

Playing Inclusion

The Performing Arts in the Time of Migrations:
Thinking, Creating and Acting Inclusion

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WINTERREISE BY EXIL-ENSEMBLE AND YAEL RONEN
A German Journey towards Inclusion

Abstract

This paper presents the work of the Exil-Ensemble: a platform for professional artists, who live in exile. The introduction contextualizes the project – born in 2016 at the Gorki Theatre in Berlin – in relation to Germany's migratory situation. It then addresses the complex issue of the professional performer's status as a refugee, working for a European institution.

The essay then proceeds to analyze the company's first production, *Winterreise*, which brings to the stage a journey through Germany and Switzerland, undertaken by the actors and the director, Yael Ronen. Discreetly balancing biographical and fictional elements, the piece – open in many regards to performative experimentation – turns out to be a journey of exploration of the hosting culture. It is an exercise of de- and re-construction of stereotypes, and a reflection on concepts such as 'migration' and 'homeland'.

The reality of the Exil-Ensemble is an example of a multi-ethnic and inclusive cultural politic, which confirms theatre to be a secure arena for scrutiny, an observatory of social dynamics, and a testing ground for a possible coexistence.

Keywords

Exile; migration; Germany; Exil-Ensemble; Yael Ronen.

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1. EXILE AS A 'STATE OF MIND' AND MIGRATORY SITUATION IN GERMANY

Exile is a fruitful ordeal for an author. [...] Undoubtedly, migration – a phenomenon that has deeply affected the world over the last ten years – will birth a whole new generation of authors and enrich the body of literature on Exile. 'Exilic' is still one of the most prolific languages, written with a pen sharpened by sorrow¹.

These words, written by the Turkish journalist Can Dündar, who has lived as an exile in Germany since 2016, illustrate the problematic state of an exiled artist's soul, torn between uprooting and the desire to continue creating art in his adopted country.

Exile is, first of all, a troubled 'state of mind', but art can turn a condition of displacement into an opportunity: not only does it prevent annihilation by giving the exiled a voice, but it also offers him a creative force that draws its fertility from the exile itself².

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¹ C. Dündars, "Schreiben im Exil", *Theaterkolumne #10*, <https://gorki.de/de/can-duendars-theater-kolumne-10>. Translation mine. This and all following URLs last accessed September 15, 2018.

² Of the many writings on this topic, see at least S.R. Suleiman, ed., *Exile and Creativity*, Durham: Duke

This is the case for the Exil-Ensemble of the Gorki Theatre in Berlin and the Israeli director Yael Ronen, who has turned exile into an artistic programme:

In the last years at Gorki, I have had the good fortune – with *Common Ground*, *The Situation* and *Winterreise* – to realize theatre projects with actors of different backgrounds. We shared the experience of being ‘displaced’ and of longing for a homeland or a reality that did not exist anymore. Life in exile becomes a place where identities must be re-established and a vision of Zion must be created – that is, the ideal place, whose roots lie in the yearning for a common past that will come true in a dream sometime in the future. Life in exile is not yet firmly anchored, so it throws you out of your habits, comfort zone, relationships and strength and drags you into your inner self³.

Migration and forced exile are (and have always been) common realities, of which Europe is becoming more and more aware because of the recent political turmoil and which consequently have begun to permeate the occidental thought and art.

According to the most recent survey by the Federal Statistical Office of Germany, in 2016 almost one-fifth of Germany’s population had a migration background (18,6 million of the 82,4 total inhabitants)⁴. The *Unabhängige Kommission ‘Zuwanderung’* (Independent Immigration Commission), headed by former *Bundestag* President Rita Süsmuth, officially defined Germany as a ‘country of immigration’ (*Einwanderungsland*) as early as 2001⁵. Since then, the issue of migration has received increased political attention; after the ‘Long Summer of Migration’ in 2015, when about 890.000 refugees arrived in Germany, the country has been divided between Merkel’s *Willkommenspolitik* (Welcome policy) and a political shift to the right, with the radical right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) entering the parliament as the third-largest party in 2017⁶. On closer inspection, the number of migrants to Germany in 2015 is not much higher than – for example – the almost 800.000 of 1992, and in recent years the so-called migrant crisis has consistently slowed down⁷. Nevertheless, migration is still the most discussed and instrumentalized issue in Germany’s political debate⁸.

