

Swedish Whiteness, German Multiculturalism, French National Identity, and American Racial Profiling

Transnational Perspectives on Jonas Hassen Khemiri's *Invasion!*

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ABSTRACT

Populated by characters from the Middle East, North Africa, Southeast Asia, and Sweden, Jonas Hassen Khemiri's debut play, *Invasion!* (2006), marked one of the first intercultural theatrical events on a mainstream Swedish stage. It unapologetically confronted audiences with the consequences of stereotypical representations of Muslim men as fundamentalist terrorists and further criticized the notion of "Swedishness" for not just working as a mere designation of nationality and citizenship, but also a silent, yet powerful signifier of whiteness. Moreover, *Invasion!* was the first play to be performed in a mainstream theatre by a cast that had an intercultural and international background and could effortlessly switch between standard Swedish (*rikssvenska*) and suburban Swedish (*ortenspråk*).

Acknowledging the fifteenth anniversary of *Invasion!*, this article looks back upon the watershed of director Farnaz Arbabi's original production and the play's subsequent transnational impact. How did a play that was defiantly at odds with the hegemonic whiteness of the performing arts in Sweden, at that point in time, not only become a modern classic that found its way into the university curricula, but went on to garner an impressively transnational success? What exactly captured the interest and attention of theatre artists in Germany, France, the US, and many other countries? And how did international reviewers react to and interpret the work? What interests me specifically is to study how the play has 'travelled', how its characters and themes have migrated to different national and linguistic contexts, engendered new creative networks and transnational dialogues as well as unfolded multiple layers of cultural translations in the process. A genuine understanding and appreciation of Khemiri's work, I suggest, necessitates a transnational outlook that, in turn, sheds light on Nordic theatre and performance as increasingly intercultural and motivated by concerns that are not regional but global.

KEYWORDS

intercultural performance, cultural translation, transnational, Nordic whiteness, Orientalism

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hybridity is heresy
*Homi Bhabha*¹

The Muslim man must either be implicated in a terrorist act or beat up a woman or both. It's all part of one big trajectory of really bad representation. Along comes Jonas Khemiri's *Invasion!* and messes it all up.

*Jamil Khoury, Co-Executive Artistic Director of Silk Road Rising, Chicago*²

Jonas Hassen Khemiri's debut play, *Invasion!*, opened on 10 March 2006 at the Stockholm City Theatre (today: Kulturhuset Stadsteatern) and was directed by Farnaz Arbabi who has since become his frequent collaborator, and whose own decolonial productions have left a definitive imprint on the performing arts in Sweden. Populated by characters from the Middle East, North Africa, Southeast Asia, and Sweden, *Invasion!* marked one of the first intercultural theatrical events on a mainstream Swedish stage. It unapologetically confronted audiences with the consequences of stereotypical representations of Muslim men as fundamentalist terrorists and showed how Arab and Muslim people risk internalizing these very stereotypes that, in turn, corrupt their sense of identity. The play further criticized the notion of "Swedishness" for not just working as a mere designation of nationality and citizenship, but also a silent, yet powerful signifier of whiteness.³ Moreover, *Invasion!* was the first play to be performed in

1 Bhabha 2004, 322.

2 Silk Road Theatre 2013.

3 Critical race scholars have offered a poignant definition of Swedish whiteness and its intricate conflation of ethnicity, race, nationality, and citizenship: "[B]eing white constitutes the central core and the master signifier of Swedishness, and thus of being Swedish. This means that a Swede is a white person and a non-white person is therefore not, and cannot *fully* become a Swede." Hübner and Lundström 2014, 431; see also Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2012.

a mainstream theatre by a cast (Bahador Foladi, Isabel Munshi, Bashkim Neziraj and Shebly Niavarani) that had an intercultural and international background and could effortlessly switch between standard Swedish (*rikssvenska*) and suburban Swedish (*ortensspråk*), which designates the various socio-linguistic dialects informed by loanwords as well as rap and hip hop phrasings that are spoken in immigrant-heavy suburban areas.⁴

Invasion! became a considerable success running for two seasons and was invited to the 2007 Swedish Theatre Biennial. Soon after, the play started a remarkable run on international stages and it arguably qualifies as Sweden's most successful theatrical export since *Mamma Mia!*, another work whose title is distinguished by the emphatic exclamation mark. There have been dozens of documented professional productions in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, South Korea, Switzerland, Turkey, the UK, and the USA. Moreover, a cursory search on YouTube reveals that the play has found its way into the repertoire of numerous international student theatre ensembles. *Invasion!* has also received numerous accolades, including a Village Voice OBIE Award for playwriting in 2011. The German translation was first published by the influential magazine *Theater Heute* in 2008. That same year, the play was chosen as the Swedish representative for a reading cycle at the Festival d'Avignon that included one dramatic work from each of the then twenty-seven member states of the European Union.

