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Politics and mythopoetics

It is 1939, the brink of the Second World War. A hot evening. In the garden of an elegant home on the island of Tasmania, a charity performance is unfolding: the host, a middle-aged woman, is playing the exiled Iphigenia, daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, stationed as priestess at the temple of Artemis at Tauris, where she must condemn all strangers to death. As this Australian Iphigenia stands amid crumbling (but not ancient) marble columns and recounts a terrible dream about the ruin of her ancestral home in Argos, an interloper in far-flung Tauris/Tasmania is brought to her to be sacrificed. Iphigenia does not at first recognise her brother, the shipwrecked Orestes, played by the host’s husband. In the next scene, set the following morning, a blind guest to the house stumbles upon the imitation temple and is disoriented by the echo of his footsteps on marble in the Australian environment.
He explains afterwards to his concerned hosts: ‘I was lost. I thought I was dead.’

Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Tauris* (Theatre of Dionysus, Athens, c.414–412 BCE) bookends playwright Louis Nowra’s landmark work *The Golden Age* (Playbox Theatre, Melbourne, 1985), serving as both play-within-a-play and askew mythology. Iphigenia’s words of sympathy for Orestes and his cousin Pylades, ‘[y]ou surely have sailed long and far to this land; and long will you rest abroad in the earth below’ (ll. 480–81, p. 103), or in Nowra’s version, ‘[y]ou will die in pain and lie in an unmarked grave’ (p. 94), prefigure the trauma that is about to be visited upon Australian society: a cataclysmic war for which tens of thousands of its people will travel half-way round the world to die far from home.

*The Golden Age* plugs into another mythology with its story of a ‘lost’ tribe discovered in the Tasmanian wilderness, the inbred and dying descendants of a band of escaped convicts and other misfits of the colonial past. ‘Nowt more outcastin’, the forest people’s mantra, remembers the pain of their ancestors’ exile (cast out first from Britain, then from colonial society), while their failure to thrive offers up the frightening prospect that a strand of Australia’s migrant bloodline was rotten at the core. And inasmuch as the forest tribe may be read as an allegory for the Tasmanian Aboriginal population, obliterated by settler colonialism, the rupture of exile is ghosted by its inverse counterpart: the rupture of invasion and genocide.

This book concentrates on mid- to late-twentieth-century and contemporary theatre and performance
engaged with stories, conditions and experiences of migration, though in doing so it traces migration histories and theatrical practices that are older than this. Even when we exclude its non-human forms, ‘migration’ is a word that encompasses a lot. What we can say is that whether it is thought of in terms of individuals (immigrant, expatriate, temporary worker, exile, refugee, itinerant, cosmopolitan nomad, et cetera) or collectives (colonial settlement, diaspora, slave or convict transportation, trafficking, displacement), migration is, at its heart, about encounters with foreignness – with foreign people, and with foreign places. These are, it may be supposed, ingredients of good storytelling.

But what do we mean by ‘foreign’? Does ‘foreign’ simply refer to the geographical fact of coming from elsewhere? Or does it imply a stranger? In her book *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (2000), Sara Ahmed warns against taking for granted that being a migrant consigns one to being a ‘stranger’, noting that it is ‘relationships of social antagonism that produce the stranger as a figure in the first place’ (p. 79). The unlucky ‘strangers’ who arrived before Orestes and Pylades at Tauris in Euripides’ play are, it seems, aptly named in modern translations.

Migrants and strangers are also, of course, produced by movements through space. The work of Michel de Certeau gives us a useful starting point for thinking about these. In the chapter ‘Spatial Stories’ from *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), he conceptualises *place* as physical environment and *space* as human practices, relations and perceptions within
it – or more succinctly: ‘space is a practiced place’ (p. 117; italics in original). Remembering Ahmed’s insistence that we don’t just assume that ‘migrant’ = ‘stranger’, we see that it is only in de Certeau’s spaces that migrants become strangers (that’s not to say that migrants cannot themselves feel strange regardless of whether they encounter anybody else). The Golden Age can be deciphered as a palimpsest of spatial relationships to place: a layering of arrivals and departures, the result of involuntary migrations back and forth between Britain and Australia, and between suburban civilisation and wilderness. De Certeau argues that on a fundamental level, ‘[e]very story is a travel story – a spatial practice’ (p. 115). The ‘spatial syntaxes’ (p. 115) of storytelling, he suggests, are not separate from life, but ‘carry out a labor’ (p. 118): stories ‘make the journey, before or during the time the feet perform it’ (p. 116). Language orders the interplay of place and space.

