marginalized people that find themselves in these rural communities," says Oseni. "She's an educational rolling project, and the full American experience includes nature and wilderness. And that opens up conversations about climate, which is one of the biggest reasons that people are being displaced."

Little Amal arrives here at a time when migration topics are routinely in the headlines. Less than a month ago, Governor Maura Healey [declared a state of emergency, saying the state's shelter system was overwhelmed](#). The issue remains [politically charged](#).

"We're not intending to engage aggressively. It's a theater piece, she's a child," says Lan, the producer. "But we're going to Arizona and Texas, complicated places where the issue is a live one. People want to engage in the issue, and Republicans as well as Democrats have said, 'We're really interested in this.' Most people want peace and want to find a way through this. Amal means 'hope' in Arabic, and that's what we want people to come away with."

Amal's Walk Across America features events in Boston, Cambridge, North Adams, and Ashfield Sept. 7-10. A full listing of the free events can be found at <https://walkwithamal.org/events>