

A reflection

Kenda Hmeidan

I was asked to prepare a keynote for the PostHeimat event “Encountering the Future” 2019, which took place at the Maxim Gorki Theatre. Here, I will share some thoughts from this Keynote. Back then, when I started writing the text and thus reflecting on the productions I participated in during the past couple of years, it only became harder and harder for me to formulate a conclusion and to have clear answers to the questions which accompanied me from the moment I arrived until now. So, this text is not a “how-to guide”; instead, I am writing to share and reflect upon some of my experiences at productions at Gorki Theatre.

I am Kenda Hmeidan. I come from Syria and moved to Berlin in 2016, after finishing my acting studies at the Higher Institute of Drama and Art in Damascus. I joined Gorki as a member of the Exil-Ensemble.

The language is one of the first and foremost challenges I must face as an actress in Germany. I actually have to translate the whole text, word by word, and jump between three languages: Arabic, English and German. By now, I call it “the language obsession.” The moment I analyse the words, I start to feel them, and I can immediately start playing with them. It is interesting to notice how every language has its structure, which I must follow. Each language puts me as an actress in a different playground. I notice how my voice has a different pitch and how my face and body move to express myself. There is certainly a difference from the way I act in Arabic.

I remember a friend of mine once told me about a writer who wrote about languages, and this sentence stayed with me. She said: “Every language has her own eyes, and speaking a second language is like having a second soul.” Of course, in the beginning, it is unusual. Who is this person talking? I feel it is not really myself. Now I realise it is me, with new tools to describe myself, using new methods to work and acting under new circumstances.

Furthermore, there is the complicated matter of rehearsing in a foreign language. After three years in Germany, I thought I had grasped and understood the language quite well. Nonetheless, discussing plays, expressing my thoughts and improvising – in German, for example – is a complex process.

I must be highly focused and do my best to follow what’s happening. Because I have to ask many questions to understand the process, I sometimes feel isolated,

especially when I am the only one who doesn't speak German. In some situations, it is not enough to understand the general idea or feel what's happening on stage. One needs to grasp every idea very concretely: Why, when, where, and what is the message underneath all of it?

Sometimes, I miss what I like most about acting in theatre, which is the discussions within the group during rehearsals, when each team member shares an idea or a thought, which opens a new door, developing the content together and collectively working on the material. I miss the kind of discussions that inspire the whole process. During those times, when everyone is sitting around the table speaking in German very fast and coming up with new ideas, I am busy running from one person to the next, trying to figure out what is going on. And the moment I actually get it and can comment on this particular idea, they have already moved on, starting a new discussion about another topic. This gives me the feeling of always being late and forced to run through ideas actually to feel present. At this point, language becomes dull and not very interesting to discover and learn.

Then I participated in the play *Ausser Sich*, directed by Sebastian Nübling (2018), which was like a revelation for me. It is a play after the novel by Sasha Marianna Salzmann, 364 pages, in German. I read six pages from the original book, and then I had to ask for the book in English. I studied it, then went back to the German version and started to prepare for my role in German. I took my time to prepare the play thoroughly in advance. I felt like I owned this language for the first time in Germany. I learned how to make this language mine, how to prepare the text, bend and form it, and not just say it. I could act and feel the text, and I let it pass through me. This feeling is incredible because this had been one of my biggest fears before I came to Germany. I always ask myself: how can I own the text on stage? It is not my goal to phonetically memorise the text, and I don't want this to become the case when working in a foreign language.

Hamletmaschine (dir. by Sebastian Nübling 2018) is also one of my most meaningful experiences at Gorki. The working language was mostly English and Arabic since six people of the cast were native Arabic speakers. So ironically, the director and the assistants sometimes felt isolated. They waited until we finished the discussion, and then we translated for them. *Hamletmaschine* was more like a dissection process of the text and transforming this process to images, movements and embodied experiences. There was a huge see-through curtain splitting the stage into two spaces; on it, the text was written in German and Arabic. So, the matter of language is up to the audience; they choose when to read and in which language. I remember how my confidence as an actress got back to me; I didn't need language to express myself because bodies can tell stories, too. This play is an experiment to build a bridge and reach the audience. Connecting with the audience, thus holding the tension, transmitting a feeling and entering a sort of silent dialogue.

This connection sheds light on a further important aspect. I am an Arabic actress; this implies a politically charged background. While practising art in Syria, I actually never had the chance to voice out my political opinion on stage due to extreme censorship. So, for the first time, I encountered a space of free speech and freedom to express my political and social views. Finally, I am able to understand that my opinion does count, and therefore, I carry a responsibility. So, I need to find my stance to understand the political system I am situated in and the audience I am performing for. Some of the work I did at Gorki isn't about my personal story or my political background, but I notice that many people still read my work through the lens of my background. This means they expect a particular image, a fixed story, but the performance does not always correspond to my personal story or background. So, I ask myself about the content, the group of people I supposedly represent, and the culture I stand for. Do I have a particular responsibility towards my audience and fellow colleagues to break certain stereotypes?

So, I end this reflection with more questions and thoughts. Do I want to tell my personal story on stage? If the answer is yes, then how and in which form? Actually, in which language? And if the answer is no, what is the reason? What remains private and why?

While trying to settle in a new country, learn a new language, politically position myself and prove myself as an actress, I wonder what role I play in this society. Am I a professional actress working in a theatre? Does my political background and the war in Syria define me and my work? How can I escape this loop? This narration? To ask it differently and in a larger context: How can I encounter the future?

