

# Fringe 2024: Precious Cargo

**Barton Williams stands on stage in front of a wall of cardboard boxes. Footage of Vietnam plays against a soundtrack of war.**

*'Everything in life comes at a price, whether or not it comes in a box...Once upon a time a boy flew on a plane, and left his family. The end. He arrived in another country. Not the end.'*

In the dying days of the Vietnam War, Da Nang had fallen to the Communists and Saigon was under bombardment. Charities, and those in charge of the city's many orphanages, asked the US forces to evacuate their children, and on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1975 President Ford announced a planned series of thirty flights to bring as many orphans as possible to the West.

The first flight ended in tragedy, when locks on a ramp failed and the plane crashed, killing many children and adults. But over the next few weeks **Operation Babylift** continued until enemy action made it impossible. It is estimated that over 3,000 children were evacuated.

Most of the babies were orphans; many were the children of Vietnamese women and American servicemen. It was not unusual, however, for parents to use the orphanages as day care when they had to work. In the chaos of spring 1975 some of these children were also evacuated, their parents returning to find their babies gone.

The children were taken initially to the Philippines, and then

on to their new homes in the USA, Australia, and Europe, where they were adopted. Fifty years later, many are still searching for their biological families.

***Precious Cargo*** is their story.

Barton, who was adopted by an Australian family and grew up in Adelaide, is a remarkable performer. Alone on the stage for the entire show, he expertly combines storytelling (much of it in rhyme) with physical theatre. He was a sports-mad boy; he runs frantically back and forth – ‘Sport! Sport! Sport!’. Despite his size, he became a top surfer – ‘Breathe! Breathe! Breathe!’ – and it was surfing that ultimately changed his life.

But first we hear about his childhood; his wonderful, supportive, Australian mother, whose love may have been tough, but was also plentiful; his macho, somewhat racist (‘I hate these immigrants!’) Australian father, who loved him but loved his ‘own’ son Michael a tiny bit more,

*‘It’s a father DNA thing...I wasn’t always there for him but he got very cool toys.’*

Like many of the Operation Babylift children, Barton suffered at school. Children are quick to pick on any differences, but,

*‘Some got it much worse than me.’*

The show includes the words of many other Vietnamese evacuees, who were interviewed by Andrew Eaton-Lewis as part of the *Precious Cargo* project. One girl, adopted in England, thought she was the only Black Vietnamese child in the country (some of the children’s fathers were Black American soldiers.) Another constantly rubbed her eyes; there were shreds of shrapnel in them.

In 2021, Barton travelled to Lewis to appear in a surfing

film, *Silent Roar*. He loved the island, but it was the last place he expected to meet another Vietnamese. Enter **Andy Yearley**, acclaimed local composer and boatman,

*'He looks full Viet – just like me! He sounds nothing like a Viet. Just like me! He's me but Scottish!'*

Andy was adopted by Iain and Eileen and had a happy childhood.

On arrival he was half deaf, with shrapnel in his ears; damaged eardrums were common among the war babies. Nevertheless Andy has made a career in music, studying at Broughton High School in Edinburgh and the Royal Academy of Music in London, but always returning to the Hebrides.

Iain:

*'He's the island's best music teacher, and probably its best musician too. I'm biased.'*

Andy had already visited Vietnam once. Barton made plans to take Andy and a Gaelic film crew back, to find out what they could about their blood families and revisit the old orphanages,

*'I was seeing my birth country for the first time. It was time to go home.'*

Bart, Andy and several of the interviewees, talk about their first adult experiences of Vietnam; they loved the country and were happy to be there, but despite physical similarities knew they were different. They don't speak the language. Bart can't stand bubble tea,

*'I was the fake Asian.'*

Andy notes how rich they felt compared to the locals; the poverty shocked them. They found crossing roads terrifying.

Andy visited a music shop and didn't understand a word the owner said, so spoke back to her in Gaelic. Street vendors told them how lucky they were to have escaped. Bart re-enacts the obligatory haggling over prices – prices they could easily afford but were told they must still challenge. He's a great actor; it's hilarious.

But *Precious Cargo* can switch from hilarious to heartbreaking in an instant. These children's stories are sad as sad; many, including Bart and Andy, never trace their mothers, although some have more luck finding their American fathers – Americans can afford DNA testing. Bart has so many questions about his mother,

*'Was she a sex worker? Did she come back for me?'*

Andy visited his orphanage and saw children disfigured by Agent Orange, the chemical weapon used during the war. It has passed through the generations. Andy was moved to tears; none of these children would ever escape, no one would ever adopt them. He was shown the ditch in which he was found, beside a dead woman, presumably his mother.

Bart's mother once told him that he should always be careful what he said about Americans – without them, she would not have been his Mum. Operation Babylift has not been without its share of criticism; some people question whether it was really in the best interests of the children to remove them from their homeland. Bart, Andy and all of those other Vietnamese babies faced many challenges as they grew up in countries where they would always be different. But Bart adored his adoptive mother, 'she was my rock', and is still mourning her recent death; Andy loves Lewis passionately and has his own family there now.

*Precious Cargo* is a magnificent piece of documentary theatre; Barton Williams is a wonderful writer and performer, and Andy Yearly's music brings so much more to the project. Examining

an event in world history that many of us still remember (but for how long?), *Precious Cargo* speaks to us not only of the individuals whose lives were changed forever in those last frantic days of a long and controversial conflict, but also, as superpowers continue to fight their wars on foreign territories, of the children who are today being forced out of their homelands across the world.

While Bart is on Lewis, the Northern Lights perform,

*'In Australia they're called the Southern Lights. The same but different. Like Andy and me.'*

*Precious Cargo* is performed and was originally conceived by Barton Williams, with music by Andy Yearley and additional text by Andy Yearley and Laura Cameron-Lewis. It is directed by Laura Cameron-Lewis and produced by Andrew Eaton-Lewis. It was developed with support from Creative Scotland, Mark Barbeliuk and Wee Studio. For more information visit [www.sruth-mara.com](http://www.sruth-mara.com) and [www.facebook.com/sruthmara](https://www.facebook.com/sruthmara).

*Precious Cargo* is at Venue 26, Summerhall (Demonstration Room) at 15.10 until 26th August. Please note there is **no** performance on Mondays 12<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> August. Tickets [here](#).

