

# The Global Politics of Performance Nomadism

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## 1. Performance Nomadism: When the Local becomes Global

*In the last two decades especially, the flow of refugees moving over the surface of the globe, now thought to number about 15 million, has focused attention on cultures everywhere, forcing each country to address its own questions of identity and definition. At no time in memory have more people throughout the world publicly argued changing beliefs in nationalism, internationalism, ethnicity, and culture in the face of global interdependence in economic, military, cultural, and environmental spheres. Against this background, the conflict in the Gulf signals a new definition of “world war.”<sup>1</sup>*

*In almost every intersection of cultures, everywhere there are worlds within worlds. In the world of contemporary performance, what I shall call the “discourse of interculturalism,” and by that I mean its evolving affiliations and themes, has positioned itself to reflect these crosscurrents as a strategic mode of inquiry.<sup>2</sup>*

More than ten years ago Bonnie Marranca envisioned “interculturalism” as a new method and critical perspective to address the impact of refugee movements, immigration and globalization at the end of the Cold War era, when in a sense performers and their audiences became “global nomads,” the division between high and low increasingly blurred and culture the buzz word, yet more and more received as a consumer good for transnational circulation. Bringing together diverse fields such as theatre anthropology, social sciences, cultural studies and new historicism “interculturalism” sought to go beyond the East/ West polemic and to question the nature of representation. However, with the fall of New York’s twin towers on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 this optimistic outlook was shattered and since then the deconstructive critique of orientalist fashioning has been increasingly backlashed. Thus, one might observe the disturbing return of binary division in our global media representations, whether it be in the neo-conservatist/ pseudo liberal guise of colonialist stereotype or the neo-imperialist East/ West rhetoric of the Bush regime. [Folie: Hörzu-Werbekampagne]

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<sup>1</sup> Bonnie Marranca, “Thinking About Interculturalism,” *Interculturalism and Performance*, eds. Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta (New York: PAJ Publications, 1991) 11.

<sup>2</sup> Marranca, “Thinking About Interculturalism” 11.

Yet, against such polemic claims, contemporary performance appears to set up its own parameters of strategic resistance by consciously blurring local/ global divides – and whether one might want to call this “universal” again as the panel suggests I am also frankly not feeling too sure about. But what in fact I am arguing here is that especially in the international festival context, contemporary performance artists assume the role of performance nomads, i.e. a people on the run who carry their local concepts around the globe and into our local performance venues. Stage space may thus increasingly be regarded as nomadic, a space to be temporarily inhabited, yet by no means a territory as Guattari and Deleuze in their treatise on *Nomadology The War Machine* have so convincingly claimed:

The nomad is there, on the land, wherever there forms a smooth space that gnaws, and tends to grow, in all directions. The nomad inhabits these places, he remains in them, and he himself makes them grow, for it has been established that the nomad makes the desert no less than he is made by it. He is a vector of deterritorialization. He adds desert to desert, steppe to steppe, by a series of local operations the orientation and direction of which endlessly vary.<sup>3</sup>

By taking up Deleuze’s and Guattari’s notion of “nomadology” as a mode of deterritorialization and counter-thinking, I would like to address for the purpose of this paper today two performances from the International Fadjr-Festival in Teheran, which I have seen presented by the sponsorship of the German Goethe Institut in Germany in the years 2004 and 2005. As I will argue these performances may be considered as “nomadic” in the sense that they perform as an “exteriority,” that in the Deleuze/ Guattari sense would be opposite to the Iranian state and thus present a subversive counter guerilla to State ideology, i.e. as a “force that destroys both the image and its copies, the model and its reproductions, every possibility of subordinating thought to a model of the True, the Just or the Right.”<sup>4</sup> As I will argue these

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<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Nomadology The War Machine*, transl. Brian Massumi (New York: Semiotext(e), 1986) 53.

<sup>4</sup> Deleuze and Guattari 45.

performances do not only present nomadic war machines against Iranian state censorship, but they also strike against our own Western ideologic pre-conceptions.