As *Invasion!* celebrates its fifteenth anniversary, it seems appropriate to look back upon the watershed of Arbabi's original production and the play's subsequent transnational impact. How did a play that set out literally to invade mainstream theatre and was defiantly at odds with the hegemonic whiteness of the performing arts in Sweden at that point not only become a modern classic that found its way into the university curricula, but went on to garner such transnational success? What exactly captured the interest and attention of international theatre artists? And how did reviewers react to and interpret the work? What interests me specifically is to study how the play has 'travelled', how its characters and themes have migrated to different national and linguistic contexts, engendered new creative networks and transnational dialogues as well as unfolded multiple layers of cultural translations in the process. A genuine understanding and appreciation of Khemiri's work, I suggest, necessitates a transnational outlook that, in turn, sheds light on Nordic theatre and performance as increasingly intercultural and motivated by concerns that are not regional, but global. In other words, I deploy *Invasion!* as a highly representative example to reflect on how Nordic performance is a concept that travels far beyond any geographical or cultural boundaries.

Following from Arjun Appadurai's lead, I conceptualize the transnational here as the flow of cultural expressions and cultural representations between countries and continents, in addition to the circulation of capital, technology and information. As part of his theory of globalization, Appadurai proposes five elements or *-scapes* (ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes,

4 For a critical discussion of *ortensspråk*, see Lacatus 2008 and Refsum 2011.

financescapes, ideoscapes) to identify transnational exchanges that encompass: people, including migrants and refugees; mediatized information and cultural representations; technologies; capital, goods and labour; as well as ideologies. Together, these five *-scapes* constitute global cultural processes that are in constant formation and characterized by internal disjunctures, meaning that they do not move in sync with one another. Furthermore, Appadurai suggests that these transnational processes always risk being harnessed and ideologically recontextualized or reintegrated by nation-states, thus becoming domesticated and re-confined to national borders, values, and frameworks.⁵

Khemiri's play denounces the uneven, discriminatory, and potentially lethal consequences of the disjuncture or disconnection between the various facets of global cultural processes. Most pertinently, it condemns how global capitalism and its need for cheap labour do not correspond to the legal and humanitarian situation of paperless migrants and refugees. Furthermore, it criticizes how global media circulate images and representations that conflate politics, news, and entertainment which in turn pigeonhole Muslim and Arab men as fundamentalist terrorists. As an artistic product, not to say commercially successful commodity itself, however, *Invasion!* also forms part of the global flow of cultural exchanges.

When plays migrate across borders, they (ideally) appeal to the imagination of theatre communities in a variety of new contexts. To capture how performing artists, audiences, and reviewers in different local, national, and temporal contexts have emphasized different themes of Khemiri's play, my analysis is further framed by the concept of cultural translation. As I have argued in a different context, cultural translation in the theatre works on four inter-related levels that encompass: the literal translation of a dramatic text into a different language; the material and financial conditions that promote a stage work; the artistic and political choices made by directors, designers, and actors; and, finally, the play's reception and the critical discourse it generates.⁶ Influenced by Homi Bhabha and Peter Burke, my work on transnational performance suggests that cultural translation is only successful if it manages to touch a nerve, provoke some apprehension or stimulate a debate in the new host culture.⁷ Cultural translation goes beyond the manifold efforts to make a play intellectually intelligible, it also needs to make it relevant and provide it with the necessary emotional impact to speak to audiences in a specific cultural context and at a specific moment in time.