As social scientist Naika Foroutan affirms, migration is indeed a political issue, but it must be addressed alongside other inequalities and social problems. Only when the society as a whole is approached in accordance with the unique ‘social contract’ of the *Grundgesetz* (the German constitution) can the goal of effective integration can be pursued⁹. Along with this political agenda, cultural change is necessary: “Emotionally, we still think of ‘integration’ as ‘assimilation’, that is, as a constant process of adapting

University Press, 1998. Interesting remarks can also be found in L. Ginzburg, *Buongiorno mezzanotte, torno a casa*, Trieste-Roma: Italo Svevo, 2018, 38-39 and 61-66.

³ Y. Ronen, “Ein Land ohne Land für ein Volk ohne Land. Im Exil kann man am besten von Zion träumen”, *Theater heute. Der ideale Staat*, Jahrbuch 2017: 32-34 (34). Translation mine.

⁴ Statistisches Bundesamt, *Bevölkerung mit Migrationshintergrund – Ergebnisse des Mikrozensus 2016*: 37. Of these German residents with a migration background (*Migrationshintergrund*), 68,6% were born abroad and experienced migration personally (*Migrationserfahrung*); 31,4% are second- or third-generation immigrants.

⁵ An abridged version of the commission’s report is available online at: <http://www.fluechtlingsrat.org/download/berkommzusfas.pdf>.

⁶ R. Römhild, A. Schwanhäußler, B. Zur Nieden, G. Yurdakul, eds., *Witnessing the Transition: Moments in the Long Summer of Migration*, Berlin: BIM, 2017.

⁷ The number of asylum applicants for Germany decreased from 476.510 in 2015 to 222.560 in 2017: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-datasets/-/tps00191>.

⁸ See N. Foroutan, “Ein manifestes demokratisches Problem”, *Theater heute*, 4 (2016): 40-45 (41-42).

⁹ N. Foroutan, “Darum geht es: Wie wollen wir alle zusammenleben?”, *Theater heute. Grenzen*, Jahrbuch 2016: 16-27 (24-25).

that at some point completely erases cultural differences”¹⁰. Instead, we need to overcome the paradoxical coexistence of approval of cultural diversity in theory and emotional distance from that diversity in practice.

How can we cross this boundary, facilitate collective reflection and promote cultural exchange? Theatre could play a key role in this process. Beyond politics – and notwithstanding the desire of some AfD politicians, who want to preserve an alleged ‘pure’ German theatre – “multiculturality and cultural exchange are not inventions of left-wing political dreamers, but a historical condition” of art itself¹¹.

2. THE EXIL-ENSEMBLE

The Exil-Ensemble is “a platform for professional artists who have been forced to live in exile. Since November 2016 seven actors from Syria, Palestine and Afghanistan have been working as part of this platform at the Maxim Gorki Theatre”¹².

The idea takes inspiration from the historical precedent of the *Schauspielhaus Zürich* in the ’30s, which hosted many actors and directors who immigrated to Switzerland after the rise of the Nazis¹³.

The current members of the group are Maryam Abu Khaled, Hussein Al Shatheli, Karim Daoud, Tahera Hashemi, Mazen Aljubbeh, Kenda Hmeidan¹⁴. Until the end of the 2017/18 season, before leaving to pursue a freelance career, the Syrian actor Ayham Majid Agha was a member of the ensemble and its artistic director. The actors auditioned for the ensemble in person or online, as Kenda Hmeidan explains:

Gorki opened the borders for the Exil-Ensemble project. I sent my documents; I was in Syria when I applied, we did a Skype-call – we couldn’t do it in any other way – and then they accepted me. At one point, within a month, everything just worked out and I moved to Germany¹⁵.

The actors signed two-year full-time contracts at the Gorki Theatre (now extended for one more year), with the task of creating two main stage productions each year in addition to leading workshops, learning German and building their skills for the German stage. The group receives financial support from the Federal Cultural Foundation, the LOTTO Foundation Berlin and the private foundation Mercator¹⁶. The guidelines of the project were clearly defined from the beginning:

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18. Translation mine.

¹¹ P.W. Marx, “Das Phantasma des Deutschen Nationaltheaters”, *Nachtkritik.de*, January 11, 2018. Translation mine.