My first example, Helena Waldmann's *Letters from Tentland*, started out as a German/Iranian co-production, when the Berlin-based choreographer Helena Waldmann came up with the idea to introduce her performance work on board the "MS Studnitz," a Rostock based culture ship to cruise the Orient and anchoring on the coastal cities of Iran. During Berlin's Theatertreffen in fact, she proposed this idea directly to the director of Teheran's Dramatic Arts Centre, which is of course Iran's prime venue of theatrical activity today. Operating as the theatrical branch of Iran's Ministry of Culture, the Dramatic Arts Centre sponsors and pretty much controls about all of Iran's major theatre activity as there are almost no private self-administering theatres in operation.<sup>5</sup> As Farah Yeganeh in a 2005 article for *Theatre Research International* has pointed out, this governmental subsidy may in fact allow for the comparative freedom. On the one hand she admits that "theatre groups can have new initiatives without being much worried about the audience's interests and tastes" as well as it allows for "free access to the arts for all citizens." Yet, on the hand, the censorship will of course ensure that "the performances do not offend religiously and politically" despite this comparative liberalization.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, festival appears as the main outlet for theatrical performance in Iran, where there are hardly any permanent theatres established. Particularly of interest to the local scene is the international scope of the Fajr-Festival, which is by far regarded as the "most significant theatrical event taking place in the country" and attracts many of the local as well as international avantgarde artists to showcase their productions.<sup>7</sup> Commemorating the anniversary festivities of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Yeganeh furthermore points out that "The festival, in a nutshell, reflects the characteristics of Iranian theatre, and some believe that

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<sup>5</sup> Farah Yeganeh, "Iranian Theatre Festivalized," *Theatre Research International* 30:3 (2005) 275.

<sup>6</sup> Yeganeh 275-276.

<sup>7</sup> Yeganeh 280.

it has contributed to the international exchange and development of the national theatre movement.”<sup>8</sup> Interestingly enough, Germany - and the Goethe Institute in particular - has over the past decade played an important part in that theatrical exchange by staging German productions at the Fadjr-Festival in Iran as well as by inviting Iranian productions and festival winners to German theatres in Berlin, Düsseldorf and the Rhein-Main area. During the Fadjr-Festival performances are also accompanied by international workshop sessions and conference lectures so that Iranian artists do not only get the chance to demonstrate their own work, but are also confronted and one might even say infiltrated by theatrical approaches and methodologies from abroad. So, as Yeganeh somewhat critically remarks, this liberal exchange may to some extent be regarded or even by some be resented as a neo-colonial appropriation. She comments:

What is appealing, and perhaps appalling, is that this research reveals that the whole structure of theatre in Iran is, intentionally or unintentionally, based on festivals. Because theatre in its western form is definitely not a part of our people’s playing culture, every theatrical production – perhaps with the exception of Teheran – can just attract audience enough for two or three performances and then disappears. The different trends and approaches in Iranian theatre observed in festivals reflect the debate going on among artists and critics. On one side are the nationalists, who think that the future of our theatre lies in rediscovering the truest national form, lost due to long negligence and ideological indifference. On the other side are the proponents of modernity, who think that our theatre in the twenty-first century can develop only in close conjunction with the theatres of the world, and claim that the futile search for purity will deny theatre its vigour and originality.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Yeganeh 280.

<sup>9</sup> Yeganeh 282.

This sort of tension between nationalist and modern tendencies within Iranian societal and theatre discourse, could also be observed in Helena Waldmann's workshop and performance strategies, when she was invited by the Dramatic Arts Centre to hold auditions for her theatrical exchange project in Teheran. Part of the difficulty there was that local actors were not familiar with Waldmann's so-called "performative approach" of her work. Contemporary Iranian theatre presented itself to German choreographer as a heavily text-based undertaking, where actors would primarily work with the subtleties of language interpretation and not use their bodies as much as a means of expression.

A very good illustration of this local approach is my second example here, which I will now briefly insert into my discussion of the more detailed analysis of Waldmann's work, because it sort of contextualizes the background and significance of Waldmann's work to the Iranian theatre context. Mohammad Aghehati's *Kiss you and Tears*, which won several of the 2004 Fajr Festival awards (Best Play, Best Director, Best Actress and Best Actor) and was also presented in Germany at Berlin's House of World Cultures as well as at the Maifestspiele festival in Wiesbaden is based on Mohammad Charmshir's dramatization of Vaclav Havel's *Letters to Olga: June 1979 – September 1982*. Introducing locally renowned actors Payam Dehkordi and Shabnam Toluie in a minimalistic square set prison, Mohammad Aghehati's effectfully directed the play so as to heighten the intense atmosphere between the two actors, who of course as a male female couple presented already enough of a tension to the local theatre scene. Considering that in Iran men and women are not supposed to touch on stage, Toluie's constant role-reversals as she switched from Catholic priest, to cleaning lady, cell mate, judge and wife bore more of a systemic threat than the mere dramaturgical function of pressuring the prisoner's decision towards abandoning his political ideals. Toluie's hands needed to be covered in gloves, yet for each strike that she put onto Dehkordi's hand during the performance one could easily imagine another strike that she hit at the political regime. Subtly working its way around the censors for at least the first performances up until *Kiss you*

*and Tears* was ultimately banned from the Iranian stage, the performance thus gave an ardent illustration of a hijacked universalism in terms of the appropriation of Havel's letters and also of what theatre critic Harald Olkus has referred to as "signalling either a reformist openness in Iranian theatre or else a considerable subtlety in working around the censors."<sup>10</sup>

