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**In Transit: Wajdi Mouawad's *Scorched* in Bremen, Germany as Theatre of Anticipation.**

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### **Introduction**

Any person coming to Germany who is persecuted politically or in another way in their home country (as in Syria by the terror militia of the so-called “Islamic State”) has the right to be considered for refugee status and to apply for asylum. While the person is awaiting the result of the check, and if refugee status and asylum are granted, it is then the responsibility of the state to assure dignified treatment of the applicant or refugee. In Germany, since 1953, 4.6 million applications for political asylum were received, of which 0.9 million were received between 1953 and 1990, and 3.7 million since 1990. In the last few years, the figures are 127,023 for 2013, 202,834 for 2014, 476,649 for 2015 and 181,405 for January to March 2016. While the federal government of Germany is keen to see refugees integrate into the state, bureaucracy is sometimes blamed for inappropriate delays of dealing with applications, and there are concerns about the appropriateness of the very concept of *integration* and the related marginalisation of migrants across generations. The names and the looks of these immediate refugees, as well as German-born second and third generation immigrants who came to Germany decades earlier make these people to be perceived as non-German and alien (Sharifi 2014, 35). The question remains: what have the state and its cultural institutions done to change these stereotypes? Sharifi points out that at its annual 2011 meeting the German Dramaturgische Gesellschaft noted that Germany’s cultural diversity was not yet represented appropriately in the core programme of German municipal theatres (as opposed to special events). Hence it urged cultural institutions to develop more activities of this nature and provide alternatives to out-dated concepts such as integration. In this, Sharifi concludes that theatre can and should support the acceptance of migrants as a positive feature within German society (2014, 43).

Following this suggestion, in the 2014/15 season, the municipal theatre in Bremen put on a total of fifty-two events relating to migration, under the heading of *In Transit*, to start developing alternatives through arts to such out-dated concepts as integration. The activities of the *In Transit* initiative ranged from full productions of classical and contemporary plays to discussions with the audience, and events staged for specific refugee groups. The majority of these events came ahead of the massive wave of migration in the summer of 2015. For the 2015/16 season, the theatre wanted to go further and focus on telling a story of the vehemence, weight and impact of an ancient Greek play with its selection of Wajdi Mouawad’s *Incendies/Scorched*, directed by Mirko Borscht. In the following, we discuss how Borscht’s staging addressed the issues of migration in general, and specifically in the context of Bremen theatre’s outreach activities.

### **DANIEL**

The theatre in Bremen is a typical German city theatre, programming drama, dance, musical, operetta, opera and theatre for children and youths<sup>1</sup>. The theatre launched its innovative *In Transit* under the leadership of its artistic director, Michael Börgerding, and dramaturg, Regula Schroeter, who wanted to find out more about the people who were moving into Germany. They were also interested to learn how migration affects the German people themselves. With

hindsight, assistant director Friederike Schubert and the newly appointed leading dramaturg Simone Sterr commented that this season marked Bremen theatre's artistic team as proactive and not merely reactive: "We predicted what might happen and now it is daily life" (2015). They chose to put on *Scorched* to provide no longer only a thematic context, as in the *In Transit* season, but to ground the insights gained through this initiative within historical discourse. I travelled to Bremen to see the production in November 2015, inspired by reading about *In Transit*, and keen to see the extent to which this theatre might have regained at least some of its position at the forefront of developments in the German theatre scene that it had held in the 1960s when it made the national headlines with ground-breaking productions by a young Peter Stein, among others. The production certainly developed its own aesthetic, much in line with other municipal theatres' attempts to better represent diversity on stage (Sharifi 2014). Now I am keen to explore how this staging relates to Mouawad's own artistic project.

## YANA

The poetics of *performative testimony* defines the dramatic and performative structures of Mouawad's theatre. His plays "bear witness to the national tragedy of Lebanon, work through the trauma it caused, and offer hope to the survivors. Instead of inspiring dread, fear, horror, and pity leading to catharsis, these plays re-enact violence, memorialize the victims, and perform mourning work in order to renew our shattered faith in humanity" (Moss 2001, 174). The play *Scorched* is the second instalment of his cycle, *Le Sang des promesses/The Blood of Promises* (1997 – 2009). It tells the story of a twin brother and sister on the quest to uncover the mystery of their mother's silence during the previous five years. A contemporary re-telling of the Oedipus myth, it examines what kind of cultural, collective and individual memories inform the journeys of exilic children. The text employs the elements of testimony and autobiography; and it engages with the simultaneity of dramatic space and time.