¹² <https://gorki.de/en/exile-ensemble>.

¹³ This connection is mentioned in *Winterreise*, Chapter IX, and in *Gorki – Spielzeithaft #13* (March-July 2017): 15: “Zürich. Das Exil Ensemble der 30er”.

¹⁴ Individual biographies are available on the Exil-Ensemble site mentioned above.

¹⁵ Interview with the author on June 26, 2018. For more on the casting process (for which there were about 120 applications), see D. Marcus, “Geflüchtete Künstler und ihre Bühnenprojekte”, *Deutschlandfunk – Kulturheute*, February 22, 2017. The call for applications (the deadline was July 31, 2016) can be read in *Gorki – Spielzeithaft #11* (August-November 2016): 26.

¹⁶ The Exil’s residency has been underwritten by 1,2 million euros: see R. Donadio, “Turning Traumatic Arrivals into Art: Exiles Form a Theater Troupe”, *The New York Times*, April 12, 2017 and S. Diesselhorst, “Utopie transkulturelle Theaterarbeit. Wie die deutsche Theaterszene in Modellprojekten geflüchtete Theaterleute integriert”, *Nachtkritik.de*, January 29, 2018.

Over the past months many theatres have made the effort to broach the subject of refugees' situations in Germany. How can the theatre become a space where refugees are represented with self-determination? How can we successfully escape from the arrogant gesture of a privileged institution? The central issue on both sides is one of duration: is theatre, as an institution notoriously obsessed with remaining current, interested in sustainability in its work with the refugees? And on the other side, are refugees forced to performatively perpetuate their flight state on a project basis just as long as they are interesting as protagonists in their own biographies? The Gorki has decided to take a new approach. [...] It makes jobs available – because we believe that is the best way to treat each other as equals. [...] We managed to formulate a program that should enable seven colleagues in exile to pursue their profession with us¹⁷.

In its content, the project seeks “mutual exchange of theatrical traditions and aesthetic systems. The Exil-Ensemble sees itself as a model project for a shared artistic path, that Gorki as a theatre wants to travel together with international artists. In perspective, collaborations with directors, authors and interdisciplinary artists are part of it”¹⁸.

It should be stressed that the members accepted into the ensemble were all already professional artists. And this issue, how the public of the host land perceives exiled artists, is indeed a sensitive topic. It deals with the audience's (at times involuntary) stereotypes and with the aspirations of the performers, who struggle to find their artistic dimension, regardless of their status of refugees:

What I've experienced all over Europe, is that the audience doesn't think that it's possible, in a show with or by refugees, that these people are professional actors. It's always: “Oh how nice that (for example) Arabs have a chance to be on stage, even though they're amateurs”. This reaction is everywhere! [...] It is therefore our responsibility to not present ourselves as refugees – just because it's now in fashion to work with refugees. Everyone who is paid to stand on stage should also be regarded as an artist. [...] This time [i.e. with *Winterreise*] we will talk about our experiences with Germans. [...] We're professional actors, even though we don't speak their language yet. I hope that one day we'll be able to speak it and work on a different topic than being a refugee, or what our experience as refugees in Germany is like¹⁹.

¹⁷ *Gorki – Spielzeithaft #11* (August-November 2016): 26.

¹⁸ <https://gorki.de/de/exil-ensemble>. Translation mine.