With this article, I also wish to reclaim *Invasion!* as a work that was conceived

5 Appadurai 1996, 32-43.

6 Gindt 2019.

7 Bhabha suggests that it is through cultural translation that "newness comes into the world" (2004, 326). The meeting of two or more cultures opens up for a new dialogue and space that is characterized by hybridity and challenges the falsely imagined homogeneity of a majority culture by highlighting marginalized and minoritarian identities and positions. Burke argues that cultural translation is "a double process of decontextualization and recontextualization" (2007, 10), whereby a literary text that originates in one specific social and historical context becomes re-interpreted in another context.

for the stage. Since the publication of his debut novel *Ett öga rött* (*One Eye Red*) in 2003, Khemiri has become one of his generation's most celebrated and influential authors, both in Sweden and abroad. His unique way of working with language and mining its performative potential to destabilize meaning and identities has primarily attracted the interest of scholars of literature.⁸ Of particular importance for my objectives is Christian Refsum's Bhabha-inspired argument that Khemiri's oeuvre explores questions around cultural hybridity and portrays a country that has long – and falsely – imagined itself as culturally homogenous but, since the 1990s, has been re-negotiating what it means to be a multicultural and multilingual society.⁹ Cultural translation is also a guiding methodological principle for Helena Wulff who, like me, seeks to comprehend the transnational reception of Khemiri. Wulff focuses exclusively on the reviews of three of Khemiri's literary texts in a Swedish and US context respectively and concludes: "When it comes to the international success of Khemiri's work, it turns out that it cannot be related only to Sweden or any particular engagement in Swedish culture. It can rather be understood as local versions of the global themes of terrorist crimes and racial profiling."¹⁰ Here, I seek to take a closer look at how such local variations of global topics manifest themselves both in the review process and onstage. I depart from Refsum and Wulff by focusing on actual performances – as opposed to dramatic or literary texts – and by studying their processes of production and reception in a significantly broader perspective by including five representative case studies from four different countries and languages.

I begin by outlining some defining characteristics of Arbabi's original Swedish production before turning to selected performances from Germany, France, and the US to illustrate different artistic and political approaches to and interpretations of the play. These points of contrast and comparison are not meant to be exhaustive, but serve as representative of the transnational impact of Khemiri's play and its many cultural translations, at least in the west where *Invasion!* has become a key cultural product that protests racial profiling and unmask the social anxieties caused by fundamentalist terrorism and new waves of immigration. I am deliberately promiscuous in referring to various productions and quoting from the respective reviews in order to trace an overview of the transnational appeal and impact of Khemiri's play as well as its relevance in various national and cultural contexts. This seemingly schizophrenic methodological choice seeks to mirror the paranoia created by the mysterious character Abulkasem who is at the centre of the play and propels the action forward. Furthermore, this method honours the fast pace and dramaturgy of the play which furiously jumps between different settings that range from a dive bar where a group of theatre students hang out, a gay nightclub, to a summer cottage in the countryside, and the offices of the Swedish Migration Agency.¹¹

8 Wiktorsson 2013; Nilsson 2012.

9 Refsum 2011, 173.

10 Wulff 2009, 14.

11 The analysis is based on archival research of reviews, press photos, published interviews, video recordings of the productions in Stockholm, Hamburg and Metz, and extended clips of the

Scenarios of Orientalism

Without questioning the novel's literary qualities, literature scholar Natia Gokieli suggests that Khemiri's debut *Ett öga rött* filled a void in the Swedish literary establishment which was filled with "a desire for a voice of color, a very much racialized desire."¹² For majoritarian society, Khemiri, who was born in Sweden as the son of a Swedish mother and Tunisian father, invited "the contentious discovery of the non-white other within the borders of the self."¹³ After the success of *Ett öga rött*, Khemiri was approached by the Artistic Director of the Stockholm City Theatre, the late Benny Fredriksson, with an invitation to write a play for the upcoming season devoted to diversity.¹⁴ If *Ett öga rött* filled a void by becoming one of the first big intercultural novels that was eagerly consumed by mainstream society that soon awarded Khemiri "a special status as star-author in the discourse on immigrant literature,"¹⁵ it seems reasonable to suggest that Fredriksson was interested in commissioning what he hoped would become a similarly successful event onstage, especially since the Swedish government had declared 2006 the year of cultural diversity (*mångfaldsår*). The role played by managing directors, agencies, and publishers cannot be underestimated when it comes to the transnational export and cultural translation of a play.¹⁶

