

Színház- és Filmművészeti Egyetem Doktori Iskola

Research and poetry in the performance *Exodus*

Theses of doctoral dissertation

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“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”
Emma Lazarus: The New Colossus (1883)

I commence my dissertation with the above lines from Emma Lazarus’s sonnet that appear on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty in order to mark that the performance to be discussed in relation to the present time refugee situation, or as it is most often posited in Hungary, the migrant crisis, the *Exodus*, that is my doctoral work of art discusses the human destiny of those on the run and those in search of a new home or homeland from a wider perspective. Although the performance engages with current events, it does so seeking historical and mythological parallels.

The creation of the performance was prompted by my apprehension that we have stepped over a civilizational barrier that ever since the end of World War II in the largest part of Europe have functioned as an unwritten law; that human life has ceased to be sacred and its total and absolutely independent value has been questioned. Presently human lives are being separated into worthy and worthless, the latter being those who have been excluded from capital acquisition and who according to the newest global social contract can only subsist on the outside of the barbed wire; while the former are those who are within, living a goal-oriented high-speed life.

I consider this apprehension the initial motiv that made me start the work on *Exodus*. The aim was to get to know the universe of refugee (asylum seeker, immigrant) existence from as many angles as possible within the given time and financial frame with the group of actors involved, then to use this experience as our source for creating stage narratives. The performance was conceived as the summary of these stage narratives.

My dissertation deals with the issue of the theatralization of the topic, furthermore, related to the concept of theatrality it also reflects on the connections of theatrality and theatrical space. Theatrality defines the interrelationship of existence and theater, which is a historically changing relationship, as the language of stage behavior is culturally constructed and therefore only interpretable within a given cultural framework.

The Greek vision of theater conceived of the theater space as a space within which we learn about the world via spectacles, in other words, according to the Greek understanding

the audience is the most important component of the theatrical space. Based on this set of references today's Europe as a giant world-theater could be divided to onlookers and looked at ones, in other words to those who watch and those who have a chance to play. In the context of the *Exodus* those who are always merely spectators are the ones doomed to remain outsiders, onlookers, observing from outside the fence i.e. from the other side of the border.

"Existence and theater mutually copy each other" (Andrea Tompa), therefore the spatial split between the audience and the stage has a central role as the carrier of thatrality and the summoner of tension. That is why the shift of perspective becomes important – I address it as the consequence of spatial framing; as well when discussing how the audience becomes part of the play; also when I talk about their inner spatial shifts resulted by changes of perspective.

Besides the question of thatrality I also examined the issue of documentarity: the process through which documents were being theatricalized during the rehearsals. Though *Exodus* has certain features which make it resemble documentary theater, I define it as research based poetic theater, a powerfully theatrical, poetic stage play, which is largely based on documents. A defining feature of poetic theater is that it utilizes symbols and metaphors and not just raw documentary material, on the one hand, and on the other hand that it removes documents from their original context and transforms them into poetry. Among documents I count media documents (articles, reports, photos, news programs), personal identification documents, as well as those lyric texts which were written by the actors following a particular protocol, as the latter document the process of creation and its subjective effects on the actors themselves. These texts were created by the so called haiku-method previously devised by András Jeles.

The scenes of the performance were structured based on motives and symbols, which acted as fragments, as scene-seeds. Since symbols are merely empty shapes, which receive their meaning via socially sanctified associations, through changes of perspective/identity they can receive an entirely new meaning. Within the performance symbols have an unobstructed dynamics modelled upon the ceaseless motion of life itself.

In my dissertation I presented the process through which from various documents (mediadocuments, Biblical and other rereligious/mythologic texts), and from personal experiences (interviews, encounters) the performance *Exodus* was born. I examined two fundamental questions: how can one use theater methods to speak about an existing social phenomenon; and how can one use relevant documents knowing that these (primarily the media documents) were being surrendered to various expectations (of those actually in power)

– manipulated, thus. This is why our immediate encounters with the refugees were useful, as they helped to create a critical approach to the contents offered by the media.

The work on the performance *Exodus* was an attempt to face the current crisis of our civilization and an experiment in understanding it without prejudice and prefabricated truths.

The main stages of my dissertation/research:

Theatricality in the performance *Exodus*

- The definition of the concept of theatricality
- Theatrical space in *Exodus*
- Space – theories of space (home / native land)
- Spatial division: the problem of border-setting and the shift of perspective
- The crossing of set borders

Documentarity in the performance *Exodus*

- Document and theater
- Documentarity in *Exodus* (interviews/encounters, the documentation of the creative process, fingerprint as a document, media documents)

The work of the actors

The concept of music and its execution

Examination of the performance's motives and symbology

- Figures from antique mythology
- Religious symbols
- Force and power symbols
- Motives of material wealth
- Symbols of the feminine/maternal principle
- Border crossings