¹⁹ M. Abu Khaled, K. Daoud, A. Majid Agha, interview with R. Ajnwojner in *Gorki – Spielzeithaft #13* (March-July 2017): 11-13 (13). This number of the theatre's journal also provides a brief account of the trip and a photo feature by Esra Rotthoff. The actors recall the heated debate that takes place in Germany about the (at times exploited) ‘employment’ of refugees on stage: for an exhaustive summary of the theme see Diessehorst, “Utopie transkulturelle Theaterarbeit”, which mentions the discussions around *Die Schutzbefohlenen* by Nicolas Stemanns and P. Laudenbach, “*Winterreise* am Maxim Gorki Theater”, *tip-Berlin*, April 25, 2017, who remembers the example of *Empire* by Milo Rau. See also what A. Majid Agha affirms (cited interview with Marcus, “Geflüchtete Künstler”) about the ‘exploitation’ of the refugees' stories by some directors on the stage. It should be specified here that the legitimate claim of a professional artistic status does not take anything away from the merits and noble cultural goals of other amateur, didactic and social theatrical experiences. In fact, the future of the theatre and the (intercultural) education of future audiences relies heavily on non-professional performances. For a discussion of the multifaceted German reality in this area, see W. Schneider, ed., *Theater und Migration. Herausforderungen für Kulturpolitik und Theaterpraxis*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2011, in particular A. Sharifi, *Postmigrantisches Theater: Eine neue Agenda für die deutschen Bühnen* (*ibid.*: 36-45); A. Sharifi, *Theater für Alle? Partizipation von Postmigrantischem am Beispiel der Bühnen der Stadt Köln*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2011; J. Bloomfield, *Crossing the Rainbow. National Differences and International Convergences in Multicultural Performing Arts in Europe*, Brüssel: IETM, 2003, 50-56. A recent publication that widely discusses and analyses different aspects of the so-called *Flüchtlingstheater* is B. Peter, G.C. Pfeiffer, eds., *Flucht – Migration – Theater. Dokumente und Positionen*, Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2017. It's worth mentioning another project that closely resembles the Exil-Ensemble: the Open Border Ensemble

In these words, two topics emerge: the use of a foreign language on stage and the use of biographical material from the migrants' lives. These two topics are crucial to the whole debate around theatre and migration and, more than once, critics have highlighted these areas as weaknesses of the company's work²⁰. However, one must remember that the artists themselves are aware of the limits of these choices, which are after all just temporary compromises. Certainly, the use of multiple languages in a single play (productions alternate fluidly among English, German and Arabic, but a translation is always provided in supertitles) requires some effort from the audience, but 1) Gorki's public is so heterogeneous that, for many people, the language shifts are more than welcome, and 2) multilingualism is a richness, and the theatre – with its universal language – transcends such barriers fairly easily (as Chapter VII of *Winterreise* demonstrates)²¹.

Finally, on the question of the biographical material, the actors' willingness to break out of their 'roles' of migrants is clearly and programmatically expressed in Chapter II of *Winterreise*, where Maryam says: "It's always about us: our stories, our background, our culture. We are bored with ourselves". The group pushes therefore the German friend, Niels, to open up and show them his culture ("We want to know more. [...] We want to get to know you, the real you. [...] We want to understand you") and plan a bus tour through Germany²². Even though the actors use their own names in the piece and their migratory past emerges constantly, their journey is focused on Germany, their new adoptive country, and on the Germans. Their experience of the exile inevitably influences the ensemble's production; after all it is programmatically built into the company's name²³. But the question is: how long are they going to carry this name? Indeed, the goal of the project is to come soon to an end, having allowed the actors in the meanwhile to take part in other production at the Gorki and to be included in the theatre's regular season productions. In the words of Kenda Hmeidan:

This project will end at a certain point. Now things are changing at the Gorki: I'm working in other productions without the group, in the big ensemble; all of us are now working in other projects in the program of the whole house. We are going separate ways, and that was also the goal. There are a lot of nationalities here at Gorki, and they're really paying attention

of the Münchner Kammerspiele (<https://www.muenchner-kammerspiele.de/open-border/open-border-ensemble>), where incidentally works Kenda Hmeidan's brother, Kinan.

²⁰ On the language issue, see Diesselhorst, "Utopietranskulturelle Theaterarbeit" and B. Burckhardt, "Nahe und Distanz". *Theaterheute*, 4 (2018): 20-22 (22). On the 'slip' into the 'refugee-rhetoric' see F. Wille, "Fragen der Kunst", *Theater heute*, 6 (2017): 12-13 (12) and U. Seidler, "*Winterreise* am Gorki-Theater: Skurrile, abstoßende, deutsche Klischeeneurosen", *Berliner Zeitung*, April 9, 2017.

²¹ On the potential of multilingual theatre, see C. Holthaus, "Jeder macht das mal auf seine Art und Weise. Ansätze und Herausforderungen einer interkulturellen Spielplangestaltung", in *Theater und Migration*: 147-157 (154).

²² I wish to thank the Gorki Theatre, particularly Xenia Sircar, for making the script of *Winterreise* available to me and for arranging the interview with Kenda Hmeidan.

