Roma Refugee Youth and Applied Theatre: Imagining a Future Vernacular

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Abstract
This paper examines an experiment in theatre-making with a group of Roma refugee youth currently living in Toronto, Canada. A drama academic, a professional theatre director, an Executive Director of a Roma Community Centre, two Hungarian translators and nine Roma youth worked together to cross language and cultural borders in order to place theatre-making in a broader socio-political arena. Their primary goal was to awaken public officials, and a general public, to a better understanding of the youth’s experiences of ‘home’ and migration in order to garner support for their claims for refugee status. Using cultural geography, community-engaged public pedagogy and feminist science as different disciplinary lenses and theoretical frames through which to make sense of the tensions of such collaborative theatre projects, the author positions the work as a ‘theatre of little changes’ (Balfour 2009) ultimately worth engaging in.

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Keywords: REFUGEES; ROMA.

Coming clean
Over the course of my career as a drama teacher and researcher, I have not always been aware of the many ways in which my practice was implicitly harnessing artistic work to an agenda of social change. Sometimes that agenda was very small indeed — enticing a reluctant student to remain committed to a project, while at other times the agenda seemed larger — creating a performance for City Hall as a deputation to resist proposed budget cuts to arts organizations. Whether large or small, a central and entirely liberal humanist
value was often at the heart of the creative project — change is possible through the arts. Such liberal humanist impulses, however, have often taken applied theatre research in problematic directions because of its (understandable) compulsion to advocate for its value and ‘transformational’ power in many adversarial arenas. For the purposes of this paper, however, I would like to take seriously Michael Balfour’s (2009) recognition of a ‘theatre of little changes’ as an interesting provocation as I chart out the experiences of a group of Roma refugee youth engaged in a ‘minor’ (Deleuze 1997) piece of theatre-making. The stakes were great, for this particular group, and we — director Alan Dilworth and myself — worked hard to keep grand expectations and salvation narratives at bay. It wasn’t easy.

The plight of the Roma people — some background

The Centre for Urban Schooling (CUS) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education sponsored our recent theatre work with the Roma community in Toronto. CUS is dedicated to improving the quality of the teaching and learning experiences available to children and youth living in underserved urban communities. Established in 2005, CUS carries out academic and contracted research, offers educational programs and professional development opportunities and supports students, teachers, schools, parents and district boards in the development of school reform initiatives that have a clear focus on equity for all students. The educators, researchers and activists affiliated with the Centre work collaboratively on education projects that challenge power relations based on class, race, gender, language, sexuality, religion, ethnicity and ability as they are manifested in all aspects of education, both formal and informal.

Because of significant local media attention in the Roma community over the past year, we at the Centre became aware of the social and educational experiences of Roma youth and their families whose refugee claims were being rejected at an unprecedented rate in Canada. These families were being sent back to Hungary, from where they had only just escaped endemic persecution and violence. We took the decision to work with this community and to explore their experiences theatrically in order to communicate these experiences to a broader public. Our hope was that we could use the platform of the symposium and the power of the university to find an audience of the power elites inside and outside school systems and to lend our voices and resources to the Roma community’s pleas to the Canadian government to stay in Canada. Clearly, the goal was ambitious although we tried to resist the impulse to fasten too much ‘emancipatory’ agenda onto our creative work together.

During the mid to late 1990’s, there was already considerable documentation of abuses happening in many Roma communities in the former Communist countries of Eastern Europe, including Hungary and the Czech Republic. The Budapest-based European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) is an international public interest and legal organisation working to combat anti-Romani racism and human rights abuse of Roma through strategic litigation, research and policy development, advocacy and human rights education. Since its inception in 1996 it has been researching, investigating, reporting and defending the human rights of Europe’s largest minority group, the Roma (European Roma Human Rights Centre, 2011). Through years of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, targeted by both sides in the Bosnian and Serbian wars, hundreds of thousands of Roma became victims of ethnically-motivated violence.

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They experienced police brutality, neo-Nazi violence, forced sterilisation, and political silence while imprisoned. This also included lead poisoning of many imprisoned Roma in camps, as reported by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 2000 (European Roma Rights Centre 2006). The WHO declared their living conditions a health emergency and recommended that the UN immediately evacuate the camp residents.