In theatre, we find particular footholds for comprehending de Certeau’s philosophical account. Theatre about migration opens up bodily lexicons, as well as spatial syntaxes. Bodies on stage (or in the classroom, or on the street, or wherever else performance happens) actualise stories with a voice, accent, skin and history. So the cross-casting of Aboriginal Australian actors as Nowra’s forest people, speaking the bawdy, Cockney- and Gaelic-inflected language the playwright invented for them, would flag up a very different roadmap of travel, kinship and dislocation stories than the casting of Australian actors of English, Irish, Welsh or Scots heritage. Oftentimes, theatre of migration
pays attention to imagining the contact zone between those
who arrive and those who lay claim to ownership or cu-
stodianship over a territory. But who does the imagining?
Some of the work discussed in the following pages was writ-
ten, produced or performed by migrants, while some of it
comes from artists working in their natal environments (this
includes the second-, third- or further-generation descend-
ants of migrants as well as indigenous people).

An excavation of the authorial origins of iconic narra-
tives of exile, journeying or pilgrimage for the purpose of
comparison with today’s theatre makers would be a largely
unhelpful exercise. What matters is whether and how these
and other recognised narratives – the Ramayana, the Book
of Exodus, Medea, Iphigenia in Tauris, Oedipus the King and
Oedipus at Colonus, Journey to the West, The Divine Comedy,
The Wandering Jew, As You Like It, The Tempest – influence
the way we tell and hear migration stories. I’m aware that
reeling off this mini-list generates slippages and confla-
tions between the religious and the secular, between myth,
drama and verse, between European and Asian, not to men-
tion slippages of more than a millennium. My discussion
here is concerned more with the cultural and political uses
of mythic or canonical material than with the particularities of
its mode and content.

In relation to the uses of myth, Jean-Luc Nancy offers
valuable insights. In the chapter ‘Myth Interrupted’ from
his book The Inoperative Community (1991), Nancy states
that ‘[m]yth is always the myth of community, that is to
say, it is always the myth of a communion’ (p. 51). By this
he doesn’t mean that myths are always about community, but that in the act of telling they gather people, igniting co-investment; in the context of theatre, the value of myth as a gathering, collectivising force is clear. For Nancy, what myths do matters more than what they consist of: ‘we know that although we did not invent the stories ... we did on the other hand invent the function of the myths that these stories recount’ (p. 45). Part of what myths do, Nancy suggests, is embed power: ‘[w]hat is “mythic status”? What privileges has a tradition of thinking about myth attached to myth...?’ (p. 48). This is especially interesting in the context of Nancy’s key claim, that modern and postmodern societies ‘no longer live in mythic life’ and ‘have no relation to the myth of which we are speaking’ (p. 52). Given this ‘interruption’, what is myth – and canonical texts, which are frequently the vehicles for myth – doing in contemporary theatre of migration?

The first section of this book develops this question in relation to the languages, stories, artists and audiences of theatre of migration. (I’m using the phrase ‘theatre of migration’ as shorthand for a range of theatre and performance that is responsive to different contexts of migration.) A concern with the politics of myth-making or mythopoetics persists throughout the second and third sections of the book, ‘The Migrant Nation’ and ‘The Migrant City’, but in these sections I am most interested in situating the nation (and nationhood) and the city (and urban identity) as sites as well as ideas with which theatre of migration is continually in conversation. In the second section the discussion turns
briefly to the partition of India and its consequences, before concentrating on the settler colonial (sometimes termed ‘settler invader’) nations of Australia and New Zealand, while the third section takes as its case studies the cities of London, Cape Town and Toronto.

