

“Theatrical Migrations and Digital Bodies: The Migrant Voices Project.”

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The question of interculturalism and migrancy in theatre studies has pressed critical questions that engage with the politics of theatrical practice and the ethics of representation. I want to frame an argument that the recognition of migrancy as a condition of modern political and economic repression has profound significance in theatre practice because it challenges fundamental precepts of theatre knowledge and *mise-en-scène*. In this, I am influenced by Julie Salverson’s work on theatre ethics, in which she argues that the attempt to replicate human trauma through fixed representational strategies that encourage audiences and performers to “feel” the truth of their narrative, is an ethical transgression: “I am suggesting that if the overly symbolic is the evasive, the overly literal is the lie.” For Salverson, this leads to a refutation of the false affections of emotionally-coded realism, and an embrace of the carnivalesque and the comedic. I would like to suggest another direction, which leads to the implosion of *mise-en-scène* and the reformulation of the social practices of theatre-making.

I’d like to start this talk, which is a bit of show and tell, and a little bit of rant, with three images of theatrical interventions on the subject of migrancy and interculturalism. The first is from the summit of international theatre polity, Théâtre du Soleil’s 1999 production of *Le Dernier Caravansérail (Odyssees)*, produced with a cast of 40, directed by Ariane Mnouchkine; the second is from the margins where most theatre work happens; in this case, a small, unnoticed theatre company in Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario. The third is from Banner Theatre’s *Wild Geese*, from the basement of the theatre polity, with a cast of four musicians. I want to juxtapose these two productions, made only a few hundred miles apart, in terms of their social politics, their theatre ethics and their own migrations, as evidenced in their tours. This will lead to some tentative conclusions, narrowly sketched and hastily argued.

Image 1: *Le Dernier Caravansérail*

In the tradition of Brecht and subsequent resource-heavy socialist theatrework, Theatre du Soleil invests deeply in the apparatus of theatre production. The theatre as a polity (and that is now three times I have used that word) manifests and models the social apparatus. In *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, a documentary research process fed real-life narratives to the troupe, which processed them through the author and textual collaborators, and embodied them in the cast, which modeled French metropolitan interculturalism. The play, having thus gathered its migrant sources into aesthetic order, deployed the fullest technical resources of the theatre – the theatre as state and estate – and toured it

internationally. Tracing the migrations of the informants, the play migrated from platform to platform, always landing in the theatre apparatus capable of installing it, including the Villa Borghese in Rome, the Lincoln Center in NY, the Berlin Arena, and the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne. The play of constructionist materiality and actor-centered illusion in Mnouchkine's mise-en-scene requires the dialectical interface of exposed theatre practice and peak disciplinary facility, because this of course the dialectic of the theatre as the counter-state, as aspect of the state.

This is intercultural theatre as the term is often understood within the disciplinary mechanisms of the theatre professions, the theatre of those Rustom Barucha refers to as "the interculturalists" who retain "hegemonic control over the existing frames and circuits of intercultural interaction"(159).

Image Three: MT Space

Théâtre du Soleil's aesthetic order marshals the theatricalities of the avant-garde tradition, and in so doing embodies an argument that the avant-garde's (now century old) disruption of naturalism and critical realist performance, combined with authenticity of sources is sufficient to intervene in the ethical questions it raises. I want to acknowledge that this approach is capable of deeper ethical negotiations, particularly when released from the multinational theatre economy. As an example, I'd like to cite a recent production by a newly formed multicultural theatre in Kitchener, Ontario, The MT Space was founded by Majdi Bou-Matr, a immigrant to Canada from Lebanon, with the express purpose of staging works by and about experiences of migancy and interculturalism.

Bou-Matr was trained in the same avant-garde techniques that work through Théâtre du Soleil, and his work shows a similar fascination with transformational and spectacularized bodies. His most recent work, *Pinteresque*, is a theatrical riff on Pinter's Nobel Prize speech, informed by interviews with Kitchener residents who had arrived in this working class Ontario city as refugees. Bou-Matr's ethical decision was to reject the surrogation of impersonation: the actors never assume the names, identities or experiences of the informants, who were only seen in short authenticating video sequences. The unresolved question, of course, is the nature of theatrical pleasure and its function.

Image Three: Banner Theatre

My third image is of the British radical troupe, Banner Theatre. I refer to Banner as the basement of the theatre polity because it operates so far below the radar of critical reception that most theatre academics have never heard of them. Even Raphael Samuel, the radical historian whose work on the workers theatre of the 1930s was so formative, overlooked Banner and its direct connection via Ewan MacColl to the workers theatres, when he concluded that there were no existing historical continuities deriving from that movement. Banner Theatre is workers theatre, and its firm

refusal of theatre disciplinary – its rejection of plot, mise-en-scene and fable, continues the argument of the “propertyless theatre for a propertyless class.”