Invasion! is divided into seven scenes. It starts with a high-school class visiting a performance of *Signora Luna*, a relatively obscure drama published in 1835 by Swedish author Carl Jonas Love Almqvist (1793-1866). Set in medieval Sicily, it depicts the fate of the blind and devoted Antonia Luna who abandoned her family after falling in love with the pirate Abulkasem Ali Moharrem. Unbeknownst to audiences watching *Invasion!*, two actors are sitting in the auditorium, pretending to be noisy students who get agitated by the deliberate ham-acting taking place onstage and interrupt the performance first by making inappropriate sounds and then by jumping onstage and heckling the audience. Deceptively simple, the device nevertheless worked frighteningly well at the Stockholm City Theatre and raised the pertinent question of which bodies and sociolects seemed acceptable and unacceptable to Swedish audiences. While some spectators tried to shush the young men, others actually pushed them or used their handbags to hit them. Arbabi expressed surprise at the aggressive reactions by white Swedes in the audience who seemed unwilling or unable to see through this theatrical device because they could not conceptualize that two young men with an immigrant background might in fact be professional

production in Chicago. Director Arbabi visited two of my classes on post-colonial performance to talk about *Invasion!* and her work in general.

12 Gokieli 2017, 267.

13 Op.cit., 270.

14 Sörenson and Khemiri 2019, 64.

15 Op.cit., 276.

16 The publisher, Colombine, which holds the rights for *Invasion!*, is in direct communication with playhouses and dramaturges in Scandinavia, while a number of affiliated agencies and publishers (such as Rowohlt Verlag in Germany, Agence Althéa – éditions Théâtrales in France or Agency North Oy in Finland) cover the international market. Email communication with Berit Gullberg, Colombine, 27 January 2021. Referenced by permission.

actors in a mainstream theatre.¹⁷

Once it has been established that this interruption is part of the play, the fictitious character Abulkasem takes on a life of his own: the students start using the word Abulkasem as a noun or an adjective to express excitement or annoyance; a socially awkward young man with an Indian background creates the alter-ego Abulkasem to gain the necessary confidence to chat with a woman he meets in a club; and a Kurdish-Swedish student appropriates the name to impress her seminar group with her knowledge about a famous feminist director from Iran. However, Abulkasem also becomes the designation of a seemingly elusive, international terrorist about whose whereabouts a panel of political and military experts speculate. As the play moves away from farce and satire towards a more sombre tone and a genuinely gut-wrenching ending, we meet an asylum seeker whose interview with a migration agency officer is wilfully mistranslated into a fundamentalist hate speech. The play concludes with the testimonial of a young man who witnessed first-hand how an 'illegal' asylum seeker burnt their fingerprints on an electric cooking plate in a desperate attempt to erase their identity from official files and thereby avoid deportation.

Throughout the play, Khemiri cleverly juxtaposes experiences of everyday racism with structural discrimination. As theatre scholar and director Anna Christina Bahow eloquently argues, Abulkasem becomes a fictitious embodiment of Orientalist thinking that seeks to justify colonial domination by representing 'the Other' as different, inferior, and in need of rescue. Bahow further suggests that Khemiri deploys the stage to sabotage and deconstruct such Orientalist representations and tropes.¹⁸ The 'Other' does not exist, yet is seemingly ubiquitous and, in the words of Edward Said, serves as a foil that "help[s] to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience."¹⁹ Building upon these arguments, I suggest that *Invasion!* depicts various scenarios of Orientalism. Diana Taylor has famously posited "scenarios as meaning-making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes."²⁰ In *Invasion!*, the various scenarios illustrate how Orientalist power structures and representations continue to falsely shape identities and reproduce stereotypes which become most precarious for those who are subjected to them. The play thus works as a political intervention that seeks to critique and deconstruct Orientalized identities and practices of 'othering' racialized minorities, especially Arabic and Muslim people.

In a world post-9/11 where racist and Islamophobic imagery circulates more vehemently than ever, these various scenarios of Orientalism can easily be translated into different national settings and arguably helped facilitate the play's transnational success. That should, however, not blind us to the nuances in the international interpretation and reception of the play as directors have chosen various approaches and critics have been triggered by different aspects depending on the shifting cultural and political landscape in which the play was

17 Dufva 2006.

18 Bahow 2018.

19 Said 2003, 1-2.

20 Taylor 2003, 28.

staged.