This structure is, obviously, one of innumerable ways in which a discussion on theatre and migration might proceed. The organising principles that I employ will, inevitably, highlight particular aspects of migration and of performance practice, while marginalising or obscuring others. ‘Migration’ is a big, unwieldy word with which to follow this book’s ampersand, one that manifests in diverse and complex historical, social and cultural contexts. A migrant can be a person who leaves one home and makes another, or one with multiple homes, or none, or a person who eschews geographical fixity altogether. Migrants can be individuals, families or political communities. They may move by choice or by compulsion. They may be made welcome or shunned. And each of these contingencies can bleed into another.

While the main emphasis of this book is mid- to late-twentieth-century and contemporary theatre informed by histories of migration that also engages with migration as a topic or trope, it is important to locate the emergence of conditions of its possibility in the popular itinerant and immigrant theatres of the nineteenth century, which didn’t necessarily foreground stories of migration. Theatrical trade routes mapped economic ones in the era of European imperial expansion and consolidation, with theatrical managers such as Maurice E. Bandmann and J. C. Williamson,
actor-writer-managers such as Dion Boucicault and actors such as Julius Knight, Charles and Ellen Kean, Ira Aldridge, Oscar Asche and Lily Brayton establishing successful – and profitable – transnational careers spanning Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India, Southeast and East Asia and Africa (in relation to work in Australasia, see Veronica Kelly’s 2011 book The Empire Actors, and for details of Bandmann’s international career, refer to the Global Theatre Histories project, led by Christopher Balme at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich). Russian imperial geopolitics prompted theatrical migrations over a similar period: from the late nineteenth century to the mid-1930s, Yiddish theatrical troupes, compelled by persecution and by economic pressure in Russia and Eastern Europe, travelled to Western European cities and to New York, offering a range of popular musical, vaudeville and dramatic entertainments and in some cases playing a role in the development of theatrical Expressionism and Modernism (see David Mazower’s 1987 book Yiddish Theatre in London and Nahma Sandrow’s Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater, 1995). While imperial-era popular theatres were dominated by a repertoire of European plays and operas and European forms (melodrama gradually making room for Naturalist, Expressionist and Modernist work), some distinctly hybrid forms emerged out of colonial contact, such as the popular Malay-language, Eurasian musical theatre that toured the Dutch East Indies, detailed by Matthew Isaac Cohen in The Komedie Stamboel: Popular Theater in Colonial Indonesia, 1891–1903 (2006). If itinerant
and immigrant practitioners didn’t tend to make migration their topical focus, the cultural and economic transactions initiated by their work represent the beginnings of theatre’s globalisation as we recognise it today. These artists’ careers also show how theatre and migration can be mutually propelling activities.

The post-imperial consciousness with which Nowra imbues The Golden Age – characterised by an awareness of shifting local and international affiliations – can trace its inheritance directly (if not solely) to the migrations and cultural transplantations that gave rise to imperial and colonial theatres. I offered the example of Nowra’s play at the start of this book not to make a case for the enduring relevance of ancient Greek theatre and mythology, but because it offers a good place to begin thinking about how a play can enfold ancient ideas about exile, so that meaning, and indeed meaningfulness, derives from this enfolded, even as it opens up tensions between the ancient and the contemporary. If theatre of migration can both shape and reflect a society’s imaginings of its ‘others’, then these imaginings are always already caught in an echo chamber of archetypal, often heroic, narratives. Certain mythic cornerstones – the painful separation, the journey, the encounter with others, the longing for home and, sometimes, the nostos (homecoming or return) – tend to prevail as far as the emotional legibility of migrant narratives is concerned. To put it another way, we already have a symbolic system by which we recognise (the Latin etymology is ‘know again’) migrants and migration, and this compels our reading of the political present.
We also have ways of recognising migrants laid out for us by bureaucracies. One of the most pressing questions we need to ask about the relationship between theatre and migration today, and a key component of this book’s focus, is what migrants are made to mean under contemporary capitalism – it seems unwise to call it ‘late’ – when belonging is rationalised (and rationed) via an arsenal of passports, visas, body scanners and biometrics. It is from this rationalisation that formal categories of non-citizen emerge: highly skilled migrant (designated in the United States as an individual with ‘Extraordinary Ability’, and in the UK under various ‘Tier 1’ categorisations: ‘Exceptional Talent’, ‘Entrepreneur’, ‘Investor’ and ‘General’), temporary worker, family migrant, student, unauthorised asylum seeker, refugee and so on. Each category carries an associated moral tinge, occupying a higher or lower rung on the ladders set out by what Homi Bhabha calls ‘surveillant culture[s]’ interested in differentiating ‘the good migrant from the bad migrant’ (The Location of Culture, 1994, p. xvii). We are living in a contradictory time in which capital moves more freely – many would argue more recklessly – around the globe than ever, while human movement, even in its increasing numbers, is subjected to closer scrutiny and codification. Theatre that has something to say about this has something to say about our global era.