No action was taken. In her recent report on Roma forced migration to Canada, Gina Csanyi-Robah (2011), our collaborator from the Toronto Roma Centre, has described the history of the Roma people as ‘five centuries of consistent human rights abuse. It includes a past of genocide (15th and 16th centuries), enslavement (16th century to 1864), forced assimilation and eradication of Romani culture (18th and 19th century), and the Parrijmos or “Great Devouring” (genocide of two million Romani murdered during the Holocaust)’ (2011:4). Their history is one of inconceivable and unrelenting persecution and is well summarized by the EERC in the following statement:

Roma have been, for much their history, forced migrants, many of them real and all of them potential. Roma are a persecuted people with no mainstream media to cover their tortured journeys, no safe haven across any border and no military alliances to interfere in their defence (ERRC, 2006).

Canada was a receiving country of a first wave of Roma refugees between 1994 and 1998 wherein 85-95% of those refugee claims were successful. But, as the Czech Republic and Hungary made applications to join the European Union, these numbers dropped dramatically to an 8% success rate by 1999. The explanation, even made publicly in an unguarded moment by our current Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, is that such human rights abuses could not possibly be occurring in Europe. Ensuing policies began to effectively curb successful Roma application into the country.

The second wave of Romani refugees to Canada began in 2007 and continues to the present time. Since 2008, approximately 3049 Czech Roma and 10,177 Hungarian Roma refugee claims have been documented. If these represent modest families of four, then potentially 52,904 individuals have sought refuge in Canada over the last four years but rejection rates have gone from 6% to 93% between 2008 and 2010. (Csanyi-Robah 2011:9). And this trend is about to become entrenched in the Canadian political landscape if the newly proposed Bill C-11 comes to pass. This will allow the Immigration Minister’s office alone — not NGOs and human rights leaders — to deem certain countries ‘safe’ (read, European Union member states) and will shut out systematically any claims from those countries. This will further threaten the Romani of Europe who continue to experience systemic discrimination and racial violence. These are the young people we met and the stories we heard.

Moving towards theatre: tensions and possibilities

In total we gathered, for three separate days over the space of four months, to work together before our proposed sharing of the theatre work with an audience of invited guests. This was a short period of time, too short obviously, but it was very challenging to have the students released from school for this work. As it turned out, the nine we began with were not the same four we finished with and hence our working stories and our performance was a constantly evolving thing. Their lives, health issues and even, in one instance, a refugee claim being heard during our rehearsal period, considerably
challenged our efforts to sustain the work with the same group of students. Our director was also caught up in two professional shows, so we were working additionally with his tight schedule. Despite the many complications we proceeded, holding on to the view that something worthwhile would come of our work together.

Our performance guest list included the Director of Education for the Toronto District School Board, key Members of Parliament and those from the opposition parties, the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, two immigration and refugee board judges, members of the media, academics, activists and community members. We did not get as much response as we had hoped, which was disappointing because the youth we worked with cared primarily about speaking to those people who might be in a position to positively affect the outcome of their refugee claims. However, although the Minister did not come and nor did the Director of Education, there were members of the Director’s inner-city advisory board present with whom the youth made contact following the performance and that connection resulted in a subsequent presentation made by the Executive Director of the Toronto Roma Centre to members of this advisory council, who, in theory, could bring information and recommendations back to the Director. Of pertinence to this advisory group were the stories which surfaced through the drama process about their sometimes positive but more often negative experiences in one secondary school and two elementary schools in the Toronto neighbourhood where the Roma have settled. A modest outcome, given our ambitions, but at least the stories had a life beyond our small performance that may ultimately result in some solidarity from the school board and improved experiences of schooling for the Roma students.

