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CRASHING THE GATES. 5 Provocations on Contemporary British Theatre

Omar Elerian, 06 February 2014

Introduction

Good morning, and thank you for being here today. It was a great pleasure to be asked to speak at this symposium, and I have to admit, I was fairly surprised to be invited in the first place.

A few months ago, I attended a similar three-day symposium at the Goethe-Institut in London, mainly because I was intrigued by the title of the event: “Postmigrant Perspectives on European Theatre.” I was unfamiliar with the term “postmigrant,” and in all honesty, my first reaction was a vague sense of disapproval and discomfort towards the word. I maintain this same feeling today, and I hope my intervention will clarify why this is the case

My name is Omar Elerian, and I am a third generation migrant. I was born in Italy to an Italian mother and a Palestinian father. My father was born in Egypt to Palestinian parents who fled Jaffa, now in Israel, in 1948. My mother was born in Gorgonzola, near Milan in the north of Italy. Her father had settled there, after leaving the central region of Umbria, to work as a carpenter, bringing his wife (my grandmother), who had migrated before him from even further south in Calabria. During my childhood, we continued to practice the family’s favourite pastime: moving homes and countries. We lived in Kuwait, Egypt, the United States, and a number of different places in Italy. One of the most vivid memories I have of that time is my brother and I waiting to open the two gigantic steel trunks that moved with us around the world. They held our most treasured toys, books, clothes, and at least 25 sets of duvets and bed sheets, which my mother was never willing to leave behind. Today, those trunks are still taking up most of the space in my parent’s cellar. I have no idea what they contain anymore, and my parents haven’t moved in the last 20 years; but I suspect my mother might still have a spare set of blankets in there, just in case.

At the age of 23, I moved from Milan to Paris to pursue my study of theatre. In 2009, I moved from Paris to London, following my ambitions to confront a different theatre culture. I am now 35 years old, and the one thing I've learnt so far is: "there's no such place as home."

Home, in my experience, has always been a state of mind.

This is very practical, since I don't need two giant steel trunks to carry it with me.

I like defining myself as a migrant, and I am blessed to have (had) the luxury to be able to travel and work freely across Europe, thanks to my Italian passport. I love being able to define my identity every day – a layering of experiences and encounters, decisions and inputs, actions and reactions. Who I am is what I make of myself.

But.

Who am I in the eyes of others?

This is an Equal Opportunities Monitoring Form. You have to fill out one of these for almost anything official or work-related in the UK. I've always had problems with these forms, mainly because I never find a box to tick for myself.

Just a couple of years ago, though, my freedom to define my identity was indelibly violated in Tel Aviv airport. Entering Israel for the first time in my life, I walked up to the immigration officer and handed over my Italian passport. He opened it and read my name. He then asked me for my father's name, to which I answered: "Mostafa." Next he asked for my grandfather's name: "Eissa." By the time I had finished pronouncing his name, my passport was withheld, set to the side, and another officer quickly escorted me to a waiting room in the arrivals area. The rest of the theatre company made it through Israeli immigration, except for two colleagues: Gabeen Khan and Nazanin Armin. Their ancestors' names had succeeded in identifying them more prominently than their British passports and their laid back East Londoner looks. We were held in the waiting room for 4 hours, asked to repeat our family genealogies every hour, and were forced to accept parts in a play for which we didn't – and never would – study. Who and what I thought I was became irrelevant in this context. I was the "other," the enemy, the uninvited. And there was nothing I could say or do to contradict that.

I am a theatre director and the Associate Director of the Bush Theatre in London. For the last 40 years, the Bush was based in a small room above a pub. From its 80-seat auditorium in Shepherd's Bush Green, in west London, it has discovered and launched generations of successful and influential British playwrights, actors, and artists. I don't

belong to that history; but I am now part of it and currently contributing to the writing of its next few chapters.

When I was asked to join the Bush by the new Artistic Director, Madani Younis, the theatre had just completed a move to its new home around the corner in the former Shepherd's Bush Library. With this move, we transitioned from a small hidden door on the side of a local drinking outlet to a prominent landmark of the community's history, next door to Shepherd's Bush Market, arguably the most multicultural marketplace in the capital. Two years ago, Madani and I were fairly unknown outsiders in the big London theatre community – we had never run an organisation even close to the size of the Bush Theatre; we both have very "eclectic" backgrounds in theatre-making rather than in more traditional "New Writing"; and nobody knew how to spell or pronounce our names correctly. This final point still hasn't improved, although there's been some progress.