In its 30 years of work the various members of Banner Theatre – of whom Dave Rogers is the constant presence, as founder, director, songwriter and performer – has moved from front-line agitprops and the blends of documentary and clowning that were common idiom in the 1960s, to a more formalized, theatrically reduced for they call “video ballads,” most of which are now developed in relationship with Ground Zero Productions in Edmonton and director Don Bouzek. (I won’t go into the details of that collaboration, which I have written about elsewhere, but suffice to say that over five years of work together, Banner and Ground Zero have both reconstituted their working methods and have begun to explore digital working processes and performances).

In a sequence of video ballads under the group title of *Local Stories/ GlobalTimes* Banner produced a series of shows focusing on issues of migrancy, forced dislocation and refuge seekers in an embracing political analysis that traced the actual human cost of corporate globalization and militarized imperium. The series began in 2001 with *Migrant Voices*, based on the experience of Kurdish and Iraqi refugees in Britain, followed by *Burning Issues*, commissioned by the National Union of Miners to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the miners’ strike in 2004 and *Wild Geese*, about exile and forced migration of workers from Ireland, the Carribean, the Mid-East and Asia, in 2005.

Although I had written about Banner and have followed their work closely, I had never actually seen them perform live until the spring of 2005, when I was able to bring *Wild Geese* to Guelph. At the risk of being too local and personal, I’d like to examine my own experience of seeing that show in order to extrapolate the crisis that I suggest Banner exposes in our practice of theatre-going. It is my belief that Banner challenges ideologically constituted modes of spectatorship by displacing our expectation of spectatorial pleasure.

Perhaps the best way to describe the video ballad is to describe what I saw, and my ambivalent delight and discomfort in the deregimented presentation.

Banner came to Guelph because I have been for many years a member of the board for Ground Zero, which really only means that I am someone Don Bouzek can trust to fulfill the obligations of a board member without personal investment. In the spring of 2005, Bouzek was arranging a tour of *Wild Geese* in Alberta and Ontario. Theatre du Soleil tours into the facilities that embody the performance of the state; Ground Zero tours into facilities that embody living in the state. With patchwork funding from various councils and unions, he was able to set up a

tour by selling performances for cost-recovery. That means he phoned me and asked if I could sponsor a performance in Guelph. I contacted activist friends in the NDP, labour and student political circles and they agreed we could sell 200 tickets. At \$10 each, that could mean a surplus to donate to a cause.

This is a familiar story but let's pause and think about it. The performance I brought to Guelph was actually two, because Don was also touring a video ballad by Ground Zero with Maria Dunn, built on a song cycle of songs about Alberta's working class history. Two performances for a \$1000. Six musicians, two techies and a director, traveling by van, sleeping in my friends' houses.

Think about the economics of that and what it means. What it means is that political theatre like Banner operates literally on the level of household economies for most people, where \$1000 may mean meeting the mortgage or not. Now let's think about the cost of installing *Le Dernier Caravansérail* in the Lincoln Centre. Of getting it to the Lincoln Centre. And let's ask how economies of scale affect the ethics of performance.

Arriving in Guelph without celebrity and cultural capital, Banner pulled an audience of about 40 people. It was a hard sell. The local activist music store wouldn't promote it because it was 'theatre'; the public library wouldn't display a poster because it was 'political': The tour was partially sponsored by CUPE but the CUPE office on campus wouldn't promote it because it was being sponsored by a tenured faculty member (and CUPE represents part-timers); the Steelworkers didn't answer the calls. And so on. The story is familiar to anyone working in popular theatre in Canada.

So it was with some awkwardness and shame that I sat down to see the show. Which began not with a theatrical flourish but with a casual entrance by the musician to check equipment, and a brief introduction by Don Bouzek, who explained the genesis of the project in a detheatricalizing prologue that served to offset our expectations of theatre decorum in the performance to follow. Enter Maria Dunn and her fiddler accompanist (who had been engaged for this tour.) Standing firmly in place side by side in front of the large projection screen that dominated the space, their performance of Troublemakers was disconcerting. The music, with Dunn's characteristic blend of celtic folk and country & western was catchy, and her voice carried passionate anger. Behind her Bouzek's image sequences and voice-overs provided context and argument.

Although it seems like a concert, her performance has none of the adlibs and asides that respond to the concert audience. It is austere and rehearsed, so that her songs establish a dialogue with the digital images and voiceovers.