On the first day of our meeting, Alan Dilworth, an award-winning professional director in the Toronto theatre scene, came to our group with a simple idea of greeting one another. The youth did not speak English so we were also working through a Hungarian translator. To start the morning, seven young people, the Executive Director of the Roma Centre, the Hungarian translator, Alan and I greeted one another and talked about what it means to be present to others, to see and hear them. We laughed over conventions we did not share. We learned that young Roma women do not shake hands, but kiss instead. We tried to cross boundaries by experiencing each other’s customs of greeting. We laughed an awful lot. Then, we sat around a table, in a circle, and invited the youth to share stories of ‘home’ with us. What Alan and I imagined was that we would start with stories of ‘home’ (Hungary, for all of them) and arrive at ‘Toronto’ to move the stories into the current moment where our invited guests might have the greatest chance of intervening. Alan believed though that the audience would need to know something of where they came from if they were to understand the gravity of the claims for asylum. A long and painful afternoon ensued, as stories repeated one another with increasing horror and starkness. I found myself unable to speak at one point and barely able to hear another story of violence and persecution inside and outside schools in Hungary, told with unsettling frankness, first by the youth and then in English by our Hungarian translator.

Wary of the potential of re-traumatizing the youth in our efforts to ‘understand where they came from’ and aware also of the fine line we were walking between theatre and therapy, we heeded Julie Salverson’s (2001) and Rae Dennis’ (2008) call to work outside literal translations with stories of injury and rely on the collective possibilities of theatre-making when approaching such difficult stories. Salverson cautions against the literal
translation of ‘stories of injury’ as reductive and potentially re-violating. She argues that theatrical performance must move beyond ‘naturalistic repetitions of trauma’ and aesthetically transform that testimony (2001:214). The stories were often stark and simplistically translated so that the nuance was hard to hear. But, it was also true that these were un-nuanced stories. Being hit by a teacher with a book in the back of the head when you are 8 years old is not subtle. Having a Molotov cocktail thrown at your house, then having your father shot by police as he tried to flee the fire, leaves little room for perspectives and counter-narratives. These are the stories we needed to find a way to work with. Dennis (2008) speaks to the importance of the collective in such interpretive acts arguing that the story is transformed, as a group collectively moves from literal to theatrical language.

We therefore made two important decisions — we would need to find a way to share the narration of the stories among multiple story-tellers and we would proceed without props of any kind. Bombs, books, violence, all seemed too graphic and literal, so we decided, in the interest of taking some distance from the rawness of the stories and heeding Salverson’s call for the abstract translation of the literal, to tell the difficult story by talking the audience through the actions and plot, gesturing the details of properties and sharing the telling of a story through a multiplicity of narrators. This approach had the added benefit of allowing the students to collaborate with English vocabulary, easing the considerable tension of speaking in a new language.

This last phrase was a refrain we heard in many youth stories so it had a kind of echo through their performance. I never got entirely comfortable with the constant re-articulation of the phrase even though they told us that this is what is said and this is what they would hear repeatedly, from teachers, the police and the general public.

At times, in the improvisational work, it seemed an almost playful transgression. ‘Playing’ the role of the oppressor offered some power. They played with this identity in ways that seemed useful in terms of releasing some of the discomfort we were all feeling. But the sheer repetition of the phrase troubled me and, by the third day of rehearsal, the repetition seemed, from my observation, to become less performative; it took on a reality we all felt a little uneasy about. The question of how ‘real’ we wanted to be, therefore, came to the fore. The fact that multiple narrators shared the story and also that oppressor/oppressed characters moved seamlessly through each other’s stories helped somewhat. We were not replaying individual people’s traumatic stories with them as protagonist-victims in each vignette, yet the sheer repetition of such ‘stories of injury’ was discomfiting.
The telling however was justified, by them and by us, through making regular reference to the ultimate desired outcome of the piece — to arouse strangers to action on their behalf. They knew their stories were serving an important end, but Alan and I were both concerned that the sheer repetition was taking a toll. Some of their transgression, laughter and dialogue in Hungarian with each other, seemed at times like a tactic to reclaim their personhood in the face of so much performed ‘abuse’. In these moments, Ric Knowles’ (2010) caveat about the cultural imperialism endemic in so much intercultural exchange in the theatre came to the fore and seemed to amplify our own related concerns.

