

# SOUTHBANK CENTRE

## Press Release

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Press images: available to download [HERE](#)

## Elif Shafak and Anoushka Shankar lead Southbank Centre's Refugee Week 2026 programme

This year's festival celebrates 'Courage' and marks 75 years since the UN Refugee Convention



L: Anoushka Shankar (credit: Laura Lewis) R: Elif Shafak (credit: Ferhat Elik)

This summer, the **Southbank Centre** celebrates the resilience, creativity and contributions of refugees and people seeking sanctuary as **Refugee Week** returns with a programme of cultural events and performances centred on the theme of 'Courage.' The Southbank Centre's Refugee Week programme, which runs **26 – 28 June 2026**, brings together artists with lived experience of displacement, leading cultural voices, allies and creatives with migrant heritage to reflect on what courage looks like today. It offers a powerful affirmation of community and solidarity in defiance of division and hostility with a dynamic and multi-disciplinary programme of DJ sets, film screenings, gigs, panel discussions and literary events in response to this year's theme.

This year's iteration of the festival takes place during the Southbank Centre's 75th anniversary year and also marks 75 years since the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention first set out the internationally recognised definition of a refugee, along with the rights and protections that must be afforded to them. Seventy-five years on, Refugee Week celebrates this historic moment with a joyful programme, shining a light on rich and multifaceted creative projects by those who have sought sanctuary.

The Southbank Centre programme is produced in partnership with UK-based charity **Counterpoints Arts** and forms part of the wider national celebration of Refugee Week, the world's largest arts and culture festival celebrating the creativity of refugees and people seeking sanctuary, running 15 – 21 June 2026.

Highlights at Southbank Centre include global bestselling writer and renowned activist **Elif Shafak**, who will deliver the inaugural Counterpoints Lecture in the Queen Elizabeth Hall on **27 June**. Drawing inspiration from the use of the term 'counterpointed' to describe the diverse and complex perspectives of people who have experienced displacement, Shafak will explore how artists displaced by war and political extremism can reshape our understanding, and whether creativity can help to heal our divided world.

Sitar virtuoso and activist **Anoushka Shankar** joins forces with Counterpoints Arts and the Southbank Centre to co-curate ***It Sounds Like Courage*** in the Royal Festival Hall, a night of performances from artists standing in solidarity with displaced people (**26 June**). Hosted by comedian **Nish Kumar** and featuring artists including **Salena Godden**, **Nikita Gill** and **MoYah**, alongside **Nai Barghouti** who performs with the **London Contemporary Orchestra** – with more acts to be announced – this showcase will be celebratory, centring community, connection, and creativity.

On **27 June**, DJ collective **Our HeartBeats** take over the Southbank Centre's Riverside Terrace for a free community celebration of the power of music to bring people together. Championing DJs from displaced and underrepresented backgrounds, the collective use music and performance to empower young people, particularly those with experience of displacement. Weaving together the sounds of home with the unmistakable reverberations of London's vibrant music scene, this day-to-night musical journey sees newly trained Our HeartBeats DJs take centre stage, supported by headline acts, to share their sounds and their stories.

A specially selected programme of short films, curated by actor and writer **Sarah Agha**, will be screened for **Arab Film Club** on **28 June** in the Purcell Room, followed by a live Q&A with Agha and the film-makers. These films demonstrate how film-makers can humanise narratives of migration, using cinema to champion stories of courage, community and resilience.

**Almir Koldzic, Director of Counterpoints Arts**, said: *"We are proud to continue our longstanding partnership with the Southbank Centre for Refugee Week 2026. Through music, spoken word, visual art and film, this exciting programme of events will bring people together to celebrate the creativity of refugees and migrants and stand in solidarity with them - fostering compassion and connection at a time when it feels more urgent than ever."*

**Ruth Hardie, Head of Public Programming at the Southbank Centre**, said: *"Developed in close partnership with Counterpoints Arts, this year's Refugee Week programme invites us to consider the central theme of courage: how courage and creativity offer new ways of seeing, questioning and imagining a future without fear and division. The Southbank Centre's programme of events and performances brings together artists and communities, making space for conversation, connection, and, most importantly, celebration of the creative and cultural impact of those who have experienced displacement."*

**Mark Ball, Artistic Director of the Southbank Centre**, said: *"In the 75th anniversary of the Royal Festival Hall, built as the centrepiece of the 1951 Festival of Britain, we are reminded that so many*

*of the artists, architects, designers and creative practitioners who created visions of the post-war future for the 1951 Festival were refugees who had fled the persecution of Nazi Germany. 75 years later it's fitting that this rich artistic partnership with Counterpoints Arts shines a light on the work created by artists with lived experience of displacement and those seeking sanctuary - work that continues to positively shape culture and society."*

Further events to be announced. Tickets for the Southbank Centre's Refugee Week programme will go on sale to Southbank Centre Members on **Wednesday 25 March** and to the general public on **Friday 26 March**. [www.southbankcentre.co.uk](http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk)

– ENDS –

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The Southbank Centre's programme is part of a wider festival taking place across the UK in partnership with Counterpoints Arts. For more information go to the [Refugee Week website](#).