²³ Exile also works as a double interpretative level in the ensemble's other, more recent productions. In *Die Hamletmaschine* by Heiner Müller, for example, the alienation of the expats adds a nuance of meaning to that of the DDR-intellectual as presented by Müller, updating the piece for our times and implementing its message. The insertion of text passages by A. Majid Agha also contributes to this: <https://gorki.de/de/die-hamletmaschine>; première February 24, 2018; attended by me at Gorki Theatre on May 26, 2018. The Exil-Ensemble's other previous productions are: *Wonderland* (presentation/workshop, December 22, 2016, <https://gorki.de/de/wonderland>), *Skelett eines Elefanten in der Wüste* (text and direction by A. Majid Agha, première September 14, 2017, <https://gorki.de/de/skelett-eines-elefanten-in-der-wueste>), *Elizaveta Bam* (text by D. Charms, directed by C. Weise, première April 14, 2018, <https://gorki.de/de/elizaveta-bam>).

to that because it creates another picture for the theatre – politically and socially – and it attracts a wider audience²⁴.

Winterreise is only the first stage of the actors' quest to find themselves as artists in exile; the project's real victory and success lies in its conclusion. It is a springboard for the German theatrical scene, which will then be enriched by the participation of these seven (and many other) professionals. Their personal histories will remain an indelible experiential background, but their artistic journey will develop beyond it.

3. *WINTERREISE* رحلة الشتاء

The concept of the piece is to bring on the stage a journey that the Exil-Ensemble really undertook in January 2017²⁵. This research process for their first production represents at the same time the company's founding act and a socially engaged attempt to get to know the new host culture through a full immersion in it. The winter journey lasted two weeks and brought the ensemble on a bus to ten German cities (Halle, Dresden, Weimar, Munich, Oberndorf am Neckar, Mannheim, Dortmund, Düsseldorf, Bremen and Hamburg), with a foray to Switzerland (Zürich). The Gorki's resident director, Yael Ronen, also joined the journey, as well as the actor Niels Bormann (who, later in the play, assumes the role of the bus driver, cultural interpreter and 'prototypical German'), the dramaturg Irina Szodruch and the visual artist and photographer Esra Rotthoff.

The premiere took place on the main stage of the Gorki Theatre on April 8, 2017; the play then toured in the cities visited during the journey. The play was hosted by the *Lessingtagen* (Hamburg 2018), the *Augsburger Brecht festival* (Augsburg 2018) and the *Festival Chantiers d'Europe* (Paris 2018).

As anticipated in the words of Yael Ronen herself above, *Winterreise* follows and is closely connected to two plays she has previously directed: *Common Ground* (2014) and *The Situation* (2015)²⁶. Apart from the concept of the journey (shared only with the first), all three pieces consist of emblematic social experiments (of coexistence, mutual discovery and inclusion) and seek to de- and re-construct stereotypes. These latter – which could otherwise lead to discrimination and misunderstanding – are used intelligently by the company²⁷: the idea of foregrounding the impression that the Germans make on migrants (and not, as usual, vice versa: see Chapters III, VI and VIII below) is

²⁴ Interview with the author on June 26, 2018.

²⁵ <https://gorki.de/en/winterreise>. By Yael Ronen and Exil-Ensemble. Directed by Yael Ronen. Stage design: Magda Willi; costumes: Sophie Du Vinage; music: Yaniv Fridel and Ofer Shabi; video: Benjamin Krieg and Patricia Bateira (station Mannheim); puppet show: Ariel Doron; drawings: Esra Rotthoff; dramaturgy: Irina Szodruch. Cast: Maryam Abu Khaled, Mazen Aljubbeh, Hussein Al Shatheli, Niels Bormann, Karim Daoud, Kenda Hmeidan, Ayham Majid Agha. The present analysis is based on the performance I saw at the Gorki on June 26, 2018.

²⁶ The first (<https://gorki.de/index.php/en/common-ground>) explores the possibility of creating a 'common space' of confrontation for the sons of refugees of the Yugoslav Wars, whether victims or war criminals: it is a collective journey back to the origins in Bosnia and gives the new Berliners the opportunity to evaluate new perspectives of mutual acceptance. The second (<https://gorki.de/index.php/en/the-situation>) – nominated Play of the Year in 2016 by the magazine *Theater heute* – brings Syrian, Israeli and Palestinian migrants together in the desks of a German language school; the dynamics of the Middle East are, hence, examined in the microcosmos of the language course.