Introducing *Scorched* to his Avignon audience (2009), Mouawad stated that every artist tells the one and only story of his life; and if this story reaches beyond this artist's personal preoccupations, it can achieve a dramatic and existential universality. In his plays, Mouawad tells the tale of unkept promises, abandoned children and sacrificed hopes. The parable of the Binding of Isaac, in which God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, finds a special echoing in Mouawad's theatre. He renders the story of Isaac's sacrifice as Abraham's ignorance of his sin. Hence, Mouawad's plays question the responsibility of parents for their children. In *Scorched*, the abandoned infant of the young Nawal, the fruit of her first true love, turns into his mother's torturer, the father to his own brother and sister. The Lebanese civil war serves as the background to Nawal's fight for love, her resistance, torture, and testimonial silence.

Mouawad's personal experience of the Lebanese civil war is marked by what Susan Suleiman calls the *1.5 generation effect*, the traumatic survival experience of children, who during the time of the atrocities were "too young to have had an adult understanding of what was happening to them, but old enough to have *been there*" (2002, 277). They experienced the trauma prematurely, "before the formation of stable identity that we associate with adulthood, and in some cases before any conscious sense of self" (2002, 277).

Born in 1968 in the Lebanese village of Deir el Kamal, Mouawad was already a bystander, no longer innocent, by 1975, when the war started. He had witnessed the street-fights and listened to the bombs falling. In 1978 his family moved to France and in 1983 to Quebec, so his childhood was forever to remain "the knife stuck in one's throat" (Mouawad 2009, 5)<sup>2</sup>. The war's shocking episodes made their way into Mouawad's plays and productions; so the unresolved childhood trauma dictates the testimonial nature of his theatre.

## DANIEL

It is interesting to see how closely related the play is to the author's personal experience, and how he seeks to abstract from that personal dimension, making the experiences of the characters transcend the boundaries of the specific context of Lebanon to a universal context that reflects the experience of migrants, of exile, in general. The audience can follow the plot and understand the contexts and implications of war without the detailed knowledge of the Lebanon conflict. In the Bremen production, the notion of "anywhere and nowhere" was transmitted through a bleak set dominated by a trench filled with water, three industrial fans, and a predominance of grey in its colour; so the stage turned from the representational site into that of memory and troubled imagination.

## YANA

This tendency to go from something concrete to something abstract marks Mouawad's dramaturgy in general: *Scorched* bears a visible tension between the real historical events that took place during the civil war and its fictional representation. For instance, the scene in notary Alphonse Lebel's backyard unfolds simultaneously in several temporal and spatial settings, but is placed within a single locale on stage. The notary invites the twins to sign Nawal's testimony. Here, he mentions Nawal's "bus phobia" and begins telling the story of Nawal's witnessing the attacked and burned bus. The scene in Lebel's backyard overlaps with the other one, in the earlier time-frame, when Nawal tells her friend Sawda the truth: she was a passenger on that bus (Mouawad 2005, 43). This horrifying episode, which appears in the play as Nawal's recollection and on stage as her personal experience, "is not a figment of Mouawad's imagination. The attack occurred on April 13, 1975 and is widely seen as marking the beginning of Lebanon's civil war" (Arsenault 2007). The incident involved a group of gunmen who killed four members of the Lebanese Christian party and militia (Phalangists). So, for Mouawad, Lebanon remains the country of a "childhood lost in pieces"; the place that theatre is called to restore by bringing peace to the artist's memory. In his work, Lebanon appears, as Salman Rushdie would have it, as "two countries, real and fictional, occupying the same space, or almost the same space" (1997, 22). Here, the war is experienced as the child's memory – removed in time and distorted in imagination. In its original staging *Scorched* allowed Mouawad to escalate the story of his personal suffering to the universals of abandoned childhood, to reach in its language the realms of poetic expression, and to make memory a separate, almost tangible entity on stage. I wonder how Mirko Borscht approached this issue in his staging in Bremen?