## **LISTINGS**

### **Counterpoints x Footnote Prize Readings**

*Sun 31 May, 7.45pm, Purcell Room*

The shortlisted writers from refugee and migrant backgrounds reflect on themes of displacement, belonging, courage and creativity.

### **It Sounds Like Courage**

*Fri 26 Jun, 7.30pm, Royal Festival Hall*

Co-curated with Anoushka Shankar and Counterpoints Arts, *It Sounds Like Courage* brings together artists with lived experience of displacement, musicians with migrant heritage and high-profile allies in the fight for justice and equality for a night of music and spoken word.

### **Counterpoints Lecture with Elif Shafak**

*Sat 27 Jun, 2pm, Queen Elizabeth Hall*

For this first iteration of the annual Counterpoints lecture, award-winning writer Elif Shafak explores how imagination and artistic practice shape our understanding of the world.

### **Our HeartBeats: Courage in Creativity**

*Sat 27 Jun, 2pm, Riverside Terrace*

A day-to-night celebration of global club sounds, community and music's ability to unite, empower and challenge from Our HeartBeats DJ Collective.

### **Arab Film Club: An Afternoon of Short + Q&A**

*Sun 28 Jun, 3pm, Purcell Room*

A programme of exceptional short films spotlighting refugee narratives and stories of migration, curated by actress and writer Sarah Agha.

## **About Refugee Week**

Refugee Week 2026 takes place from 15–21 June 2026. It is the world's largest arts and culture festival celebrating the contributions, creativity and courage of refugees and people seeking sanctuary. It brings people together through thousands of events and activities, from performances

and talks to exhibitions, community gatherings and creative projects. A community-powered festival, it is shaped by individuals, artists, schools, libraries, venues, local authorities, cultural institutions and grassroots organisations. Founded in the UK in 1998, it takes place every June alongside World Refugee Day (20 June) and has since grown into a global movement with over 2 million participants, across over 20 countries. Refugee Week UK is a partnership project coordinated by Counterpoints Arts, working with a wide network of national partners and organisations.

[refugeeweek.org](https://refugeeweek.org) | [Instagram](#) | [X](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Linkedin](#) #RefugeeWeek #SimpleActs #Courage

### **About Counterpoints Arts**

Counterpoints Arts is a leading national and international organisation in the field of arts, migration and cultural change. Founded in 2012, Counterpoints' mission is to support and create transformative art by, with, and about migrants and refugees – so their stories shape our culture and help change how we see displacement. Their work takes place at the intersection of climate, racial justice, mental health and displacement and they produce a range of programmes including Refugee Week, Counterpoints Film Productions and Platforma festival, working across all art forms, and collaborating with a range of people and partners, including artists, arts/cultural and educational organisations and civil society activists.

[counterpoints.org.uk](https://counterpoints.org.uk) | [Instagram](#) | [Bluesky](#) | [Facebook](#) | [YouTube](#) | [Linkedin](#)

### **About the Southbank Centre**

The Southbank Centre is the UK's largest multi-arts centre and engages the most diverse audiences of any performing arts organisation in the UK. Our biggest venue, the Royal Festival Hall (2,700 seats) is the lasting legacy of the 1951 Festival of Britain and the ambition and values of that project – that arts, ideas, innovation and culture can heal communities and should be available and accessible to everyone – are still our guiding principles today. The Southbank Centre is uniquely able to offer a wide-ranging, inclusive and world-class artistic programme spanning contemporary visual arts, music, dance, performance, literature, comedy and spoken word across the Royal Festival Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room, the Hayward Gallery and our free spaces. We are also home to the National Poetry Library, the National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP), two resident organisations (Kinetika Bloco and Tomorrow's Warriors) and six resident orchestras (Aurora Orchestra, Chineke! Orchestra, London Philharmonic Orchestra, London Sinfonietta, Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and Philharmonia Orchestra).

[www.southbankcentre.co.uk](https://www.southbankcentre.co.uk)