²⁷ On the risk that stories of migration will fall into one of the two opposite but equally dangerous extremes, stereotyping or mythologizing the refugees, see D. Trilling, "Five Myths about the Refugee Crisis", *The Guardian*, June 5, 2018 (n. 3 in particular).

already an innovation. A stereotype is not negative per se; it's the starting point for categorizing the new and for explaining encounters between cultures. To confirm, deny or temper it, is the task of the interpersonal dialogue²⁸.

The title, *Winterreise* (Winter Journey), is always printed with the Arabic translation, in accordance with the multilinguistic nature of the entire performance. Besides literally hinting at the plot of the play, the title is a reference to Robert Schumann's song cycle of the same name, which sets 24 poems of Wilhelm Müller to music. One of these, *Der Wegweiser* (The Signpost) is sung in the play. The actors, who have learnt it – as they tell Niels – in their German course, sing it on the road in Chapter VIII. The last two quatrains establish a *fil rouge* between the Romantic *Lied* and the condition of the exiled:

Weiser stehen auf den Straßen,
weisen auf die Städte zu.
Und ich wandre sonder Maßen
ohne Ruh' und suche Ruh'.

Signpost stand on the streets,
indicating the way to the cities.
And I wander on and on
without peace, searching for peace.

Einen Weiser seh' ich stehen
unverrückt vor meinem Blick;
eine Straße muß ich gehen,
die noch keiner ging zurück.

I see a signpost in front of me,
standing firmly before my eyes;
I must follow a road,
from which none has ever returned²⁹.

A group of refugees singing Schubert's *Winterreise*, quintessence of German Romanticism, is already in itself a strong message: on the one hand, it shows the power and universality of art, as the emotional baggage of a disoriented exile of the twenty-first century is expressed perfectly through a Romantic song. On the other hand, it could be understood as a claim to belonging, as a spur to inclusiveness.

The creative process that led to the writing of the script (a process which is not finished, since the performers constantly modify the script), helps clarify the Gorki's role in the debate on the refugees as a passive 'object' of the representation. In the case of Yael Ronen and the Exil-Ensemble, the biographical and documentary elements only provide an initial pretext, a loose schema and starting point for active artistic creation:

We came back from the trip, and for three weeks we sat just at the table: Yael asked questions, we answered, we started discussions about topics, we wrote something together, and then we collected all the material. Not everything we say in the piece is real: the process that we went through is more about starting with a real story and combining it with fiction. After performing it for a certain time, you realize it's not yours anymore. A lot of details were just imagined and we played with them³⁰.

The dramaturg Irina Szodruch – underlining the work's therapeutic effects – affirms that:

²⁸ For the use of stereotypes in the artistic confrontation, see A. Mortazavi, "Über das Bekenntnis zur Uneindeutigkeit", in *Theater und Migration: 73-76* (74).

²⁹ F. Schubert, *Winterreise Op. 89*, edited by W. Dürr, Kassel-Basel-London-New York-Praha: Bärenreiter, 2009, 58-61. Translation mine.

³⁰ Kenda Hmeidan, interview June 26, 2018.

the plays that come out of this process are willingly called ‘by-products’ by Yael Ronen. [...] For her, the working process is always in the forefront, and through it, all the participants discover something new about themselves and the world. [...] This talking and opening up is the first step of the ‘Ronenian group therapy’. And at some point, she starts channelling the stories. She writes scenes based on them, she distributes writing-assignments to the ensemble, and she brings their texts into a scenic form. The most difficult moment of the rehearsals is when they read a scene on paper that’s a story they’ve told. In that moment they’re not themselves anymore [...]. They become figures; their experience is combined with [...] Ronen’s fantasy. As soon as the piece is performed for the public, the healing process usually begins, because the private becomes public and vice versa. This is the third step of the therapy, the catharsis³¹.

