Performing Memory: Contested Identities in the Work of Wajdi Mouawad

Dr. Michael Devine

Acadia University
Wolfville, Nova Scotia
B4P 2R6
Canada

Email: mickdevine@gmail.com

Performing Memory: Contested Identities in the Work of Wajdi Mouawad

Dr. Michael Devine

Acadia University
Wolfville, Nova Scotia
B4P 2R6
Canada

Email: mickdevine@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper will examine two major works by the Lebanese-Canadian playwright Wajdi Mouawad, who has achieved international prominence with plays such as ***Tideline*** and ***Scorched***. Both plays are exercises in performing memory. The characters in each play embark on quests to recover lost identity, traversing real and imagined landscapes and crossing boundaries from current to historicised identities in doing so. Mouawad himself has made this voyage. Emigrating first to Paris and then to Montréal as a teenager, Mouawad developed his œuvre as an actor, director and playwright in the multicultural milieu of contemporary French Canada. Writing in French, an adopted or second language, his works, particularly ***Littoral*** and ***Incendies*** (as they are titled in French), betray an obsession with origins and with recovering memory while simultaneously rejecting nostalgia or the idea that authenticity resides solely in the past.

The past is not a fact. The past is simply a big field, that had a great deal of activity in it.

John Cage, 1973

Littoral and ***Incendies***, written in French by the Lebanese-Canadian playwright Wajdi Mouawad and translated in English as ***Tideline*** and ***Scorched***, together form an illustration not only of John Cage's remark on the past, noted above, but on the illuminative convergence in great works of drama between personal experience and perceptions of identity. In both plays Mouawad's characters traverse a shifting and contested landscape of identity which mirrors, in many respects, the journey of the playwright as a child in Lebanon through his adolescence in France and further development in Montréal, Québec into perhaps Canada's most recognised playwright.

Mouawad, coming from the two cultures between which he creates his liminal landscape, has thus far managed to escape the critical commentary visited upon the alleged exoticism of theatrical work by the noted intercultural directors Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine and Robert Wilson. Whether his vaguely Platonic set of credentials—expertise based on experience—is enough to validate his dramatic analysis of identity can be left up to the critical reader; but socio-political critiques ignore the fundamental fact that Theatre, itself a hybrid form combining elements of live performance with written literature, rests upon criteria distinct from the schools of theory which propose finite definitions of such notions. While there can be little disputing the validity of critiques of works where writers of European origins use and abuse the myths and folklore of more ancient cultures, there has always been, in the arts in general, a tolerance of cultural miscegenation that seldom adheres to political dicta of appropriateness.

Thus when discussing the theme of contested identity in Mouawad's work it is essential to distinguish the devices he uses in explicating his themes that are primarily literary or distinctively theatrical. Theatrical devices create critical distanciation in both plays, re-channeling the reflexive desire of the spectator to achieve cathartic identification with characters or the narrative, encouraging audiences to examine the effects of inter- and transcultural interaction on identity and the development of alterity in characters.

Mouawad's plays ***Tideline*** and ***Scorched*** centre around the theme of identity sought, re-discovered, or forged (the last of which implies a fusion of identities into a new, third identity as *the Other*). Both plays take the quest trope as their main structural device. The quest in ***Tideline*** is recognisably chivalric—it even includes an imaginary Knight—but quests in literature extend beyond Western tradition and back to the creation stories of many cultures. They can therefore be regarded as a universalist device in the construction of shared and individual identity.

The word "universal" is key here to an understanding of how Mouawad's work generally, and these two plays specifically, fit into the critical and structural framework of intercultural theatre. Beyond orientalism (as defined by Said and iterated by theatre critics such as Marvin Carlson) is a category of intercultural theatre referred as *universalist*, best exemplified by the work of Brook, Wilson and Mnouchkine[1]. Like the work of these internationalist directors, ***Tideline*** and ***Scorched*** are plays written employing a conscious use of classical Western theatre devices[2], yet both display structural elements which may be considered at odds with modern Western dramaturgy[3]. Both plays occupy a liminal position between Western and Eastern culture, analogised by the events, which take place in French Canada and Lebanon, both unnamed [4]. The plays suggest, in opposition to essentialist discourses, that identity is a fluid, and that creation of the Other, existing in a liminal landscape between competing home cultures, is a natural, though not inevitable, by-product of cultural mixing.