Other scenes, unlike the one just described, were entirely played out in Hungarian with no attempt to make the words understandable to the audience. In these scenes, collective and sometimes abstract movement also created some distance from the literal telling of the story. This aesthetic choice recalls Dennis’ move to the collective through playback theatre as, in her case, a response to individual stories of refugee trauma. These Hungarian moments throughout the performance seemed to hang in the air somewhere, a space in between where the youth were, emotionally, and where the audience was — a strained communication, leaving the audience less certain about and less comfortable with their ‘role’. This shift in where the power was situated was a necessary move in the drama, without which we would have risked simply replaying the desperation of the youth while positioning the audience with all the power and creating a naive call for them to make change happen. While that might have been desirable, we were also interested — artistically and politically — in inviting the audience to think about what relationship they might have to these stories and what responsibility they might have to them now that they had been shared.

Late in the development of the work, Alan came to the idea of a ‘message in a bottle’. It was partly a response to how insistent the youth had become that people hear their stories and help them remain in Canada. That plea took on increasingly desperate tones the longer we worked with them. I worried that we were saddling theatre, again, with impossible outcomes and, worse, making promises to the youth that we could not guarantee. And yet I shared their hope, their sense of possibility. Towards the end of the performance, the students brought small slips of paper to people in the audience and, locking eyes with them, said, ‘Open it’ as they backed away to their position on the ‘stage’, a simple space in the middle of the floor. Audience members opened the paper, which read: ‘We MUST stay in Canada?’ And then the actors individually repeated the Hungarian word for ‘do you understand?’ — ‘Èrted?’

Cross-disciplinary knowledge for understanding: Cultural geography, community engagement and feminist science

Doreen Massey argues that spaces ‘are processes’ (1994:155) and we were attempting in our performance to create a space and make choices that would render absolutely clear that their spatial relationship — audience and actors — implied broader social relations that are dynamic and open to change. The theatre space became a ‘meeting place’, a conversation, an ‘articulated moment’ (Massey,1994) that we hoped might invoke imaginative thought or action. Recent scholarship in applied performance has taken up notions of space, location and sociality in ways resonant with work we engaged in. Mackey and Whybrow (2007), in tracing the emergence of site-specific art, speak about a new movement in art that recognised ‘the viewer’s position of contemplation of the artwork
as both active and contingent’. They also articulate an ‘emphasis on a generative, participatory spectator’ (http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/crde20/12/1). Such an activated spectator is precisely what our own thematic emphases on the spaces and stories of the past, and those as yet incomplete, were anticipating.

Massey (2006) also writes about the myth of the shrinking world, an idea that is perpetuated by the powerful she argues, and presents us with the illusion that we know the world and each other much better than we do. This impulse can dangerously mask difference, material conditions and power relations, while limiting opportunities for recognising spaces of conflict and potential growth. It becomes difficult, she argues, for alternatives to be developed and easy for tentative attempts at alternative ways of doing things to be defeated. Our theatre space attempted a kind of response to this concern and illustrated a very small opening of the space for an as yet uninitiated conversation. We do not know each other at all. We do not share a language, a culture, a citizenship, a social location or a history. But here we are, at this moment, in Toronto, in a relationship. How will we begin to communicate?

Another way to characterise the work we undertook is a kind of community-engaged public pedagogy. Applied theatre is very well positioned to take up this call as communication within communities and across boundaries is its modus operandi. Social change, or at least a recognition of social injustice, is the desired outcome and success in applied theatre is frequently measured on at least two scales — the social and the aesthetic. In both of these measurements, the idea of community, local or global looms large. In Jan Cohen-Cruz’ (2010) recent book, Engaging Performance: Theatre as Call and Response, she usefully understands current politically/community-engaged theatre as a form of ‘social call, cultural response’. Unlike the radical politically-engaged theatre of the 1960s and 1970s, which mostly involved middle-class actors speaking for the poor and oppressed, she describes the tradition of ‘first-voice’ art-making, whereby people with stakes in a topic use storytelling and performance to communicate their own challenges. She writes:

This model of art aims concretely to better the lives of people most adversely affected, both through their own efforts and through the shared experience, from story to performance, of people with the power to affect policy directly (68-69).