According to the structure of the script and the performance I attended, the play consists of an ‘opening’ and ten ‘chapters’. In the opening, a video of a foggy winter landscape is shown on a big concave surface consisting of three movable panels. Videos and images are projected onto these panels throughout the show. An ethereal Arabic song and a smoke and wind machine help convey the winter atmosphere. Esra Rotthoff’s hand appears on the screens in the foreground, filmed from above as it writes the title of the piece in Arabic and realizes other drawings. The actors come onstage one after the other. Below, the contents of each chapter are described.

I. *Waiting for Niels*. The actors, ready to leave with luggage, have an appointment with their German friend Niels, who is – surprisingly – late. He arrives, but instead of starting the trip immediately, Maryam interjects a metatheatrical digression to explain the backstory to the audience.

II. *The Talk*. The migrants express their desire to stop talking about themselves and to get to know Niels, his culture and his country. They propose a bus tour through Germany.

III. *On the Road*. Niels is the bus driver and explains to the group, in a caricatural scene, with exaggerated German precision, all the rules they must observe while on the bus. He knows the price of every possible replacement part off the top of his head. Some short anecdotes follow in quick succession, as if they were confidences made on the bus: Ayham describes the whiteness of the landscape outside Berlin, Hussein tells how his mother tried to exempt her sons from military service in Beirut, and Kenda describes her farewell from her boyfriend in Damascus, who migrated to Germany before her. Then Maryam asks Niels for advice about how relationships in Germany work, since she discovered that the German guy she likes is in an open relationship.

IV. *Dresden*. Niels wanted to show them the capital of Romanticism, but the group stays in the hotel because of the city’s weekly Islamophobic Pegida demonstrations. Niels clumsily attempts to explain (“It’s nothing personal, they’re only demonstrating against the Muslim part of you”). Mazen’s nostalgic memories of his girlfriend are followed by an exhilarating scene in which Hussein and Karim that try to decipher the xenophobic banners from the window³². Maryam speculates about a banal message of the German guy. Donald Trump’s contradictory statements are heard from the television, and the demonstrators outside irritate Ayham, who gives a cynical, self-ironic speech about the

³¹ I. Szodruch, “Die Gruppentherapeutin”, *Theater heute. Grenzen*, Jahrbuch 2016: 104-107. Translation mine.

³² They wonder, for example, about the meaning of “Kartoffeln statt Döner” (potatoes instead of kebabs), being actually potatoes and kebabs a good combination, or they interpret “Fatima Merkel” as Angela’s second name, just as Barack Hussein Obama has a first and a middle name.

inclination of Arabs to use weapons and rape women. In a climax accompanied by music, Kenda expresses her rage over the demonstrations in Damascus, during which many of her friends were arrested. Karim recites Bertolt Brecht's poem *Über die Bezeichnung Emigranten* (1937), which he finds spiritually close to the work of the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish³³.

V. *Weimer*. The group visits the concentration camp Buchenwald. Mazen tells about his disappointment and his saturation with death³⁴. He mistakes an unknown woman for his girlfriend. Kenda and Karim sing Mahmoud Darwish's *Now... In the exile*³⁵.

VI. *Munich*. The group has nightmares after Buchenwald. They visit the Allianz Arena (because Niels loves oval spaces). Karim feels the urge to overcome the barriers of the stadium and lets loose in a parkour session. The group tries (and is stunned by) the German App "Zanzu", which gives migrants sexual 'explanation' according to the alleged German 'standards'. Hussein complains to Niels about the 'toilet situation' in Germany (dry toilet paper and inconvenient shape of the WC).

VII. *Mannheim*. While the others visit the Shiller Museum, Agha walks alone among the ruins of the Benjamin Franklin Village, an 'Amero-German ghost city'. He sees some pigeons and tests them by giving them signals with a scarf. The scene becomes an aerial choreography (with the use of the video). Agha tells an anecdote about a neighbour in Syria who was abandoned by the wife because of his fondness for pigeons.

VIII. *On the Road Again*. Passing through Düsseldorf, Maryam complains about the solitude she experiences in Germany, particularly in winter. Niels decides to take them to the allegedly boring Switzerland to encourage his friends to give Germany a second chance. The group sings Schubert's *Wegweiser*.

IX. *Zürich*. Hussein remembers Brecht and the *Schauspielhaus Zürich* at his time. Then he narrates his escape from "random death, massacres and chemical attacks": an odyssey through Damascus, Qamischli, Izmir, Samos, Macedonia, Greece and Germany.