While Aghebati's work must already be considered as rather physical interpretation of dramatic text – which is after all a monologic treatise of scenic letters – Waldmann's work as dance choreographer, however, exerted a rather different strain on local actors, as she did not even have a "text" for them to interpret. As Waldmann explains the difficulty of that situation in Iran: "[...] most plays are based strongly on texts, have almost no movement, are basically bodyless. Someone sits at a table and talks, talks, talks."<sup>11</sup> Since movement is restricted and dance entirely forbidden on the Iranian stage, Waldmann's concept faced severe difficulty, for how would she make her performers dance and not fall prey to the Iranian censors? The solution though presented itself to the choreographer, when she visited Iran for the first time and was confronted by the sheer overwhelming presence of tents. As Waldmann recalls:

Actually the first time I was in Teheran. I was surprised by how many tents there were on the side of the street. [...] There's a tent in the city for every single situation. But I didn't dare to constantly use tents during the workshop and only decided to do it at the last moment – the actors thought I was nuts. But it worked. On the one hand, one felt the extreme handicap, one had to develop a particular way of acting with the tent; on the other hand it was very funny.<sup>12</sup>

Accordingly, this experience of local topography found its way into the actual performance and exemplifies Waldmann's artistic approach as her performance emerged from her performative engagement with Iranian culture. Thus the performance starts with a video installation in the format of a dia-show, where we see women and families in tents [Folie],

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<sup>10</sup> Harald Olkus, "Mohammad Aghebati: Kiss you and Tears," *The Third Body. Das Haus der Kulturen der Welt und die Performing Arts*, ed. House of World Cultures (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2004) 134.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Sylvia Staude, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 12.10.2005.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

which Waldmann introduces as her souvenir gift to the audience, when she comments from off-stage: “I brought you pictures from Iran ...” In a sort-of documentary fashion the audience is thus introduced to the landscape and subtly hinted at the double meaning of “tschador,” which in farsi refers to both: tent and tschador/ veil. The metaphor of the tent hence assumes several symbolic levels for the performance to engage with: 1. on the nomadic level of local resistance, where one puts up a tent to live on the outskirts somewhat confined yet within the confinement liberated to move within pivacy, 2. the tent as a screen of projections: the audience’s, the choreographer’s, the cultural and societal impositions and inhibitions and 3. the tent as permeable skin, performative in the sense of a sheltering and connecting membrane as an ennuciative force of articulation to and with the outer world.

So while the performance delivers several speech acts from the Iranian actresses who will step up front in their tent and speak in front of the curtain and from behind their tent window directly to the audience and choreographer in a fierce resentment of stereotypical decodings of their culture, one may also have more subtle scenic inventions as the shadow-play of women behind the tent walls strumming their kitchen-ware to the polyhonic rhythms of their mutual intuning. Yet, probably the most powerful image of the tent as epitome of nomadic resistance is the one, where an individual tent starts to circle in Derwish-like monotony to an ever increasing static speed accompanied by Sufi-verse. [Excerpt] For as Deleuze and Guattari have affirmed the quintessential nomad is “*he* [or in this case rather “*she*”] *who does not move:*”

The nomad distributes himself in a smooth space, he occupies, inhabits, holds that space; that is his territorial principle. It is therefore false to define the nomad by movement. [...] It is thus necessary to make a distinction between speed and movement: a movement may be very slow, or even immobile, yet it is still speed. Movement is extensive, speed is intensive. Movement designates the relative character of a body considered as “one,” and which goes from point to point; speed, on the

contrary, constitutes the absolute character of a body whose irreducible parts (atoms) occupy or fill a smooth space in the manner of a vortex, with the possibility of springing up at any point. (It is therefore not surprising that reference has been made to spiritual voyages effected without relative movement, but in intensity, in one place: these are part of nomadism). In short, we will say by convention that only the nomad has absolute movement, in other words speed; vortical or swirling movement is an essential feature of the war machine.<sup>13</sup>

Festival nomadism as a strategy of contemporary performance artists and theatre practitioners may thus precisely mobilize cultural resistance from within that outer moment of stasis. While *Letters from Tentland* as well as *Kiss you and Tears* have been banned from the local Iranian theatre scene, they migrate globally to carry across their message of resistance. In terms of their stage aesthetics they present a curious blend of locally appropriated avantgarde concepts such as Waldmann's performative approach and engagement with local cultural elements or Aghebati's locally appropriating interpretation of Havel's prison letters. Ultimately, the division between local and global does therefore appear of less significance than the strategic effect of these works: it is as nomadic war machines against Iranian state power and censorship.

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<sup>13</sup> Deleuze and Guattari 51-52.



### **Works Cited**

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