

**Guest Lecture**  
**University of Rijeka, Croatia**

**Interculturality in Creative Expression:  
beyond linguistic and culturally bound vocabularies**

There are many forms of interculturality, but I wish to talk about its theatrical manifestations, with particular regard to the practical theatre work I have done over the past eight or so years in Eastern and Central Europe, North America and Africa.

As a theatre practitioner I have increasingly found it restricting to use formal texts, published or otherwise. Words have the force of permanence when they have been committed to print, and theatre illuminates, at its best, a permanent sense of life's ephemerality, not a talisman of a mythic or delusional permanence. With theatre we are compelled to watch *change*. Change is the foundation of theatre. Let me explain.

All theatre narrative forms have an origin in conflict. This is not confined to the Aristotelian variations on conflict/crisis/resolution; in narratives where characters can be recognized each character has an obstacle, or set of obstacles, which prevent them from achieving their desire. In more imagistic and abstract work, the conflict may lie between the image and its receptive environment and in the perception of the spectator. Conflict is essential to theatre because we learn from the collision of ideas. Conflict causes change, and change requires the ability to learn.

The question I have faced in working in cultures where I neither know the native language nor share the history of its people is this: what can we achieve together which carries meaning for all of us, including spectators, and what are the most effective means for accomplishing this?

There are various vocabularies humans use to communicate. Language, which developed quite late—several thousand years after vocal utterance—is the vocabulary most people rely on in their daily lives. Written language, which is a very recent development in human society, also enjoys pride of place. But both of these lexicons, while blessed with extraordinary potential and

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capacity, can actually limit the ability of people to communicate effectively when they come to rely on them too much, or when these tools are used in the increasingly blunt fashion technology now demands.

The most fundamental vocabulary, or language if you will, that humans have employed from early sentience is gestural, followed, in some much later time by vocal utterance, that is, non-verbal sound. There is also a language of *absence* which developed early along with these two proto-languages. Absence of response or initiation can connote many things.

In my work in various countries which have suffered conflict of different kinds, including Bosnia, Serbia, Kosovo and Uganda, I have experimented with the primary use of these foundation vocabularies. This is not to say that verbal language as we commonly know it is entirely absent, although in at least one production, **HAWKS**, there was no need for any language beyond the cries of the birds. I do not mean in such work to imply that verbal language should be replaced, but rather that we rely on it unnecessarily, to the point where our more primal communicative skills are in danger of atrophy.

Gestural communication has been studied in many disciplines, of course, and the science of reading the human body yields the discovery that, even allowing for a multiplicity of variations, humans communicate with their bodies in a very similar manner from one culture to another. So it also with vocal utterance: a child's taunting tune, chanted to "nyah-nyah-nyah-NYAH-nyah" is recognisable in most societies.

The desire to explore gestural and vocal non-verbal communication has led me to conclude that verbal communication, for all its myriad subtleties, may in many cases prove less sophisticated than our abilities to express what we feel through our bodies and voices. Surely this should be obvious through the example of instrumental music, especially when contrasted with the barrenness of contemporary lyrics in some genres; but we cling to a notion, which I often hear, that subtlety must surely be lost if a theatre production does not rely on verbal language, or, as in my case, when the director does not speak the local lingua franca.

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That *certain* subtleties are lost must be true; verbal languages are clubs which are exclusive to their members, with a host of code words and secret symbols. This subtlety can be replaced, perhaps even augmented, by subtleties of a discipline such as dance. But, I can hear spectators asking, is there not a risk of inaccessibility, of the majority of spectators not comprehending a work of art, if it is not directed to them in their most familiar mode of communication?

The answer to this question is both simple and not simple. The simple answer is yes, there is always a danger a spectator will not comprehend sufficiently to enjoy a satisfying experience. The not quite simple answer is that some incomprehension, even mystification, can be a very positive state for the spectator to experience. It forces a *change*, because their expectations and reflex responses have come into conflict with something which clearly carries meaning but which is not simplifying their task for them. In English we say a person must eat, but it is not necessary to cut their vegetables for them. The risk if one explains too much, by way of verbal language, is a de-valuing of the experience and a sense that the theatre is no longer special, that it no longer has something unique to offer.

I believe the theatre does have a unique role to play, even in our increasingly technologized society. What has been unique about the theatre from its earliest development remains: it is performed live, using human bodies in a way that incorporates dance or dance-like movement, music or rhythmic use of melody, words that may or may not be placed in syntactical order, and narrative that may or may not be sequential—something like, in fact, the manner in which we live our days. In order for the theatre to be a transformative experience for the spectator, it must be an agent of change. Not in the overt political sense, but in the sense of confronting the spectator with his or her assumptions, the habits of thought that have become comfortable and fixed over time. When confronted with an outside threat, manifested in vocabulary use by the unknown, organisms must adapt or die. Humans have proven adept, until recently, at adapting to various external threats that have been posed to them. We are, I think, at

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risk of losing this *plasticity* through the rigidity that comes with fear of the other, nationalism, economic insecurity, or the diminishing returns of our own organism.