What I’m calling a ‘mythopoetics’ of migration – literally ‘making myth’ out of migration – describes an accumulation of visions of foreignness that have collided in the globalised, bureaucratised present. Migrants exemplify the
new in terms of mobility and adaptability (qualities that may, depending on circumstance, have everything or nothing to do with autonomy, choice or wealth) but are also frequently made recognisable – communally, Nancy might add – by way of mythologies about exiles or strangers extracted from the distant past. In other words, today’s migrants are of their time, their documented or undocumented selves politicised by their border crossings, and yet they are known, at least in part, out of their time. The readiness with which exile (surely the most romanticised of migration’s categories) can be flattened by a telescopic view of history is indicated by the opening sentence of a recent book on exile and literature: ‘Exile is a phenomenon with a very long history: from Anaxagoras and Ovid to the recently exiled intellectuals, displaced persons, and refugees’ (Agnieszka Gutthy, Exile and the Narrative/Poetic Imagination, 2010, p. 1). Of interest to me in this sentence is not that exile, like migration generally, is an old thing, but that the mythic weight of ancient stories pushes in on the present, entangling the economic and political conditions of contemporary mobility with transhistorical ideas about value or status. So we have to ask what might be the politics of mythopoetics in theatre of migration. What I’m getting at is: how and for whom is a mythopoetics of migration functional, and how and for whom is it dysfunctional?

Languages

In this book, I discuss mainstream and minor text-based drama, musical theatre, physical theatre, circus, dance,
participatory theatre, documentary and site-specific performance, state-sponsored spectacle, and festivals, as well as political activism. In their capacities as theatres of migration, each can perform incisive cultural work that stems from the languages that are used – or absent. Some tools for reading these works can be derived from intercultural theatre scholarship, though I tend not to characterise them as ‘intercultural’, given that the word’s implied designation of discrete cultures is prone to reifying relationships and artistic sources into an either/or. Nevertheless, some of the key issues at stake in intercultural theory and practice inform my reading of theatre of migration, and particularly its languages: mismatches of intention, methodology and perception, ideas about intellectual, cultural or spiritual property and the risk of decontextualisation, appropriation and commodification. In contexts of migration, to use a language is to transmit meaning across cultures and to unsettle semantics, and these are things that happen in nexuses of power – differences of culture, nation, class, race and gender – as well as over sometimes vast stretches of time and space.