The principal characters in each play physically traverse the geographical space between continents; this may be seen as analogous to a spiritual journey. The values-based certainty of some characters is undermined, while other characters retain a fixed social positionality. Humans share an intense, primordial desire to belong. Mouawad demonstrates how ephemeral and illusory social and familial attachment can be and that identity formation can

1. Both Brook (for his *Mahabharata*) and Mnouchkine (for *L'Indiade*, amongst other works) have been criticised as exoticists masquerading as interculturalists, notably by Carlson. Brook's approach is defended by Gautam Dasgupta, who argues that theatrical subjectivity is a necessary counter to notions of cultural appropriation. ("Interculturalism: A Lettrist Sampler" in *Interculturalism and Performance* (1991), Marranca and Gupta, eds., New York: PAJ,

2 In his notes Mouawad refers specifically to having been inspired by the distinctive father-son relationships of *Oedipus*, *Hamlet*, and *Idiot*. Amé's murder of his father in ***Scorched*** echoes that of Laius by Oedipus.

3 For example, extended soliloquys of elaborate poetic style (which also recall western literary writers such as Racine); the multi-layered narrative and the over-all length of each play.

4 The fact that these countries, and the villages visited by the characters, are either unnamed or referred to elliptically (i.e. "the pomegranate village") is further evidence of Mouawad's universalist orientation.

be altered through the loss—and recovery—of such intimate affiliations. In both plays family affiliation is re-found and restored, at great cost to the characters who go in search of it. They are altered by the experience, transformed; they are not who they were.

In ***Tideline*** young Wilfrid is content to live an unfocused existence in a large urban city. He is making love to a girl whose name he can't recall[5] when a telephone call comes notifying him of his father's death. His mother died during Wilfrid's birth, and the father abandoned the baby to his mother's family soon after; Wilfrid has lived to his early twenties with no clear idea of his roots[6]. In ***Tideline*** and ***Scorched*** the concept of roots includes blood and ethnocultural ties but notably, neither play uses faith as a marker of cultural identity[7].

Wilfrid sets off on a quest to bury his father. Knowing little of adult responsibility, or in fact how social institutions are brought into play at times such as the decease of a family member, he seeks advice from his estranged family. His mother's family refuses to allow his father to be buried in their crypt. The view him as an Outsider who selfishly instigated the death of their female relative through his desire for offspring. The dead father physically appears to Wilfrid as the family castigates his actions in abandoning Wilfrid after the mother's death. The Father insists that Wilfrid, as his son, must take his body back to his homeland for burial. The voyage they undertake—undeveloped boy-man accompanied by a steadily decaying and strangely loquacious Father—is intercut with scenes from the past, conjured consciously by the Father, who in so doing defends his contested identity by presenting a more nuanced view of his actions.

Accompanying Wilfrid on his quest is an imaginary knight, Giromelans. The presence of an imaginary knight and a lively corpse, visible only to those similarly beset by identities thrown

---

[5] Mouawad's plays deal very deliberately and playfully with the importance attached in most cultures to *naming*. In his plays names are fluid and play a role in shifting identity. Wilfrid relates that he and his unnamed lover each called the other by several different names during the act of sex; the names are of different cultural origins, as well.

[6] Hereditary roots are a primary aspect of identity, and a focus of much contention in the debates over the assimilation/accommodation debate which takes place in multicultural societies such as Canada and France. In other societies, however, ethnicity or faith is as fundamental to identity as family.

[7] This is of particular interest because of Mouawad's own journey. Raised in a Maronite Christian family, an historic religious minority in Lebanon, Mouawad emigrated as a child due to sectarian violence. Mouawad seldom refers to religion, and never by name, in his plays; yet through actions such as Wilfrid's ritual washing of his father's corpse, he demonstrates his understanding of the social significance of religion.

into flux through the destruction of family or other affilative cultures, clearly indicates that Wilfrid, though he has always attempted to maintain a kind of subterranean conformity, is an Other, traveling between known cultures which cannot be said to constitute the "home" from which identity is conventionally said to develop. Giromelans is the defender of Wilfrid's childhood and innocence. He decapitates people Wilfrid meets who offend his sense of idealism. At play's end, as Wilfrid achieves his quest, the Knight is obliged to depart. The Knight, as champion of an ideal of innocence and faith, neatly conforms to the Idealist structure of the play. Wilfrid will hitherto be judged by his actions, not his background.