Stockholm 2006: Us and them

On a domestic level, the opening of *Invasion!* coincided with the steady proliferation of nationalist ideologies in Swedish society, best represented by the Sweden Democrats (*sverigedemokraterna*), a far-right populist party that is opposed to immigration and openly Islamophobic that first entered the Riksdag in 2010. Critical reception was enthusiastic, even though reviewers occasionally pointed out that the script was lacking in nuance when it came to character development.²¹ What is most striking is how the critical establishment reproduced a binary thinking between ‘us’ and ‘them’. The daily *Dagens Nyheter*, for example, complimented “the formidably secure and charismatic ensemble whose names, with one exception, we have never heard of,” and wondered: “[W]here did they come from?”²² The reviewer seemed to be genuinely surprised that racialized actors could play the leading parts in a production at a professional public playhouse as opposed to a less mainstream venue such as a private theatre or an independent ensemble. The regional *Hallandsposten* anxiously tried to assimilate the play into a universalizing (read: white) frame by arguing that Khemiri went beyond describing the “problematics of immigrants” to achieve something “far more universal.” Unwilling to simply listen to and maybe learn from the experiences of the immigrant population and racialized minorities, the critic felt compelled to reassure majoritarian society of the play’s relevance by arguing that “[w]e are all immigrants in our own lives” and adding that *Invasion!* was a modern-day *Everyman*.²³ *Svenska Dagbladet*’s reviewer was more self-reflexive and correctly identified the deliberate provocation and political intervention that Khemiri’s play and Arbabi’s production aimed to generate: “[N]ow we get to experience what it is like to be outside the theatre, we who regard it as our second home.” The critic proceeded to explain that the male-centric approach of the dramatic text was skilfully balanced by an almost all-female production team and concluded: “The production challenges the theatrical monopoly of the old Swedes, but it does not leave us outside. We are also allowed to join in, and it is both emotionally strong and fun.”²⁴

The critics’ need to feel included and their reassurances directed at their readership, which is imagined as entirely white and Swedish, is even more astounding if we consider that the play dramatizes how large segments of the population are actually forced to live a precarious existence on the margins of society – very often because of their name, physical appearance, skin tone, birthplace, and/or religion. Arbabi’s production clearly touched a nerve among the mainstream critical establishment because it highlighted a structural division

21 Marmgren 2006.

22 Bahador Foladi, who had previously starred in a regional production of the dramatic adaptation of *Ett öga rött*, was the only actor with whom the reviewer was familiar. Waaranperä 2006. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Swedish, German, and French are my own. Page numbers for reviews are not available.

23 Linton-Malmfors 2006.

24 Granath 2006.

that had, for a long time, privileged white performing artists.²⁵

Divisions along intersecting class and race structures in Swedish society also inspired the set design of the original production. Zofi Nilsson's scenography was characterized by a relatively bare stage that was dominated by a tilted red plane, described by one critic as "a violently sloping red catwalk, a bleeding slash through Swedish society" that marked the division between the haves and the have-nots.²⁶ An almost Meyerholdian device, the plane allowed actors to perform on multiple vertical levels and added great dynamics to the fast-paced production [Fig. 1].



Figure 1: Bahador Foladi, Isabel Munshi and Bashkim Neziraj in *Invasion!*, © Kulturhuset Stadsteaterns pressarkiv; photo: Petra Hellberg

Another defining artistic device was the choice of costumes, also designed by Nilsson. *Invasion!* has a total of eighteen characters yet only necessitates a cast of four actors who quickly switch identities between different scenes. Elaborate costume changes are therefore not an option as this would break the pace. Instead, actors usually wear a neutral outfit and accessorize as needed to quickly mark a change of character. At the Stockholm City Theatre, this basic outfit was far from neutral, however, as the four actors were styled as a conglomerate of various characters of the Belgian cartoonist Hergé's *The Adventures of Tintin*. The male actors wore a turquoise pullover, half-length

²⁵ See for example Feiler 2012.

²⁶ Fredriksson 2006.

trousers, sneakers and long socks and their hair was modelled after Tintin's famous boyish haircut. Isabel Munshi wore a pair of boots and a blue turtleneck sweater displaying a black anchor inspired by Captain Haddock. When playing the Panel of Experts, the actors quickly put on a dark green raincoat and a pair of distinctive round glasses that were reminiscent of Professor Calculus. Their demeanour, in turn, was inspired by the detectives Thompson and Thompson [Fig. 2].