[I'm going to try and give you a sample, by showing a digital sequence from the show and playing the song that

matches it. There's an implicit comment in here about the processes of reduced theatre, when the text and mise-en-scene can be extracted from a laptop and ipod. What is absent of course is the phenomenal presence of the actor and the reciprocal constitution of performer and audience... a constitution that I gesture to as Maria Dunn's surrogate.]

The narrative technique is conventional to the community documentary form that was so widespread in Canada and Australia in the last decades of the 20th century, but the performance method derives as much as from high formalism as it does from popular culture. The basic theatrical vocabulary at work here is not unlike – and in some ways is related to – the typifying formalism of the New York avant-garde: actor-musicians, digital video projection and audio recordings creating a montage of recorded actuality and performed commentary. The mix of live music, digital video, documentary collage and news item voiceovers disrupts normative patterns of theatrical reception. It isn't theatre, but neither is it video, or concert. It is the performance of hybridity, as forms migrate and reterritorialize, across disciplinary, cultural and national borders.

In *Wild Geese*, all of the elements were present but amplified. The film sequences were more elaborate, combining direct address interview sequences, agitprop graphics and animation. The cast of three musicians, played in the cultural fusions commonly referred to as “world” music: Dave Rogers carried vocal in an idiom that traces directly to Ewan MacColl, Jila Bakhshayesh moved between Iranian and Klezmer vocabularies, and Fred Wisdom triangulated them with a strong reggae inflection. Here's a sample: TRACK 11 BANNER

Like Brecht & Weill's *Mahagonny* Songspiel in 1930, the performance of theatrical songs against projections is sustained in the conventions of theatre aesthetics: rigorously rehearsed, constituted in spectatorship, driven by narrative and argument. I am fascinated by the presence of the musician-actors in performance. Unlike concert musicians – especially in the popular modes they perform – they do not interact with the audience. As Bert States has said of the performers in Handke's *Offending the Audience*, “The actors are simply representing speakers who are denying they are actors” (33). Their onstage interaction is improvisational but not improvised. They move about in relation to each other within delineated conventions. Rogers for instance, might wander over and watch Wisdom during a guitar riff; a moment of song might establish eye contact and gesture. Like musicians, they play with each other; like actors they play off each other. And at important moment, they watch the digital video with us.

Because their gestural range is narrow and un-affective, my emotional response was redirected from the presence of the actor to the powerful, media-savvy projections. In this way, the theatrical apparatus is collapsed in the

low-affect presence the performer and the projection screen. Not a refusal of the cultural technology of mise-en-scene and dramaturgical fable, but a compression.

Sitting in the George Luscombe Theatre at the University of Guelph with a small audience, I felt that I was watching a performance and a demonstration of a performance, and I recognized that this was a function of the coded decorum of the theatre space, as opposed to a club or union hall, and a consequence of a small audience, that was much less likely to hoot and holler. But at the same time, this was the actual fact of theatrical migrancy: shoestring touring to small audiences in unsuitable places. Their presence at Guelph was a product of a long chain of events and conditions but the most significant was the ability of digital media to bring bodies together – literally in the case of Banner and Ground Zero -- and for bodies to join together to respond to digital media. Migrant bodies, migrating cultural practices, the autocritique of presence. My ambivalence in the end was not one of performance conventions, but a recognition that this community in performance would connect and move on. The migrant passes through. Perhaps the most significant difference between Theatre du Soleil and Banner is that *Le Dernier Caravansérail* needs to be loaded-in and installed; it needs to *run*. But Banner is always a one-night stand.

Four hypotheses from this:

Migrancy is both subject and process, or condition and consequence, and as it increasingly reorders our understandings of history and cultural power, it exposes the hegemonic unstable operations of fixity – not just of systems and politics but of cultural practices.

- ☒ Migrancy exposes theatrical aesthetics as cultural economics
- ☒ Migrancy and forced dislocation produce decentered and dispersed performance forms
- ☒ Dispersed acting is deregimented acting
- ☒ Migrancy require an ethical refusal of mimesis

Pause for thought here: is there a relationship between social location, audience, theatrical form and migrancy as forced dislocation? If we cannot represent the other in textual narrative – thus the pressure towards documentary – how can we plasticise the other in mise-en-scene? This returns me to my opening reference to Salverson, for whom this ethical imperative offers new avenues of knowledge and release in the comedic. Banner offers another direction to me: by manifesting phenomenally the passages of migration and the connections of global resistance, becoming not a

theatre but *instances* of a theatre.