There are a few words that are key to understanding this approach to intercultural work as a constant positive confrontation. One is dialecticism, the creative tension that comes with competing perspectives. A second, just mentioned, is plasticity, the ability to adjust physically, emotionally or intellectually to stimuli which creates obstacles to one's sense of the world. The third word that is key here, and perhaps the most important, is play.

Play has been investigated in games theory and in the work of Huizinga and others, to the point where its essential nature and validity seem beyond dispute. Yet we constantly bleed play out of our lives. Humans cannot live without play, and they cannot learn without a sense of play being present. But we somehow persuade ourselves that life is a serious business, and that playing is a waste of time, frivolous, for the Peter Pans of the world who never take on their proper responsibilities. The only answer to such assertions is to gently remind that the world would be a much poorer place with our Peter Pans, who often lead us with their folly.

I say that somewhat facetiously but the wording is intentional. If play involves, folly—that is, acting foolishly—it is valuable for that very reason. People learn from mistakes. Children learn from negotiating risk. Protect a child too assiduously and you remove that child's ability to develop the tools she or he requires to survive and prosper as an independent entity.

So we established a beginning, then, for a methodology based around the notions of dialectical tension, plasticity, and play. The final word I would like to add to this set of foundation concepts is liminality.

Social order does not have to be maintained at the expense of all but a person's most trivial individuality, although in many societies true independence has been driven so far into the interiority of people that it can hardly be called individualism at all. Group thinking, such as any form of nationalism, is an opiate which also reduces the individual's ability to perceive the dangers to their identity as an individual. Note that the most authoritarian forms of government

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are generally positive about only the most mechanized and controlled forms of play. They do not regard plasticity as an asset, because plasticity breeds the ability to dissent, through its enabling of the individual to consider alternate paths. Liminality possesses a similar function.

As a director I try to work in liminal environments, where I and the performers occupy a border space between our cultures. The anticipated result is that the spectators must negotiate a landscape that is recognisable but not always familiar. This is the breeding ground for change.

As a teacher of acting I focus much of my work on play, because I find that most actors have had the ability to play ground out of them by the time they have worked at conventional theatres with conventional directors for a length of time. This is the saddest aspect of contemporary theatre, that there is so little play going on when we do plays. One of the reasons this is so is that there is an economic and aesthetic straitjacket that has been placed around institutional theatres. But really, as artists, we do this to ourselves, out of fear of rejection, or of irrelevance. The greatest danger theatre faces in most western countries now is not economic. It is the atmosphere where actors are no longer encouraged to take risks, to explore the liminal space which exists between actor and character, and between performer and spectator. I think that it is difficult, if not impossible, to tread this liminal terrain if one has forgotten how to play.

Thus in the work I do, whether for a production or for a training workshop, I create games and exercises that are unique to each group, its circumstances and concerns. Once we established a shared process we progress to études, or what I call *targeted improvisations*, where the performers (or “players”) are given specific circumstances and qualities and intentions and must then carry out these intentions using whatever tactical strategies they can find which are appropriate to the situation and the character they are playing. Such a technique was the basis for my production of I FORGET, produced at the State Theatre in Užice in 2005, in which actors each brought in a single photograph and the work was developed from this simple exercise. The instruction was simply that the photograph could not be explicit; its meaning had to be in some way obscure to the actor, and yet of personal importance. Out of this initial task was produced a

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play that asked some penetrating questions to its central Serbian audience about the nature of memory: our inability to forget things we wish to forget, and our inability to remember that which we cherish.

Actors cannot produce surprising, unpredictable work of this nature without being able to play. Play sounds simple enough, of course, but like all fundamental aspects of acting it is fiendishly difficult to maintain. Playing when one is in the mood to be playful is the amateur's delight. Playing when one is tired, or sad, or emotionally bruised, or simply too familiar with the material, is much more difficult. This is the realm where the ability to play becomes a technique, and not just a talent.

In developing this technique the non-verbal and gestural languages become important. When actors are tired, or unwilling to use their imagination, they resort to words and postures. Both of these can be described as attitudes; that is, approximations of feeling or a response, without the complete investment which would make them ring true. When an actor is working within unfamiliar parameters, however, such as the stipulation that they must use only nonsense language, or that they must tell a story to another using only their bodies with as little miming as possible, they are forced to invent. This is the honing of plasticity through play. The result, or at least the intended result, should be a kind of play for the spectator—something they couldn't quite predict, which forces them to re-invent their world. As the result of this emphasis on play the liminal space between performer and spectator is shared by both. Liminality enables alternative perspectives that are impossible to view from within one's circle of affinities; it is learning through acknowledgement of the other, of otherness, the taking on a cultural flexibility where borders are observed but not obeyed. This, to me, is the essence of interculturality as I try to apply it in the theatre.

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