



## **The Politics of the Other in Canadian Theatre/Performance**

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*Thought Experiment Productions*

### **Bios**

**Ülfet Sevdi** is a performance artist, writer, theatre director, dramaturg, and Theatre of the Oppressed practitioner based in Montreal, Canada. Her work deals with oral history and social narratives. She was the co-founder and director of *nü.kolektif* (Istanbul, 2009-2014), an Istanbul-based collective of multidisciplinary artists working collaboratively on politically oriented performances, and is the co-founder and co-director of *Thought Experiment Productions* (Montreal, 2015-). Her mission is to present a reflection on some important socio-political contemporary themes. Her approach is highly conceptual, experimental, and is theoretically grounded in the critical social sciences.

**Nicolas Royer-Artuso** is a composer, musician, musicologist, linguist, writer, music teacher, performance artist, and Theatre of the Oppressed practitioner, based in Montreal, Canada. A key aspect of his musical and academic work is the theoretical and practical use of 'heterophony.' He co-founded the Istanbul-based collective *nü.kolektif* (2009-2014). In 2015, he co-founded the Montreal-based *Thought Experiment Productions*, a multidisciplinary production company dedicated to the production of performances with political content using research in the social sciences as a methodological framework.



In this reflection paper,<sup>1</sup> we will delve into the difficulties and obstacles encountered in creating a critical artistic practice in Canada,<sup>2</sup> especially when coming from an ‘ethnic’ background.

We want to acknowledge from the start that the fact that much more representation of visible and invisible minorities can be seen in the performing arts, on stage or elsewhere in the public/media sphere, should be seen as a positive new development, and that this is in large part an effect of identity politics. But we also argue that it cannot be the end of the story: we should not confuse form with function or with content. This is our position for many reasons: 1) the outcome can be as oppressive as the situation that prompted the changes in the first place; 2) there can be a lot of opportunism in trying to comply with quotas; 3) increased representation can also be seen only as a trend and/or a marketing strategy; and/or 4) the message can be diluted to the extent that the reason why the visibly minority artist is on stage in the first place becomes a way to reassert the status quo.

These reasons could each have been possible avenues worth exploring in the following discussion. But this is not what we want to discuss. Instead, we offer the following thoughts on (self-)othering, the role and use of the ‘ethnic’ artist, and identity politics in relation to theatre and performance, in no specific order of importance or causality, as a sort of stream of consciousness that brings one topic to the other, letting some ideas activate others. Our hope is that the reader will also experience this activation, fill the blanks in with their own observations,

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<sup>1</sup> We dedicate this paper to Albert Memmi (1920-2020), who passed away while we were writing these reflections.

<sup>2</sup> We will only discuss Canada here since this is what we know the best. Our impression is that the discussion we offer will apply to many of the (neo)colonial countries where an important part of the population is composed of citizens, including of course artists, originally from the (neo)colonies that are often referred to as the Global South. In this, we include new immigrants who may be first, second, or third generation, or otherwise.



and eventually participate in the discussion.

Before starting this reflection, we have to make clear to the reader the place from which we are speaking. We speak here as theatre/performance artists who started creating political performances together in Istanbul (*nü.kolektif*: 2008-2014).<sup>3</sup> We then moved to Montreal, Canada in 2014 and continued the creation process there (*Thought Experiment Productions*: 2015-). Thus, our reflections here are informed in large part by our experience as artists seen as ‘from somewhere else’ in Canada,<sup>4</sup> and by observations made by carefully following the theatre/performance scene and the way institutions operate when dealing with artists that are ‘ethnic’ or ‘local.’

What is generally expected from ‘ethnic’ -- or any minority, visible or invisible -- or immigrant artists,<sup>5</sup> in the case that something is expected from them, is that they talk from their perspective -- the perspective of ‘foreigners’ -- about some issues they have.<sup>6</sup> In that sense, the institutions therefore ask us to play the ‘identity game’ -- which they call the ‘promotion of diversity’, or some similar term or phrase -- which means to always talk about ourselves (we artists or the group(s) we are supposed to represent), our place of origin, and our family story, as Others. Our voice is valuable (i.e. ‘authentic’) only if and when we focus on the differences we

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<sup>3</sup> In the case of Ülfet Sevdî, this creation began in 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Nicolas Royer-Artuso is originally from Montreal, from an ethnically mixed background, and has spent most of his adult life in what is often called the ‘Middle East.’

<sup>5</sup> We will use ‘ethnic’ in what follows as a term covering all these possibilities. This adjective, even if not used directly, generally stays tagged to a person for a lifelong artistic practice, for multiple reasons: 1) because the artists will create according to this definition of themselves; 2) because the artists have no way of having the institutions and audiences change their definition of themselves; or 3) a mix of both.