We commission and produce only new and original plays and shows. This means that we find plays that we want to stage, or we commission playwrights and artists to create new work from scratch. This year, we've produced three fantastic new plays by debut playwrights.

Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*, which went on to win this year's Pulitzer Prize for Best Drama, was probably our first landmark production. Producing this play was certainly the first time we realized that our voices and decisions could make an impact. *Disgraced* is a fairly traditional play – it deals with one of the three Rs in the great tradition of American drama: "Race/Religion/Real Estate." In the case of this extremely thought-provoking and contentious play, Ayad decided to take on religion and its impact on the lives of people, and specifically on the life of his protagonist. But more than religion, this play struck hardest in the debate that it stages over the idea of the "other within." And while we weren't sure whether a British audience could digest the issues at the core of this debate, we learnt very quickly in just a few days after announcing the play that there was – and still is – a great hunger for these questions from audiences and communities that have historically been completely neglected or misrepresented by mainstream British theatre. It was a great opportunity for us to articulate our position and perspective within the theatre ecology we are part of. A couple of days before opening the show, Madani wrote an open letter to Ayad, which was published by the *Evening Standard*, the most widely-circulated free newspaper in London. I'd like to read you an extract:

Dear Ayad,

You know as well as I do, that we, the children of immigrant parents, have to continually demand our cultural rights to create a new-shared history. This, as history teaches us time and again, is the journey of any new immigrant group. Looking back to my twenties I can see now I had an unflinching confidence in laying claim to this moment that I was living, and to a New Britain that I believed was being created.

Then we were hit by the emergence of a new international terror, both 9/11 and the bellicose response to it. This terror was played out in the very region of the world that both of our fathers had affectionately referred to as home.

For you it was 9/11, for me 7/7. The reaction to these events created another, unexpected and unforgiving shared history that would forcibly redefine our sense of self and place. I remember news crews descending on the streets of West Yorkshire, frantically constructing what I perceived to be a contrived reality. Narratives were peddled that described the communities I lived within as being disconnected and failing to contribute to the city's civic life. Mosques that had been the cornerstone of those communities were now suspected of being "centres of radicalisation".

In the month following 7/7 I would be stopped and searched several times by the police and issued with the mandatory pink slip — an official record of our encounter. I would tell my parents of my first two stops. My vulnerability, suddenly feeling that I didn't belong, was met by an unbearable sadness. It was too painful for them — their labour and sweat had been the ground upon which my dreams had walked.

In this moment I understood the fullness of James Baldwin's words when he described himself as the other in the only place that he had come to accept as being home. Quickly these "realities" were represented on stages, on screen, in academia and so it was born — the story of the disillusioned and dislocated Angry Brown Man. Many of these narratives afforded some in our country the pretext to purge themselves of an accumulated fear of immigrant communities, a desire that had clearly been brewing for decades. New voices slowly emerged. What impact we had on the dominant narratives that were being presented at the time can be questioned. These other stories were fuelled less by the anger that many were clambering so desperately to understand, than by the love, ambition and fight that I witnessed among my communities.

In 2012 I returned to the city that had shaped my youth and to the Bush Theatre, located in the heart of west London's Shepherd's Bush. Ayad, when you come to visit us you will see that the streets of Shepherd's Bush are alive with the languages and garbs of those for whom London had become a part of their individual and shared stories. Through these difficult times this metropolis continues to beckon people to it from around the world with promises of prosperity, of refuge and of being reborn. My personal mission here at the theatre

is driven by an ambition to find and produce these playwrights and artists who are reflecting and redefining our cities nationally and internationally. I seek to provoke the canon of British theatre with these voices, so that we do not remain a cultural footnote but the beginning of chapters in our rich theatre history that represent the Britain that I still call home.

Population analysis of London reveals an image of a city that in less than two decades will see young Londoners reflecting, in even greater numbers, histories and ancestries that have been fused together from both within and beyond the shores of our country. I hope I am here to witness this version of a city that I am in love with. I hope that in spite of the narrowing conservatism sweeping across our Europe today that the culture being borne by this generation becomes even more present and pervasive. I want to close the gap between art and life in this great city. However, today we are experiencing a continuing reduction in state subsidy to the arts alongside all other areas of public wellbeing. We have to fight to defend the level of government funding to the arts, while at the same time recognising that there is an inequality of provision across London and nationwide that is preventing all those voices that make up New London and New Britain being articulated on our stages. We must change in order to create a version of ourselves that confronts the plurality of who we are, and will in time become, as a nation.