## DANIEL

Hendrik Werner, Bremen's theatre critic, characterises Borscht's style as an aesthetics of violence. According to Werner, Borscht's "Berserkerfantasien / berserk imagination" (2015) does not have its strengths in psychological subtlety, which is evident in his production of *Scorched*. He chose the small auditorium of Theatre Bremen to compress the action of Mouawad's play into a small, dark, and claustrophobic set, and brought it close to the audience. Spectators sat on raked rows in front of the stage. The first impression of the set was striking because of its lack of colours—the stage comes across as a crowded space in shades of grey, not very brightly lit with cold light. There were large industrial extractor fans, one left, one right, and one in the back, arranged asymmetrically. Towards the front of the stage was a large rectangular trench filled with water, within it an area that looked like an island. This distorted visual perspective served as a counter-balance to the language, which Schubert described as "flowery", so as to avoid any sense of *kitsch* (2015). As a result, the production resorted to sensational moments where linear performance, based on the strength

of the actors' speaking, would have been better. While there was more of that in the stronger second half, by that time the audience was no longer interested in catharsis (Werner, 2015). In her review for Radio Bremen, Christine Gorny, too, showed disappointment at the directorial concept. At times, the action went "over the top", there was too much shouting, wriggling and splashing at the expense of making the production's impact even more stirring than it already was (2015).

### **YANA**

Genre wise, *Scorched* balances somewhere between tragedy and melodrama, which might affect its language as well. Mouawad often relies on the poetic traditions of the French neo-classical theatre. His texts often carry the shadow of an Alexandrine, but also bear the input of Mouawad's actors/collaborators who actively participate in making the story. Although he wrote the first four of his plays alone, working on the cycle, Mouawad realized that to make a show together, as a group, inspires him more than writing the text first and then directing it. Roughly, the process could be described as the following: Mouawad comes up with an idea for a play and gathers a group of collaborators who eventually "dream" and "invent" the future performance together. Using the rehearsal period as a trigger for the participants' emotional breakthrough constitutes the basic principle of Mouawad's theatre writing. I think that this collaborative process might have informed what Schubert described as the distorting perspective of the text. People who were forced to flee their countries often see their past and present through these distorted lenses. Such a perspective, I believe, often instigates an avant-garde form of writing/performing, marked by the devices of fragmentation, distancing, hyperbole, grotesque, and syncopation.

### **DANIEL**

As Schubert explained, the set was inspired by the film *Interstellar*: "In the film there is a scene in which the main character exists in a gap, which does not have time or space. This is represented in the film by a stripy effect" (Schubert 2015). In the production, this stripy effect was recreated through rectangles with grey stripes hanging above the stage.

### **YANA**

This is very interesting; it tells me that *Scorched* has achieved the status of a "canonical" text. It can be translatable and transferable into a new context, and even a new temporal setting. I don't think Mouawad really thought about the sci-fi potential of this script; whereas here you have another director who re-imagines this story through new lenses. He turns its central conflict into a compelling visual image.

### **DANIEL**

In her notes on the production, the dramaturg, Regula Schroeter, describes the play as being "about the search for truth and the entanglement with a past characterised by civil war and senseless violence". She acknowledges Mouawad's position in the context of exile, but emphasises that the author does not write his own specific history, but focuses instead "on a family story and approaches it via individual fates which represent the collective collapse of war" (Schroeter 2015). She points out that "Civil wars of the last years do not only show similarities in their complex mesh of causes but also the expressions of violence and counter violence, the development of militias and intentional expulsion of people are the same". Similar thinking informed Borscht's take on this issue:

Our society produces victims as well as perpetrators at the same time. The truly crazy thing with such so-called civil wars appears to me to be that in most cases

they are not being carried out by those who caused them and are only ended when they don't have any purpose anymore, when the economical and ideological resources of this war have been exhausted. War is a branch of economy. War regulates relationships of power, new markets and strengthens the economy. You have to bear that there are no simple truths in this play. Should one fight with weapons or with words? How is killing legitimised? Does the history of the twins begin with love or with a crime? Is it correct to confront one's own children with their true identities or does it make you guilty not to do it? (qtd. In Schroeter 2015)

I think, Borscht tried to implement this through the casting choices. First, he changed the solicitor into the female character called Madame Lebel. Then he changed the character of Nawal's mother into Nawal's father.