In the Old World homeland of his father, Wilfrid is alienated from both his own past and that which he is tied to through family. He travels from village to village, carrying his decomposing but remarkably opinionated father. Fellow travelers, fellow Others, join him; they can see the Father, but conversation remains something possible only between Wilfrid and his progenitor. Amongst the ragged collection of nomads is Simone, who shouts and sings at night to proclaim her identity, driving the villagers to distraction. Amé, a soldier from the civil war, has accidentally killed his father at a crossroads. Sabbé's family was brutalised by soldiers who raped his mother and sister and cut off his father's head, forcing Sabbé to hold it in his hands. Massi has become untethered from his village; he retains his sanity by laughing across the valley to an unseen interlocutor. Josephine is heard approaching, chanting names. She appears, holding a stack of tattered telephone directories dating from before the civil war. Josephine explains that she is memorising the names of each citizen listed in the telephone directories, to keep them alive. Again here is evidence of Mouawad's obsession with names and naming, and belief, and wariness, of their significance. This metaphor for remembrance will transform from a literary device to a memorable theatrical form at the end of the play.

After many recounting of harrowing tales—an essential element of quest narrative—the group reaches the edge of the sea. They agree that they have found the appropriate burial place for Wilfrid's father; the shore of his homeland where it connects with the vast shape-shifting landscape of the sea, which connects travelers to other worlds. The emblematic Father must be paid due reverence before they can truly begin their own journeys, each freed to tell their own stories to the world, though never, it appears, fated to assimilate into new

cultures[8]. As he is ritually washed and floats out to sea, the Father is laden with the phonebooks, an anchor not only to his corpse but to his identity, whose names he will faithfully guard. The names in the directories thus retain significance, in Mouawad's view; they also sink out of sight, becoming, in some manner, irrelevant.

Despite the tragic and bloody circumstances from which the alienation of the characters arises, ***Tideline*** is a surprisingly effervescent play, filled with mordant humour and the determination of youth to overcome anger and loss in order to establish an independent identity. Mouawad suggests that hopes and dreams are essential elements in pursuing this quest, but that the ending may not conform to expectations.

Here is a schematic of the devices employed in playing out the themes of ***Tideline***. What is notable is the number of purely theatrical devices used, distinctive to playwriting but often absent from its written form. These theatrical devices bring the play to life in the mind of the reader, as well as ensuring that the play expresses itself in a visceral and visually effective manner in performance.

In ***Scorched*** many of the same devices are utilised, but the tone is darker and the style is less playful. Like ***Tideline***, the play begins in the New World and migrates to the Old World, where civil wars and invasions have decimated the society to which Simon and Janine unknowingly return.

Janine and Simon appear before a notary, Alphonse Lebel, to hear the contents of their mother's will. She had stopped speaking five years before her death and the twins were estranged from her. Lebel must insist that they adhere to the terms of her will[9]. The terms are distressing. Nawal demands to be buried face down, naked, without a coffin, in a grave unmarked by a stone. These conditions can only change if Janine and Simon carry out the tasks she has posthumously set them, to deliver two unopened letters. Simon must find a

[8] Mouawad makes clear that this future, and their identities, will be shared and communal as well as individual. This can be taken as a strong statement in favour of collectivist values over more extreme versions of libertarian individualism. In fact it is possible to view Western Europe, where Mouawad now principally works, as a bridge culture between the Middle East and North America. Clearly Mouawad is more comfortable on the bridge. In recent statements he has distanced himself from Francophone parochial sentiments in Québec.

[9] Lebel's stalwart defense of tradition and values is an indication of Mouawad's thesis that human values such as respect for elders and self-sacrifice are essential in discovering the true self.

brother he did not know he had, and Janine must deliver hers to a father she believed was long dead. Like Wilfrid, they will journey back to a homeland they never claimed as their own, to which they are involuntarily attached. There they discover the full story of their mother's harrowing journey, and the impact it will have on their as yet incompletely formed identities.