Language and accent can have complex and often multiple effects in theatre of migration. They mark the performing body just as powerfully as skin: both may be political, as well as personal. A useful illustration of this can be found in Veronica Needa’s autobiographical solo work *FACE* (Hong Kong Arts Centre, 1998), directed by Tang Shu-wing, which traces her family’s British Hong Kong Eurasian history. Combining text-based and playback theatre, *FACE* was
commissioned for Hong Kong’s Festival Now, whose 1998 theme, ‘Invisible Cities’ (borrowed from Italo Calvino’s evocative title), aimed at providing a forum for Hong Kong’s marginalised and minority communities, including Filipino and Indian migrant workers and the Eurasian community. Needa describes the markedly different sensations and emotional consequences of performing for Hong Kong audiences in her half-forgotten mother tongue of Cantonese in comparison to English, the language of her literacy and daily life. The process of re-learning Cantonese was, Needa recalls, ‘excruciatingly difficult and slow’, like ‘returning to a kind of infancy’ (FACE: Renegotiating Identity through Performance, 2009, p. 17), but it eventually led to ‘a visceral pleasure in delivering the Cantonese text. ... the text became much more integrated into body memory’ (p. 18). Later performances of FACE in Britain (Lumley Studio, University of Kent, 2006) were more fully bilingual, the text reoriented to take account of broad national tastes. Metaphors in the two languages shifted in accordance with, on the one hand, a British predilection for irony (and general distaste for earnest sentimentality), and on the other, a more sentimental Hong Kong Chinese disposition: ‘[t]he metaphor of “moving” through honey being “sweet but thick” – in English with an edge of irony; becomes “immersed” in honey, “sweet enough to enter the heart” in Cantonese – directly sentimental’ (p. 16).

In her essay ‘The Home of Language: A Pedagogy of the Stammer’ (2003), on migrant subjectivity and the attempt ‘to locate a home within language ... which is not one’s first
language’ (p. 41), Sneja Gunew describes the shift from one’s birth language to the language of one’s adult life (and, crucially, of literacy) in terms of displacement. This may or may not involve geographical migration; Gunew discusses the fragility of dialects and patois among certain diasporic groups where requirements to converse in a dominant language override contexts for using the first language: ‘[t]hose who aspire to the cultural capital of the dominant language ... are doomed to hear these first languages as disabled tongues, as lingual impediments, a stammering spasm in the midst of sleek, global rhythms’ (p. 52). Noting that the stammer or stutter is traditionally taken to indicate ‘disabled access to speech’ (p. 44), Gunew investigates the potential for such quirks to productively destabilise cultural certainties, revealing heterogeneity (including foreignness) within language groups. For Needa, re-learning also had the creative affect of ‘visceral pleasure’. While Cantonese cannot be called a minor dialect, it was for Needa the language of babyhood, of hired nannies, not the sphere of literacy or of Eurasian culture. Nor was it a language she used with her father. Delineations of social class, gender and ethnicity were woven into Needa’s voicing of Cantonese on the Hong Kong stage in ways that were not as apparent in Britain.

This transnational example demonstrates several points about language and bilingualism. Perhaps most importantly, it shows us that language on stage can contain meaning without necessarily conveying meaning to an audience. In this regard, the politics of language in theatre is a complex thing: at once public and private, manifest and invisible,
depending on the codes and competencies with which audiences are equipped to read a performance.

**Stories**

When a mythic or canonical model for imagining migrants and migration narratives is folded into contemporary theatre, we should ask how the model feeds the new work (and endorses its participants), and vice versa. An interesting case study for applying these questions is a production of *Pericles* (The Warehouse, London, 2003) co-created by the Royal Shakespeare Company and London theatre company Cardboard Citizens, which works with homeless and formerly homeless people, including asylum seekers and refugees. Directed by Adrian Jackson, the founding artistic director of Cardboard Citizens, *Pericles* was presented by a mixed cast of RSC actors and performers from refugee backgrounds. An interweaving of refugee testimonies with the Jacobean text, itself co-authored by Shakespeare, fleshed out equivalences between the two. Obviously, on one level, the production ran the risk of obscuring the particularities and urgencies of today’s refugee politics: Pericles is not one of a generic many, but a privileged individual, temporarily exiled from his exulted position. But certain resonances were striking: the birth at sea of Pericles’ daughter, Marina, for instance, was echoed in the story of a refugee born at sea. Moreover, the interpenetration of a Renaissance retelling of classical heroism and struggle with the supposedly insignificant stories of individuals living on the margins of contemporary society emblematised a commensurate right to be heard.
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