### YANA

In general, I would not object to cross-gender casting if such a choice serves an artistic or political purpose, but it seems to me that turning Nawal's mother into her father is fundamentally wrong for the play's premise. Such a choice, I'm afraid, shifts the story of *Scorched* into a more or less clichéd discourse of gender struggle and the power of patriarchy. By no means do I want to suggest that the society of Nawal's youth, as it is depicted in *Scorched*, imagines equal rights for men and women, it definitely does not. However, what is more important is that as her personal coming of age Nawal takes on a very important task: she is there to break the chain of wrongdoings which rests in her family with poverty, anger, and lack of education, specifically lack of power and voice for women. As Nazira, Nawal's grandmother, says: "poverty is to blame for all of this, Nawal. There's no beauty in our lives. No beauty. Just the anger of a hard and hurtful life". (Mouawad 2005, 19)

The story of Nawal begins in 1951, when a fourteen-year old girl falls in love with a young Palestinian man, named Wahab, from the Deressa refugee camp. In her Christian village, such love is forbidden; and hence Nawal faces a choice of either rejecting her love and giving away her child, or leaving her own family in shame. Uneducated, scared, and weak in her will, Nawal follows the tradition, as it is spelled out by her mother: "This child has nothing to do with you, Nawal [...] Nothing to do with your family. Nothing to do with your mother, nothing to do with your life" (Mouawad 2005, 18). In the previous scene we hear Nawal telling Wahab that "something has been set in motion and nothing can stop it"; and now as we – the new family – are coming together, "everything feels better" (Mouawad 2005, 17). Here, Mouawad puts forward one of the major issues of this play: it is the question of destiny – "something has been put in motion"; and it is the question of personal responsibility. The moment Nawal gets pregnant she becomes responsible for the new life: the mother assumes responsibility for her child. But what can a young woman do to fight history and tradition? Nawal's family will not accept Wahab as one of their own (he would be killed soon) and they won't keep his child, so a new cycle of hate, shame, and betrayal is set in motion. When Nawal realizes the mistake she made by obeying her mother's rules and giving into the tradition, she decides to set things right. In this, she is prompted by her grandmother's plea, who on her deathbed explains to Nawal the history of her country and her family's hatred: "[...] the women in our family... are caught in the web of anger. We have been for ages: I was angry at my mother, and your mother is angry at me, just as you are angry at your mother. And your legacy to your daughter will be anger too. We have to break the thread. So learn to read, learn to write, learn to count, learn to speak. Learn. Then leave. [...] Learn to think, Nawal. Learn" (Mouawad 2005, 22). Nawal keeps her promise: she learns how to read and write, leaves the village to find her son, joins the resistance to avenge all the abused

women of this country, and fights further for their freedom. Nawal's journey – as Mouawad depicts it – becomes as heroic as tragic and mythological. An echoing of the *Oresteia* cycle is found in this part of the text. It is only after Nawal's death that her children, Jeanne and Simon, will be able to break the thread.

### **DANIEL**

All this, of course, suggests that Mouawad was truly inspired by the genre of tragedy. Schroeter quotes him directly when she says, "Nawal understands that truth and lies are only two slopes of the same mountain, and that from now on she has no other chance than to understand and to try to balance on the ridge and to maintain her balance. This balance is expressed in her silence". (2015)

### **YANA**

I imagine then that this play was chosen for its artistic value: it only indirectly provides new light on the emotional and historical baggage that refugees carry when seeking asylum in Europe, when settling on the streets next to those audience members who come to see this show in Bremen. Symbolically speaking, this play tells the story not only of the sacrificed child; it tells the chronicle of a sacrificed nation, the Lebanese civilians left alone to face the destiny of their unjustifiable suffering.