Nawal grows up in a small village and becomes pregnant at 14 with a child by Wahab, the love of her life, but a man from another village and of another sect. She is forced to abandon the child after birth. Soon after, at her grandmother's dying request, she leaves the village and educates herself, learning to read and write. These tools ostracise her from her roots in the village and mark her future course. With an inseparable friend, Sawda, Nawal spends the next thirty years in her war-torn country searching for the son who was taken from her, as well as founding and running independent newspapers. The killings she and Sawda witness transform her from victim to perpetrator. She murders the commander of the militia forces in a plan which carries no hope of escape. Taken to the infamous prison at Kfar Rayat, Nawal is raped and tortured repeatedly by Abou Tarek, a man of legendary brutality. She becomes pregnant by him and gives birth in the prison.

After some time, Nawal comes to Canada with the two babies. Janine and Simon grow up believing they were born in a nearby suburb. In fact they are the progeny of Nawal's rape, and she struggles to love them as her own. When she learns at an international justice tribunal that the torturer Abou Tarek is the son she was forced to give up for adoption, she stops speaking until the last night before her death.

The journey of Simon and Janine—who learn that their original names were Sarwane and Jannaane—begins as a quest to reclaim their mother from an abyss of silence and ends with their self-discovery as hybrid identities. Their mother, whose geographical journey is the opposite of theirs, is, in contrast, un-hybridised. She remains a woman of the Old World, bound to her past, until her death. Perhaps the most interesting case is that of the older child born of Nawal's love. He grows up in orphanages as a young man named Nihad. Nihad becomes an artist of a sort as a sniper who takes photos of his victims at the moment of death. He retains a childlike quality through his garbled singing of Western pop songs and imagined interviews with American talk show hosts. Through the war this aspect gradually is

eviscerated and he transforms into the torturer Abou Tarek, changing political allegiances and becoming a kind of monstrous Oedipus as he rapes the mother he has long sought but whom he does not recognise. He is recognised by Nawal at his trial—the father, the son—only because he still carries the clown nose she gave him before being forced to give him up.

Janine and Simon confront their father/older brother with the letters. He reads them, but there is no indication by Mouawad that he achieves any peace through this experience.. His identity remains split between two halves of his life. He is stuck in liminal space. Implicitly, Mouawad suggests that even hybrid identities must choose a side of the border to live on. Here is a schematic of the hybrid/non-hybrid characters in ***Scorched***:

Also notable is the character of Alphonse Lebel, a quintessentially Québecois archetype who travels but is unaltered by his experiences. He is a limited person, but not an inferior one. Lebel acts, in most respects, as a more effective and real-life version of the knight Giromelans from ***Tideline***. He never *travels*, in the sense of crossing the liminal space between identities, or putting his established identity as a Francophone notary in flux. Rather, as with the Knight, his role is to carry core human values from one context to another to underline their universal validity. Similarly, the local people encountered by Janine and Simon in their travels through Nawal's homeland have been altered by the events of the war, but they too are not hybrids. Their value lies in their attachment to, and knowledge of, their own culture.

The Outsider is crucial to every culture, and not only for purposes of socio-cultural definition. They are harbingers of change, the only true constant of existence. They are transgressors, crossing frontiers to stay for a while before moving on, their homes on their backs, the rogues and vagabonds whose presence tells us of a world larger than we dare imagine.

Michael Devine

Appendix 1:

Theatrical and Literary Devices in *Scorched* and *Tideline*

This appendix details the effective use of devices by Wajdi Mouawad which often perform dual functions, both literary and theatrical. Plays exist as both *drama*, that is, literary documents, and as *theatre*, that is, performative texts. Mouawad's linking of the two is unusually sophisticated and complex. Here I have described examples of the use of staging or theatrical devices which also act as effective literary devices. Where devices are distinct, but related, I have placed them across from each other. (S) denotes ***Scorched***; (T) ***Tideline***.