<sup>6</sup> In theatre and performance, there generally must be some sort of drama, some sort of issue. If not, it does not really fit the category, and without drama and some sort of catharsis, not much would remain for the audience -- at least in the traditional sense of the term.



are supposed to carry. We see this as one of the exclusion techniques disguised under the pretence of inclusivity and giving a voice. In a way, this is better than promoting assimilation or any social engineering practice that deals with difference by erasing it or at least making it 'manageable.' But the result is still the same: a divisive procedure along the 'us versus them' dichotomy. This situation involves, paradoxically, that the 'ethnic' artist has to play the 'difference game' in order to be accepted in the artistic community.

This is linked very closely to the fact that we should talk about our place of origin (i.e. our 'identity') as not a very good place to live in -- if not, then why did we or our family come here in the first place? -- and about the destination land (i.e. Canada) as a great place, or at least as a better place. This can take many forms. The artist can talk about repression in the homeland, about atrocities committed, from the point of view of the majority group, or from the point of view of a minority group that is treated badly in terms of its ethnicity, gender, religion, and so on. The result, however, is the same: the homeland is a bad place, an 'underdeveloped' place compared to more 'modern' places -- mostly Western -- and the Canadian audience or nation is not up for discussion. Such an approach even comforts the audience's sensibility, its sense of living in the greatest place that exists, which is basically like watching an aesthetic version of the news. And for the 'ethnic' audience, such approaches comfort that audience's choice to have stayed here, in Canada. This is a second technique of othering, which ends up making the content of the artistic practice -- and generally, the form too -- 'local' or 'exotic', and not related to the 'main' Canadian realities, which are only 'main' because they are the spectators'.

A slightly different outcome that can be observed lies in theatre and performance stories



dealing with life post-immigration, and the problems related to fitting in when Canadian ‘culture’ is so different. These are generally written by second-generation artists, or artists who came to Canada at an early age. The conclusion we reach after watching this type of work is that we have to be more empathic to these new immigrants because it’s hard to adapt or assimilate. The many biases that *the immigrant* has -- religious, cultural, or otherwise -- makes the process very difficult for the newcomers. The second generation is perceived as much luckier to have been born directly here: even if some difficulties still exist, they often are perceived as having to do with the clashes between the family ‘tribal’ expectations and the possibility of a ‘free’ (i.e. Western) life for their children.

When the work of the ‘ethnic’ artist is framed under the umbrella of ‘political art’ -- for example, when criticizing the ‘host’ country and the way it treats ‘foreigners’ -- it adopts the tone of identity politics movements, which is virtually the only type of minority political theatre and performance practice that exists at the moment. This is another form of ‘othering’, and can be seen as a set of auto-exclusion techniques, which may or may not be intentional. This set of practices generally produces an ensemble of outputs that end up reifying what the outsider is supposed to be. In a way, this is a type of *self-orientalisation* that maps onto the categories offered as clichés in the society where the artist practices. It is an appropriation of mental constructions -- cultural appropriation, a trendy term nowadays, does not go only one way -- which is something very similar to what Fanon and Memmi (among others) have discussed in the context of colonialism, but with the addition of a positive judgement (e.g. ‘Black is beautiful’). The intention is good, but it still plays on the line dividing us and them, in terms of cultures that



are so opposed one to another that it is difficult to see how ghettoization is not the only possible next logical step. The Canadian spectator embedded in the society has no other choice than -- and is pretty happy -- to applaud the fact that even the minority artists themselves admit the insurmountable difference that separates them from the 'majority.' What could be more appropriate to reassert (a will for) the status quo?<sup>7</sup>

This is linked finally to the constant reminding that when we come from somewhere else, we can talk about everything here in Canada, and freely. However, censorship in Canadian theatre and performance is alive and well, but it does not come from political institutions. Instead, it comes from the artists themselves, from the media, and from the funding institutions. These three go hand in hand, putting up obstacles to 'ethnic' and 'minority' artists offering a radical perspective on the current state of the society in which they operate. If we do not do our work the way we are supposed to, many difficulties follow. Art institutions want a certain type of work, which is often clearly defined in their 'mission' or 'mandate.' Once works are commissioned or accepted, some money must be found, and these funding institutions also have certain criteria. Grants bring prestige that may affect the artists that art institutions choose to take and/or promote. Media bodies report on some type of work, and they often have an agenda -- such as reporting on the 'ethnic' artist's work -- which also means not reporting on the work if it does not fit the criteria, or covering only the aspects of the work that fits those criteria. Positive reviews bring more grants, and so on and so forth. If artists do not want to be marginalized a second time, they

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<sup>7</sup> Note that in the case of the three situations described above, what we offer is a dramaturgical analysis. The artists themselves would never accept this analysis because this is not what they are attempting to do. The problem is that it generally ends up being this.



have to somehow comply with the institutions' demands, or find some way to cheat the system -- by hiding, for example, the real intention(s) they have for the work, the content, and so on. Until, that is, they get caught in the act.