### **DANIEL**

You referred to Moss earlier in terms of the play working through trauma and offering hope to the survivors. For the theatre audience in a place as remote from the source of trauma as Bremen, *Scorched* can bring the distant events closer because they can relate to the personal tragedy of the characters. The Bremen spectators see on stage situations they can understand, because the situations are presented to them by people they can relate to. They can then transfer that experience to the current refugee crisis. I still wonder, though, whether the Bremen production actually misses a dimension of the play that Mouawad certainly brought out in his own work. The Bremen production is grey, is messy because of the water, and there is no counter-weight to the bleakness—it is in fact difficult to see the hope that the play offers by solving the riddle of Nawal's silence and by offering the possibility of closure to the children. What this production lacks is the distance between the spectators and the characters. In Mouawad's own work, that distance was created through the poetic language. The Bremen production shied away from it. The translation into German itself comes across as rather sober, expressed in a contemporary idiom, and any poetic language left in it was carefully evened out. The scenography of Mouawad's own staging was non-realistic; it used strong colours, which, together with his poetic language, created distance from the characters and events. This stylistic elevation of the horror to the level of contemporary tragedy invited the possibility of catharsis, something that was hardly the intention of Bremen's production. Here, Borscht was more interested in the ambivalence of the relationships between victim and perpetrator. (Schubert 2015)

### **YANA**

This is a very important point, specifically in terms of a historical gap between the time when this play was written and its staging in Bremen. As we know, every new *mise-en-scène* concretizes the chosen text for its new audiences. Focusing on the moral and historical ambiguity inherited in this play provided Borscht with an opportunity to bring this story closer to his audiences in Bremen. Perhaps it forced them to think deeper about the fate of the migrants, those who reached Germany a long time ago and those who are seeking asylum today.

### **Conclusion**

The 2014/15 season in Theatre Bremen, with its 52 events under the *In Transit* heading, the subsequent production of *Scorched*, and the resulting personal involvement of Theater Bremen team members in working with current refugees, created, as Schubert and Sterr point out, a very strong network among their theatre colleagues across the country, as well as internal bonds between cast and crew. The company has now progressed from discussion to action, making the facilities of the theatre available to the refugees and aspiring to present the issue of migration in a historical context: “All these people who come over to Germany have their histories, they have their stories and we want to know what that means” (Schubert and Sterr 2015).

While it was possible to ignore refugees in the past (with the exception of their peak in 1992 and 1993, with 438,191 and 322,599 applications for political asylum, respectively, as part of the Yugoslavia civil war) because their numbers were smaller; the current influx of asylum seekers and media attention makes it more and more difficult for German authorities and the municipal theatre scene to ignore the situation. Theater Bremen’s concern with the situation reflects the daily presence of migrants in Bremen—a reality that has become the daily life for their German hosts as well. Following the staging of *Scorched* from September 2015, Theater Bremen is currently putting together sessions in which the audience is informed about the countries from which the migrants have come to Germany and working directly with different communities of migrants. It is not surprising that women remain the most vulnerable subjects within these communities. As Schubert and Sterr explained,

We find that women of the migrant community are much less empowered than the men. In conversation we then found, for example, one particular group felt especially sad that they didn’t have the opportunity of dancing together but also, even more than that, cooking together, which they are used to from home. We realised that no matter how important little gestures are, gestures are not enough and so more substantial action is needed. [...] For example, when we were planning a meal together with a group of 200 refugees including their children, we made a point of not having plastic crockery and cutlery and cheap soup and whatever else might make it look like a kitchen for the poor, but we made sure that it was all presented very well, very nicely with proper table cloths, with proper cutlery and crockery and high quality food. (Schubert and Sterr 2015)

This reflection may lack theoretical and conceptual underpinning and may therefore come across as naïve, but represents an example of artistic initiative beyond that developed under the auspices of the state. Altogether, *In Transit* was not only anticipatory, it was visionary. It reminded European society how urgent it is today for each European country and every one of their citizens to finally begin, and take seriously and carry through, the process of self-education and exchange, since only dialogue can break the act of silence and horror, as Mouawad’s play *Scorched* tells us.

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<sup>1</sup> It has three stages, with a total seating capacity of 1426. Overall, the theatre has sold between 150,000 and 290,000 seats per season since 2000.

<sup>2</sup> By the year 1990, the official date of the end of the civil war, it was estimated that up to 250,000 civilians had been killed, up to one million of the population had been wounded, about 350,000 people had been displaced, and countless others had gone into exile.