Devices Employed in Scorched and Tideline

Praxis	Combined	Literary
	Physicalised Imaginary Characters	
Film crew (T)/the past/the Knight (T) The dead father (T) The beheadings (T)		Description of W carrying Father (T)
	Scenic Rhythm	
Short scenes w/location and character jumps (T) Massi's entrance Sc. 27 (T) No breaks between scenes (S)		Scene titles denotes sections (S, T)
	Place	
	2-3 locations simultaneously (T, S) Place as fluid and temporally complex (S,T)	
		Wilfrid identified as Other on arrival in Old World (T) Sabbé, Amé, Massi, Josephine identified as Others although indigenous to Old World No burial space available in Old/New World
Multi-Casting of Characters Destruction of cathartic impulse in Spectator (S, T)		**Single Scene Characters** Anti-Aristotelian use of dimensional character to focus on theme rather than Personality (S, T)
	Metatheatre	
Reference to split reality by family (T) Father paints himself green onstage (T) W asks director to turn off the camera (T)		Group speaks to audience in "rehearsal" (T) Wazáán calls Josephine "Antigone" (T)

Temporal Fluidity

Presence of dead Father (T)

W/Father watch scenes from Father's past (T)

Scenes from Father's past (T)

Presence of Father on stage in 2-3 ages (T)

Three Nawals onstage (S)

Characters from other times and places walk through scenes and interact with characters onstage (S)

Stage directions indicate inter-mixing of characters from different times and places to indicate scenic transitions (S)

Dialogic Distanciation

Father's soliloquys (physical effect) (T)

Nawal's courtroom address to the Brother/Father of the twins (S)

Nihad's interview fantasies (S)

W speaks to audience (T)

Father's soliloquys on dying (page form) (T)

W refers to himself as another person (T)

W refers to his role-playing inadequacy (T)

Stories of Simone, Sabbé, Amé, Massi (T)

Stage direction of W address to audience (T)

Anachronism

Dead mother upbraids Father about event that has not occurred in her life (T)

Aurality

Stage directions indicating singing (S. T)

laughter (Sabbé) (T)

Simone slapped by villager after singing (T)

OV "Is there anyone who'd like to hear me (T)

say here I am?" (T)

OV Josephine reciting names (T)

Description of war sounds (S)

Description of Supertramp music (S)

War sounds (S)

OV shouts (Simone) (T)

Naming

Josephine carries phonebooks (T)

Phonebooks buried at sea w/ W's father (T)

Sex w/ girl whose name W cannot recall (T)

W and girl give each other various names of no hereditary or cultural basis in sex (T)

Description of phonebooks and J's chanting of names (T)

Nawal's promise to engrave her grandmother's name on tombstone (S)

Fluidity of identity Jannaane/Janine, Sarwane/Simon, Nihad/Abou Tarek (S)

Nawal's instruction to be buried w/o a stone (S)

Old World locations not named (T, S)

Incongruity

Imaginary character (Giromelan) kills others (T)

Hakim stays dead (T)

Father's references to decomposition (T)

Supertramp music in middle east scene (S)

Nihad's interview fantasy post-killing (S)

Metaphor

Ritual washing of the body/ phonebooks (T)

Lighting

Light from other village blinking on/off
Father in solo spot for soliloquys

Appendix 2:
Contested Identities (Non-contested identities)

Scorched	***Tideline***
Nawal	Wilfrid
Janine/Jannaane	Simone
Simon/Sarwane	Massi
Nihad/Abou Tarek	Sabbé
	Amé
(Antoine Ducharme)	(Josephine)
(Alphonse Lebel)	(Father)
(Sawda)	(Knight)

References

Carlson, Marvin (1996) "Brook and Mnouchkine : passages to India?" in The Intercultural Performance Reader, Pavis, P. (ed.). London: Routledge.

Le Monde **"**Wajdi Mouawad, enfant dans la guerre, exilé sans frontières" in *Le Monde*, http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2009/07/07/wajdi-mouawad-enfant-dans-la-guerre-exile-sans-frontieres_1215695_3246.html

Marranca, Bonnie (1991) "The forest as archive : Robert Wilson and interculturalism" in Interculturalism and Performance: writings from PAJ. Marranca, B., Dasgupta, G. (eds.). New York: PAJ.

Mouawad, Wajdi (2006) *Scorched*. Gaboriau, L. (trans.). Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press.

---- (2002) *Tideline*. Tepperman, S. (trans.). Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press.

Williams, David (ed.) (1999) Collaborative theatre: The Théâtre du Soleil Sourcebook. London; New York: Routledge.