It was not until late December of 2012 when reading your first play, Disgraced, that I was struck by how the global turmoil that we as a nation are both helping to create and are the subject of is experienced and spoken of from another vantage point. I was most taken by the fact that you, like JB Priestley, understood implicitly the nature of the audience who would first encounter your work. The central protagonists of your play do not perceive themselves (at least early on) as being peripheral in their own country; they occupy confidently and without apology a central space within their society. They negotiate and speak to the world without the filter of a liberal guilt. It is your ability to reveal this most uncomfortable of truths that we share globally — that you can be a Muslim, hold middle-class values and

aspirations but still be in thrall to the curse of "the other" — that, I have very little doubt, has drawn so many to your work.

I believe wholeheartedly that those men and women who experience Disgraced in London will be forced to confront a shared reality that compels us all to see the world from yet another vantage point.

Warm regards,
Madani[1]

The points raised in this letter, which are just a small – but very articulate – echo of the endless conversations we have on a daily basis in our theatre, are pivotal both for my analysis of the state of today's cultural landscape in London, and for suggesting why the term "postmigrant" feels more limiting than affirming, especially within the British experience.

I'd like to offer you 5 provocations on how British theatre can be affected in order to embrace change and contribute to building a cultural capital that will impact the next generation, regardless of its cultural or geographical heritage.

1. If Theatre is the Mirror of Society, Who is Being Reflected?

Theatre has proved a conservative medium, perhaps the most conservative when it comes to the representation of a shared reality within the fiction of a play. In Britain, theatre – and especially New Writing – is anchored to an extremely established tradition of realism. The representation of reality on the stage is a powerful instrument of social analysis, which allows communities and audiences to confront themselves almost without filters. Often, the quality of a new play, or production, is measured by how "true" and "believable" its characters are, and whether the plot and setting at the heart of the play are "plausible" and "truthful."

There's nothing wrong with this system of values, of course, or with naturalistic theatre itself. My point, however, is a political one.

The fictional representation of reality isn't ever objective, and the perspective through which reality is observed and depicted is influenced by power dynamics that underlie the

[1] For the complete letter see: M. Younis, "'For you it was 9/11, form e 7/7': The Bush Theatre`s artistic director on Pulitzer prize-winning play Disgraced", *London Evening Standard*, 21.05.2013, web, http://www.standard.co.uk/goingout/theatre/for-you-it-was-911-for-me-77-the-bush-theatres-artistic-director-on-pulitzer-prizewinning-play-disgraced-8624963.html, last accessed: 06 Feb. 2014.

object of representation. Moreover, the perceived audience and perceived system of shared values determines a polarization between dominant and alternative narratives. We are awash with plays representing the working class, the migrant community, the asylum seekers, the outcasts, the ghettos, the marginalized. These plays are often written, directed, produced and reviewed by people who have had very little contact with these realities. This is not necessarily the problem. The real issue is that these plays are produced for the benefit and consumption of audiences that are perceived to share a similar system of values and frame of reference with its producers. Accordingly, these plays re-enforce dominant narratives that appeal to that community, rather than offering thought-provoking exceptions that question its beliefs.

And what's worse? These plays are often lazy and superficial in asking questions and confronting complex realities, and instead, favour a self-fulfilling emotional catharsis, which begins and ends within the world of the play.

It is no wonder that these plays tend to attract a relatively mono-cultural audience, for they affirm an interpretation of the world that is most familiar to that audience. And this doesn't only apply to white middle class audiences: years of targeted funding to boost and develop so-called "alternative" voices has produced many other spaces in which the same dynamic exists, only within a different context. In fact, the result is a sort of "divide et impera," where diversity is celebrated, but is never truly embraced, and is never truly empowering.

As the Nobel Prize-winning playwright from the West Indies, Derek Walcott, said about the experiences of Carnival and traditional ethnic folklore being absorbed and celebrated by the dominant culture, "these popular artists are trapped in the state's concept of the folk form, for they preserve the colonial demeanour and threaten nothing." A few decades later, the same notion can sadly be applied to a number of productions and companies that specialize in portraying images of ethnic minorities that comply with the standards dictated by mainstream clichés and narratives.