Making theatre is, in many ways, a much riskier form of communication than holding a protest, signing a petition or attempting to meet with the powerbrokers to express desire for change. Sharing raw stories through a translator, with a transient group of youth, was a fraught proposition from the start. So why did we do it? What Cohen-Cruz offers to our theorising about this work is the notion that policy change has limited effect without cultural change. While the school board officials might have responded positively to calls from the community to better support the Roma refugees in their schools (that is, the students shared one Hungarian-English dictionary in a classroom of 25), what they needed to experience was a cultural response. Our small theatre performance offered them a space in which to witness together, to feel a relationship to one another and to the stories they heard.

In addition, as others have written (see Burn, Franks and Nicholson, 2010; Cohen-Cruz, 2010; Conquergood, 2006), it was the visibility of the Roma youth that mattered too. I am grateful to these writers who speak unequivocally of art’s social purpose,
understanding that cultural democracy requires presence and visibility. One of the most poignant moments for me, during the performance, was the decision taken by the students a mere two minutes before the show, to speak unrehearsed their names and ages at the start of the show:

My name is Zsolt Moczo and I am fourteen years old.
My name is Diana Molnar and I am seventeen years old.
My name is Melinda Molnar and I am fifteen years old.
My name is Eva Adam and I am sixteen years old.

They wanted to be seen and to be known. This choice changed the habituated practice of beginning a performance without introduction, ‘in character’, but it made clear to me that they did not wish to hide behind a mask; they wanted their audience to know that they were people who needed to be seen, to be identified — and they were there to tell a story that required a cultural response. This move to self-representation made explicit the purpose of our gathering. Theirs is a living history and it required the naming of the players and an unmitigated communication.

One of the other major ethical and artistic issues we encountered was deciding how we wanted to deal with the idea of ‘real’ or ‘true’ personal stories. It has been my experience in working with youth that ‘reality’ takes on particular import. If a story is ‘true’ it has a kind of credibility that fictitious stories don’t seem to have. Would our privileging of ‘real stories’ make imaginative discourses more elusive? Because applied theatre-making often builds from the ‘real’ stories of its makers, I wanted to lift this conversation out of the purely pragmatic or ethical realm where it normally resides and attempt to think through the use of ‘the real’ theoretically. While I wished to recognise how the youth were clearly entrusting us with precious personal stories, I also worried about the glorification of ‘reality’, and the ways in which such a rarifying of ‘the real’ may inhibit theatrical exploration and expression.

Feminist physicist Ursula Franklin (1999:28-29), a long-time critic of dominant, masculinist scientific narratives and practices, offers a very useful framework for deconstructing our conceptions of ‘reality’. For Franklin, there are four kinds of realities — vernacular, extended, constructed/reconstructed, projected. Vernacular reality she describes as ‘the bread and butter, soup, work, clothing, the reality of everyday life’ which is both ‘private and personal, but [it is] also common and political’. Extended reality is ‘that body of knowledge and emotions we acquire that is based on the experience of others’. Constructed or reconstructed reality ‘comes to us through works of fiction to the daily barrage of advertising and propaganda’ and this kind of reality can become archetypal rather than simply representative. Finally, projected reality is ‘the vernacular reality of the future’. As I reflect now on our conversations and our drama explorations, it becomes clear that all four kinds of realities were operating simultaneously and complexly.

However, when we moved on day three, into the their current Toronto stories, mostly stories of school but some of difficult experiences — with opportunistic lawyers claiming to help the students’ families with their refugee claims but simply robbing them of hard-earned money and doing very little to ensure the success of their claims — we found ourselves in a proximal relationship between vernacular and projected (vernacular of the future) realities. For the youth, the work
accomplished by the ‘real’ stories, the detail and ‘bread and butter’ of their lives was shared for one purpose only — to catalyse a projected reality that might help them escape the social and educational limbo in which they felt trapped. In this way, ‘the real’ was there to provoke the imagined — it was its primary purpose. And, once ‘the real’ had this kind of goal, it served also to release ‘the real’ from the sensationalism I worried would dominate the artistic work. Their stories were horrendous; there is no question about that. But using their stories in the interest of an imagined vernacular of the future, putting their stories to work, released us from the pressure of truth-telling, a burden that, in my experience, can limit the artistic possibilities and potentially re-inscribe the trauma of the stories. If the stories, instead, are meant to connect our past to an imagined future, we can privilege that relationship over the compulsion to ‘get it right’, which often leads the work towards the literal; an artistic and ethically dangerous cul-de-sac.