X. *Hamburg*. Kenda tells Mazen about her last relationship, which was interrupted by her boyfriend's expatriation. She needs a fresh start. Mazen briefly summarizes the visit to Niels's parents in Bremen and concludes on a positive note, describing the new family he has found in the theatre.

In all the chapters of *Winterreise* as well as in the opening, as said above, the use of multimedia cements the skeleton of the text into a coherent whole. The transitions between chapters, scenes and anecdotes are guided by changes on the screen, either filmed (videos by B. Krieg) or drawn (by E. Rotthoff, whose drawing hand is often also filmed and projected on the screens). The hand-free drawings consist of chapter titles, maps of the journey, portraits of the protagonists on the stage or of people they mention, historical parades, decorations and free creations that follow the music.

Music is also ubiquitous and serves as a bridge in all the narrative sequences. In

³³ "I always found the name false which they gave us: Emigrants. / That means those who leave their country. But we / did not leave, of our own free will / choosing another land. Nor did we enter / into a land, to stay there, if possible for ever. / Merely, we fled. We are driven out, banned. / Not a home, but an exile, shall the land be that took us in. / [...] But none of us / will stay here. The final word / is yet unspoken" (B. Brecht, *Poems 1913-1956*, edited by J. Willet and R. Manheim, New York: Routledge, 1987, 301).

³⁴ Particularly disconcerting is the realization that the architect who built Buchenwald afterwards designed some prisons in Syria that the regime still uses today. Mazen also expresses his unease about eating in the camp's canteen: "The horrors of today will become the museum of tomorrow with a Kantina".

³⁵ "Now... In the exile / Now... In the exile, yes at your house / and suddenly you're become sixty, / they light candles for you".

places, it becomes a protagonist, such as in the songs mentioned above in the synopsis and in two ‘explosions of energy’ in Chapters IV (Kenda) and VI (Karim).

The variety of technical tools employed on the stage reflects the richness of the performative elements, in addition to the ordinary prose recitation. The actors sing (particularly noteworthy are the songs in Chapters IV by Karim, V by Karim and Kenda and VIII by all in chorus), dance (Kenda, IV), do parkour (Karim, VI), do pantomime and aerial choreography (Agha, VII) and, finally, present a ‘puppet show’ (Maryam and Kenda accompany the story of Hussein’s escape by using their hands and some objects to illustrate the story on a table; this representation is simultaneously filmed from above and projected onto the screens)³⁶.

The aerial choreography that Ayham Majid Agha improvises in the ruins of the ex-army village (so similar to those of his hometown) deserves special mention. He used to train pigeons, but those of the Arab world seem to respond to different orders and signals; the German ones simply fly away. Only one feels confident and approaches him. So, starting a symphony of whistles and moving through the air in a kind of ritual ancestral dance, Agha proceeds:

I tie my scarf around a stick and start waving it. He starts to follow, he got the signal. He starts to collect other pigeons, we are seven now. We kick off your show. It’s my first choreography on German skies. I am the maestro again.

Even though all of Agha’s line in Chapter VII are in Arabic and the pigeons appear on-stage only through the mediation of the video, the scene manages to reach a rare poetic and evocative power, to synthesize the personal past and the new life in exile, and to ‘take the flight’³⁷. A flight that involves all seven members of the ensemble (like the seven birds), who have the chance to fly anywhere in the world and to be included in the big ‘we’ of the theatre. The last lines of *Winterreise* demonstrate this: “Kenda always says that theatre people are the same all around the world like a big crazy family. And it’s true: when I enter a theatre anywhere in the world I right away feel home, I feel safe, it feels like family”.

³⁶ Kenda Hmeidan (graduated in 2015 from the Academy of Performing Arts in Damascus) comments the richness of this staging approach: “I came from a different school of theatre. I felt a gap between what I knew about theatre and what we are trying to do here. Speaking with the audience, for example: in Syria we always have a fourth wall, and if we break it, it’s only briefly. Here, it’s more about connecting and talking with the people. Sometimes it’s abstract; there are a lot of elements on the stage playing with you as an actor that contribute to the final image” (interview June 26, 2018).

³⁷ See Wille, “Fragen der Kunst”: 12.