As artists, programmers, and policy makers who carry complementary perspectives, our challenge is to find and to instigate work that is able to break that vicious circle of "audiences getting what they are told they want," and instead to create spaces for more structural debate about how work is commissioned and who that work is really for. We need not serve a pre-conceived idea of existing audiences – which follows marketing categorization to the letter – but must diversify, create, nurture, and foster exchange between our audiences and communities. And we have to achieve this first of all by representing on our stages not only a snapshot – taken from afar – of what things look like outside our doorsteps, but by empowering artists and communities to experiment with

different ideas through their art. In other words, we must imagine, provoke, debate, and incite change. We need to forge a generation of artists and audiences that escapes any imposed definition of insularity *or* alternative to the main stream, representing instead a wider and more fluid cultural experience, without ever apologizing for the spaces they reclaim.

2. Quality vs. Quantity

In order to make my next point, I need to offer some statistical figures. This data is open to everyone – it is public domain; yet rarely has it's reading and interpretation sparked relevant debate from the perspective of cultural complementarities.

In the UK, subsidised theatre is funded by the Arts Council, which receives its budget directly from DCMS, in addition to a – growing – percentage from the National Lottery Trust Fund. British cultural organisations have learned, through the years, to thrive by adopting business models that aim at a balance between subsidy, generated income, and in-house fundraising. In the current climate and under the last government, we've seen cuts to public investment, which resulted in more pressure on organisations to fill the gap by being more conscious of spending and raising more money through alternative streams of income. While the decrease of public investment in culture is always something we should counter as a sector, the crisis has forced us *all* to look at each other and ask: Who should be cut? Who isn't essential? And why?

It is clear that the current government has valued more organisations that are elite outlets for culture – the vast majority of which are concentrated in London – and left those on the periphery to deal with contractions in funding that massively affect the diversity of output. On a cultural level, this translated into both a contraction in plurality, but even more importantly, an amplification of the differences in impact between those organisations on the top and bottom of the pyramid. The primary cultural outlets – National Theatre, RSC, Royal Opera House, ENO, etc. – are strategically asked to bear the weight of leading the country through these "hard times," and they are increasingly marketed as the temples of contemporary British culture and creativity. Again, this is not the surprising or deceiving point in the argument. The sobering figures come from two particular elements of a report on the top 100 subsidised organisations in the UK. The first figure concerns the percentage of BME2-led organisations in relation to the percentage of grants allocated.

[2] The abbreviation BME refers to Black and Minority Ethnic.

The average grant allocated to BME-led organisation is half of the typical RFO3. This mean that BME CEOs are generally running companies with smaller budgets and are more vulnerable to cuts across the board. Secondly, in a system with a budget of around 100M for subsidised theatre, the top 10 organisations get 50% of that money, leaving the other 169 sharing the remainder. More importantly, while BME make up 25% of the CEOs of these companies, not a single one is at the helm of the top 10. Nor the top 25. In fact, Madani Younis (in 2011) and Indu Rhubasingham (in 2012) – at 56 and 57, respectively – became the first non-white British artistic directors of major London theatres. From these figures, I infer that, while for more than 20 years there have been huge investments in creating opportunities at the bottom of the ladder for BME artists and organisations, the top attic is still a closed shop for a mono-cultural leading class. Further, until we see a change in this pattern, it will be impossible to consider how the newest generations of British men and women with mixed or foreign heritage could be motivated or empowered to succeed in theatre as they have been in other fields – like science and finance, and even in music and literature.

It is not enough to have healthy numbers that display the commitment of public funding bodies to diversity in the arts; we need to change the gatekeepers in order for different perspectives to have recognition at all levels. The boards of RFOs need to be more diverse and must address with greater rigour the plurality of their composition, if they don't want to become even more detached from the changing landscape outside their meeting rooms.

3. Complementary Perspectives

As I said earlier, I am suspicious of the word "postmigrant." I think its inflection feels negative because we associate a negative value with the term "migrant" in the first place: in the media especially, migration in referred to always as an experience affecting the "other," while we are the ones witnessing it, or dealing with its consequences. The idea of crystallising a particular perspective through the word "postmigrant" feels like we are starting from a deficit position – as if migration was an event from which we must take distance from, though without losing touch. Most of all, the term assumes a dominant narrative, an original status quo, which is being affected and altered by migration – as if there were an eternal idea of Germany, the UK or even Europe that is now contaminated by migration.

[3] The abbreviation RFO refers to Regularly Funded Organisations.