Making engaged theatre for change

As I write, we are still awaiting news on the Director Dr. Chris Spence’s response to his advisory board’s advice to both improve, in the short term, the learning conditions for the Roma youth and, in the long term, to take a more proactive stance in the struggles of deportation countless Roma families are currently facing in Toronto. Since school boards are notoriously apolitical on such matters, it will be a victory indeed if the Toronto District School Board, the largest in Canada and the fourth largest in North America (serving 250,000 students in 600 schools) responds positively and engages in broader conversations across Ministries to challenge the erroneous notion that Roma people can return to Europe and live in safety.

As we moved from explorations of personal story, from self-representation to a kind of cultural performance as understood best by anthropologist Victor Turner (1982), we tried to find that ever precarious balance between the statements and political desires of the performance and the artistic choices that might best communicate them. Both Alan Dilworth and I longed for more time, a precious commodity that was simply not available. And when one induces theatre into community action, the time frames and desired outcomes also shift. Cohen-Cruz argues that the ‘follow-up’ becomes equal to, or even more important than, the performance, wherein the performance then positions audiences as witnesses rather than spectators (2010:81). Through this experience, an important relationship has been created with the Toronto Roma Centre and through them we will continue to follow the school experiences and refugee claims of the Roma youth and their families. Resonant here, however, is Barucha’s critique of intercultural exchange in the theatre. Bharucha (2000) was arguing that all (theatre) exchanges between the globalised world and the developing world are predicated on uneven distributions of power and wealth. This is also eminently true of our relationship to these forced migrants from Europe. There was an element of cultural exchange between us, as North American theatre/academic workers and Roma youth, but it was precisely our power that they sought to rally behind their claims for safety. Our role was clear. However complicated the relational space, we proceeded with this rather singular focus.

In a final analysis of our work, I do not think that we created a powerful piece of theatre, although there were some strong moments. We needed more time to experiment, more pedagogical scaffolding and more understanding of a community
we knew little about at the outset. At the end of the performance the audience was subdued; although some did ask the youth about how they created the vignettes they shared. Nobody asked anything about the stories of abuse and persecution in Hungary — these were clearly shocking. But they did ask what the youth thought schools could be doing better in Toronto. The final measure of ‘success’ for me, however, became how the students understood their work with us. While working with their ‘true stories’ remained very important, the facts of the account mattered less than their emotional resonance within and beyond the group. In the end, I do think the youth found a theatrical language to speak truths — emotional truths — and through that process rekindled a hope that there might be a cultural response, from distant strangers, to their call and one that might position them more strongly in their upcoming refugee hearings.

To return finally to my initial concern about the liberal humanist values lurking in applied theatre-making that can sometimes overshadow the aesthetic work and serve to exacerbate the power relations already inherent in working with underserved communities, I have found Cohen-Cruz’ notion of an engaged performance very useful. For her, engaged art requires ‘looking at the ecological system within which the seed for art-making is situated’ (2010:195), which is, of necessity an interdisciplinary project. It requires a critical, socio-historical and material reading of the circumstances giving rise to the dramatic exploration. She further writes, ‘Engaged art is created in relationship to impossible visions, utopian callings, that the collaborators could not possibly have the means to carry out fully’ (2010:198). Although I worried throughout about whether theatre could make real change in their lives, it was, nonetheless, a great privilege to collaborate with this small group of young people, their tireless community advocate Gina Csanyi-Robah and with director Alan Dilworth who worked in a way that made simple conversation artful. One can only hope that we produced a ‘theatre of little changes’ but ones that together may amount to powerful and positive changes in the lives of the Roma youth who very much deserve them.

Works Cited


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