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Perpetual Transit in the TRNC: A Director's Notes on Staging Fateh Azzam's *Baggage*

On 14 March 2005 Raziye Nevzat, a student of Nicholas Pagan in his M.A. class on Middle-Eastern theatre at Eastern Mediterranean University in North Cyprus, wrote to Palestinian playwright Fateh Azzam with a query about his play *Baggage*, featured in *An Anthology of Short Arabic Plays* which the students were studying.¹ They began an e-mail correspondence in which Nevzat suggested that she would love to see *Baggage* staged and Azzam expressed great enthusiasm, stating that to his knowledge only an excerpt from it had been previously performed. Shortly afterwards, Nevzat informed Pagan of the correspondence and the latter gave me a copy of the play and asked me if I would consider staging it.

The Play

The play is a monologue for one person, interspersed with dialogue involving the central character and recorded voices representing airport flight announcements, characters from his past (which reflect the character's interior monologue with himself), and customs and

immigration officials. In an airport waiting-lounge, this lone traveller is torn between a flight to the future and a flight home. The flight home is ostensibly a flight back to the *status quo* he is seeking to escape. Further, the motif of “home” is synonymous with his refugee experiences as a child and young adult. Simultaneously it represents both an interminable space and a curious absence of defined place. Conversely, the flight to the future represents the possibility of a new start. Early in the play during a robust interrogation by disembodied voices, ostensibly representative of Customs Officials but metaphorically representative of Israeli authorities, the traveller recounts his life experiences as a young boy during an attack on his village, his subsequent displacement and refugee experiences, and the collapse of a love affair as a result of his inability, or unwillingness, to leave his troubled past behind him. Throughout his narrative we listen as he acquires baggage from various sources—an old neighbour, his father, his ex-lover—and sympathise with his inability to break free from his past. The play concludes with permission granted to board the flight to the future, but with no baggage allowance. The traveller, desperate to board the flight, nonetheless refuses to leave his baggage behind. The curtain falls on a man torn between letting go of his past in order to start again, and standing by his experiences in order not to forget.

When I read the play I liked it immediately. There are some weak aspects, chief among them a re-imagined passage of tender but nonetheless awkward reminiscence between the central character and his ex-lover; but the central metaphor examining psychological baggage is remarkably fresh, functional and surprisingly without overtones of cliché. Certain other factors also prompted me to direct it. As a play it would work well for the local audience who, like the traveller, live on the margins as a result of their

He speculates that if they had been discovered they may well have been killed. He now

for” feeling of the airport only too well. Further, and perhaps most importantly, I grew up in a small twenty-roomed hotel so my living space was a site of perpetual arrival, departure and transit, people coming and going with luggage, constantly. I added that to

for projecting one of the bags, held underarm, into the future as a result of the traveller standing excitedly once he hears the flight call. Almost immediately however, the other bags refuse to allow themselves to be gathered up, marooning him in the present. Further, at each attempt to hoist and hold a bag on a shoulder blade, the corresponding bag on the alternate shoulder slides down the adjoining arm. For a cycle of four repetitions he loses one shoulder bag as each respective shoulder is relaxed to accept the weight of the other shoulder's incoming baggage. The result is pure Beckett *and* Chaplin. Although Beckett never tired of citing Chaplin as a key theatrical influence, it was not until directing a scene for comic effect with Beckett in mind, that I could see the influence of Chaplin with such clarity.

As the rehearsals progress, I learn quickly that Hany is that rare breed of amateur actor with potentially limitless ability. The emotional hook in the play is when the traveller recounts his memory of an attack on his village, and Azzam's writing at these moments is excellent. While the traveller is being interrogated about his baggage, a question about his carpet-bag triggers a long flashback and he is immediately catapulted back to the attack, *in medias res*, from where he must flee all over again with his mother and Abu Ahmet, their neighbour. The moment when the traveller realises that Ahmet—who must be imagined as lying face down in the dirt—is dying from a bullet wound, produces a stricken silence as the traveller attempts to free his hand from the desperate man's grasp. Hany proves that he can easily negotiate the emotional arc between an adult's triggered memory in the relative calm of the airport, the chaos of mortar and bullet experienced by a child, and the intense stillness and poignancy of Ahmet refusing to let go of the youth's hand until he takes the carpet-bag. I throw up a few questions

about physical movement in the piece, such as how a mother would respond to the need to evacuate a child, and how a child would respond to being unable to flee from the grip of a dying man. Within thirty minutes, Hany is miming the act of running while holding the hands of taller people and reflexing across the stage in horror while his hand appears nailed to the floor. Watching with interested visitors who have attended the rehearsal, the play begins to unfurl its potential before us.

As to the accompanying voices, there is a problem once we record them and rehearse against the playback. It is jagged and lacks life and the cues for Hany are too intermittent to get a rhythm going in the call-and-response structure. As a talented amateur he needs people to play against and here his inexperience comes to the fore as I can feel him trying to remember the mood of each original announcement when he should be reacting to the playback, which itself is uneven and flat. Azzam's intention in designating recorded voices was doubtlessly to isolate the traveller from human contact and portray his experience in the airport as one of routine humiliation, but at this amateur level we lose far too much energy and so the use of recorded voices is jettisoned. The female cast are delighted as now they will be performing live off-stage, but I'm further troubled. Already I've introduced a note of comedy I'm fairly sure was not intended, and now I'm altering the fundamental structure of the play. Moreover, the first time the writer will see it is in public performance.

For our final dress rehearsals we move into the venue, an old Nestorian church in the town of Famagusta, which seeps atmosphere from the walls. I position the women either side of the stage, mid-auditorium, and back of the auditorium, behind curtains. The effect of their collective voices coming out of the darkness succeeds in focusing all

After sustained and spontaneous applause, Fateh Azzam takes centre stage for the Question and Answer session. An African-American ethnographer, and colleague, begins to ask him the first question of the night, but then breaks down. Although he's not able to articulate it, everybody knows that the sight of this young African man torn between past and future has touched him deeply. In that moment the incongruity of casting an African as a Palestinian is blown away. A Palestinian student tries to explain how she carries the bag her grandmother gave her, but this is all she manages to say before tears take over. A Cypriot girl who never knew her father, killed in the 1974 war, manage(c)4(e)4(nt6 464 (, m)-12(a)4()-4(2h
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to confirm that this is also true for me. Side-stepping the question I tell them that the elation produced by successful performance is as pure a high as they will ever experience and that, as with all things, this will be followed by a low: that when the play has finished its short run and there is no curtain call next week they will feel bereft and empty, but that this too will pass. In the end they will have a memory of achieving something

arms into the air so that the bags sat obediently on either shoulder, he received a spontaneous and uproarious round of applause. In that moment, Chaplin, Beckett and a Palestinian playwright and civil rights activist were frozen in perfectly intertextual, comic accord. It was an instant of sympathetic magic that I will never forget, because it felt like something: something old and brand new, something true.

Appendix

Mehmet Zorba (sound engineer) is Cypriot. He was born in Essex, and now lives in Famagusta..

Rustam Makhmudov (lighting technician) was born in Almaty, Kazakhstan, lived in Georgia, and now lives in Famagusta.

Notes

¹ Fateh Azzam, *Baggage* in Salma Khadra Jayyusi, ed., *Short Arabic Plays: An Anthology* (Northampton, Massachusetts: Interlink Books, 2003), 65-81.