I believe that within the culture sector, as much as in any other field, migration is the constant, not the variable. Through the centuries, and across the world, nation states, monetary unions, treaties, and even languages, have changed and developed – each dominant culture with its arc of rise and fall and eventually disappearance. Culture is often defined and perceived as a dead body to be contemplated and preserved unchanged, enshrined even. Culture is hailed, defended, and worshipped, like a saint with miraculous powers. And in the case of European culture, it is perceived as a historical heritage that requires protection – even after it has, arguably, rampaged the rest of the globe for a few centuries.

My belief is that identity is as fluid as culture. It escapes definition, and it is constantly re-writing itself. Most importantly, it needs to have the power to re-imagine itself. If we yield to and abide by the definitions available to us, we will inevitably fall into perspectives that are pre-existent and/or received, thereby enforcing a structure of cultural dominance.

As artists and policy makers, we need to claim complementary points of view within our spaces, not only in opposition to or outside of the mainstream outlets. We need to speak with authority and occupy positions of power to be able to balance inequality, affect modes of production, and help to write a new chapter for the cultural moment we are living and defining.

Language in this instance is key to the struggle. Therefore, as I criticise the use of the term “postmigrant,” I also would like to be able to use the word “diversity” in a different way, stressing more the notion of plurality or complementarity of perspectives, instead of the negative inflection “diversity” subtly implies – diverse being equated with non-similar, and therefore non-harmonious.

We are British, German, Italian, European. And the best thing about these definitions is that we shouldn’t know at all what it means, because the history of these cultures is still to be written.

4. Crashing the Gates

In November, we’ll be hosting the second edition of RADAR - Signals from the New Writing World, our yearly festival of new writing and new work. Alongside shows and workshops inside and outside the building, we have also been keen, since last year, on opening our stage to a series of provocations. Every year, we invite a number of speakers from across the country to share a dangerous idea with our audiences. This year, we’ve titled the talks “Breaking Walls/Building Bridges,” in an attempt to capture the polarity of any dynamic of change – you need something to destroy in order to start building again,

and you need to break in before you can start reaching out. While we spoke a lot about theatre and form last year – mainly in aesthetic terms – we thought we were missing the point by remaining confined within the insularity of the theatrical discourse, especially within the specific context of New Writing. So this year, we decided to open up the festival to a range of speakers, most of whom have very little to do with the theatre: architects, academics, musicians, campaigners, journalists, fashion designers. We asked ourselves: who defines culture today, and what are the experiences that will provoke us to think beyond the status quo? Who's breaking the walls down, and who's building the bridges from which we'll acquire yet another vantage point?

Our mantra during the first year at the Bush was: "We want to be open, porous and plural, and ultimately, we want to lose control." We discovered that in order to lose control, first you need to obtain control – not an easy task.

But it has been interesting to observe in the space of 24 months just how much impact some of the decisions we made have had on our organisation. Our audiences are growing, but they're also changing, reflecting a wider spectrum of backgrounds. Our tone is changing; people are starting to grasp what kind of stories we're after and the kind of work we're championing. We've become gatekeepers, much against our will – the door is very narrow and there's a huge mass of people waiting to get in. But at least we're now able to break the circles of the establishment from within, by creating an offer that is different, though just as valid.

The next step will be to crash the gates and really lose control. To our artists, and to our communities. To achieve, this we need to affect the modes of production of new writing in our building, and across the country. We need to question the traditional relationship between artists and producing venues, as well as the one between audiences and buildings. We need to provoke our audiences and educate them to want more and more surprises. We need to empower artists not necessarily by granting them more money or time or space, but by giving them more responsibility vis-à-vis the context of their work. Reducing the gap between art and life means that we not only present a more truthful and contemporary response to the living moment, but that we are able to imagine a different ecology in which sustainable collaboration supersedes vertical hierarchy. It also means that the community we serve needs to be at the centre of our practice, and they must have a stake in our/their theatre. Perhaps we've already breached the wall, but we need to start building the bridges, soon.

5. The Fifth Provocation

I anticipated five provocations at the beginning of this intervention, and I intend to leave this one open to the public, for the sake of coherence with my last statement about losing control. We can define the world we want to live in, define the way we want to be perceived, and articulate our perspectives. Then again, there's always the "other." But this time, a positive "other," that helps us to better perceive our limits.

This is a provocation I'll bring back to London and share with my peers and colleagues. One that will help us, I hope, to look at ourselves differently, allow us to ask questions we haven't thought about before, and to be affected by *other* experiences and ideas that we observe from a short distance, but always with curiosity and openness.

Thank you for your time and consideration.