We often hear that art *reflects* the society in which it is made. And for sure, showing the diversity of its members and the beauty inherent to this diversity is a noble task. But in this reflection, we have tried to show some of the problematic results of a situation where art institutions, funding institutions, media, and 'ethnic' artists work in tandem to focus on identity and difference, which actually reflects *the way society behaves*. Under the cover of inclusivity and praise of difference, a divisive strategy can be observed. Either you play the game and (re)assert that difference, or you remain and become invisible.

We can and must go beyond this to create art that takes the main narratives, discourses, and mythologies that the 'host' society tells itself and use them as a mirror so that the society stops lying to itself. This involves understanding the society *from within*. The 'ethnic' artist is often best situated to do this since that artist has enough distance to observe, without being limited by the frame that has been constructed by the society, a frame that makes it look as if everything is running smoothly. Thus: in that sense, the 'difference' is one of perspective. But this also means not *focusing* on differences at the level of content, a move that can only alienate the artist from the society and make the artist marginal in a way that risks marginalising the artist's voice a second time.

The 'Western Dream' has a cost for the majority of the populations of the world, and in that sense, it has all the necessary and sufficient attributes to be (also?) qualified as a nightmare.



Indeed, we all know pretty well what it means to ‘bring democracy’ (i.e. ‘modernity’) to another place. Within the West, the inequalities based on any type of identity are endemic, systemic. The entertainment complex -- in which the ‘ethnic’ artist takes a role -- can be as violent and propaganda-driven as any structure that is tied to proposing an account of the ‘dream.’ In fact, it is often more efficient because of the ways it carries its messages. In an age of populism (if this is really what we are now experiencing), art has everything needed to carry presuppositions and clichés that are shared across society, without shaping them into precise formulas. Here, then, is our final call: let us not be the ‘useful’ immigrant and/or foreigner who aestheticizes everything that the mass media (in a very general sense of the term) proposes, adds to public discourse, and therefore furthers the ‘us versus them’ dichotomy. For in doing so, the only benefit is to the power structures that are responsible and in charge of our general social condition.

### **General Notes: On What We *Did Not* Intend To Do With This Paper**

The following notes are written *in anticipation of* possible reactions, so that if a debate hopefully emerges, it won't revolve around elements, intentions, and ideas we decided not to mention or develop in the paper. We decided to put these notes at the end, so the reader would not read our reflection taking them into account, at least during the first reading. In a sense, these notes are not essential to the ‘arguments’ presented above. But since we have already had reviewers, artists, people working in the artistic sector, and academics looking at what we have to say here, and saw the different reactions it activates, we felt it was necessary to explain what this paper is *not*.

First, this paper is *not* a sequence of arguments leading smoothly to a logical conclusion: it is not an academic paper. It is intended as a description from a given perspective, from inside.





It is a reflection by artists on the role and the place of artists in the world, in a given society. We are fully aware that the paper can be read as polemical, as a provocation even. These are rhetorical tools we use that -- in our experience -- often help people take a position and try to offer counter-proposals or add to what is said. Our goal is to offer thoughts on an issue we have, in no specific order of importance or causality, as a sort of stream of consciousness that brings one topic to the other, letting some ideas activate others. Our hope is that the reader will also experience this activation, fill in the blanks with their own observations, and eventually participate in the discussion.

Second, this paper is *not* directive. The topics are treated in a very general manner. Leaving blanks and open space is a way to let readers and potential commentators resonate with the piece in their own way, without constraints, so that different experiences eventually resurface; not only comments on ours. As practitioners of Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, we are extremely sensitive to the importance of engaging as *facilitators* and not only as top-down commentators. This is where we see the force of forum theatre, and this paper can be seen as the proposition for a collective forum.

Finally, this reflection is *not* specific. There are no concrete examples, critiques of colleagues or of specific artists, references to specific institutions or media, and so on. Our goal is not to indulge in name dropping. Our goal is not to accuse specific people or institutions, but to open a debate about some of the structures that brings about this state of affairs. Instead, we seek to illuminate how these structures work together, and to ask artists to reflect on their own practice



when what we say is taken into account. This is why the paper is so general. It can be thought of as an introduction, as a prolegomenon -- perhaps, even, a manifesto.