Figure 2: Bashkim Neziraj, Bahador Foladi and Isabel Munshi in *Invasion!*, © Kulturhuset Stadsteaterns pressarkiv; photo: Petra Hellberg

Arbabi explained to me that to her, Hergé's Tintin represented the white, blonde subject, and the male European explorer who travels throughout a variety of colonial settings without ever developing a pronounced personality. Additionally, the supposedly 'neutral' and unmarked character Tintin worked as a foil and contrast to the aggressively racialized Abulkasem who, in a similar way, travels the globe until he finally arrives in Sweden. The implications of this sartorial choice were not lost on the critics who identified Hergé's (Georges Remi's) comic hero as "one of European popular culture's most disgusting colonial stereotypes."²⁷ In their ruthless quest to exploit national resources, the Belgian colonial regime under King Leopold II committed numerous crimes against humanity in the Congo, which sociologist Asafa Jalata has designated as a form of "European colonial terrorism."²⁸ By referencing the adventures of Tintin, Arbabi and Nilsson drew a parallel to the, up until then, unexplored history of Swedish colonialism of both foreign territories and Sápmi, which is a topic that Arbabi would return to with her production of *X* in 2015.

27 Hilton 2006; see also Eklund 2006.

28 Jalata 2013, pass.

Hamburg 2009: “The real Abulkasem”

The Panel of Experts consists of three characters who are interviewed by a Guide, in a talk-show setting, about the identity and location of Abulkasem, who quickly graduates from being an innocuous high-school joke to an internationally wanted terrorist. The Experts are the only returning characters and make three appearances. In Scene 2, they speculate about Abulkasem’s true identity, his origins and his place of birth. By the end of their deliberations, Abulkasem has become a conglomerate for all kinds of Orientalist projections and is identified as “the greatest threat to our common future.”²⁹ In Scene 4, the Experts are baffled by his escape from his home country and try to trace his moves since. Finally, in Scene 6, they announce that Abulkasem is now *here*, in Sweden (or in whichever country the play is performed).

In the 2009 production at Hamburg’s Thalia in der Gaußstraße, which ran for several seasons and was invited to the Scènes d’Europe festival in Reims and the Théâtre de l’Odéon in Paris in 2012, the three Experts could barely be identified as such. Every time the Experts were supposed to make an appearance, the actors deliberately broke the fourth wall by stepping out of character and informally debated the origins of Abulkasem. Additionally, in Scene 4, the Guide acts less like a moderator and more like a director, instructing his cast and asking them to explain to the audience why the Experts were looking for Abulkasem. Adding a few improvised lines, he chastised them for failing to present proper facts and coming across as “doof” (stupid). This criticism annoyed the actors who started arguing until one of them eventually left the stage in anger.

Inspired by epic dramaturgies, this blurring of fiction and reality was one of the main characteristics of the Hamburg production. The cast made full use of the dramatic text’s potential to address the audience directly and occasionally broke the theatrical illusion by calling one other by their real-life names. Several times, the actors gave a cue to the technicians asking them to turn off the music or dim the lights etc. The houselights were turned on frequently to interrupt the flow of the action, encourage moments of critical reflection for audiences, and create an unmistakable link between the stage and social reality.

The question of (false) identity labels was a central concern of this production: Who is hiding behind the mask? What is the true kernel of identity? When do people reveal their true face and when are they just putting on an act? A French critic who reviewed one of the guest performances in Paris suggested:

[Director Antú Romero Nunes’] originality is to break the theatrical illusion, not in order to reveal the real person who might be hiding behind the mask of the actor, but to suggest the violence of the act of unmasking, the brutality of wanting to freeze an action, a narrative, a play, into the immobility of an essence.³⁰

Approximately one hour into the performance, after the last appearance of the Panel of Experts and just before the last scene, one of the actors stepped

29 Khemiri 2013, 23.

30 Siéfert 2012.

forward and mimed to ABBA's "The Winner Takes It All", a Swedish-produced song that has become part of global pop lingo. After the first chorus, the music segued radically into Bollywood-inspired beats. The other three actors came back onstage and all four of them, dressed in identical black trousers and loose black pullovers, put on a black tuque and a pale-white face mask made out of cardboard and papier maché to cover the back of their head. These masks looked identical, with an old-fashioned moustache as the only distinguishing feature. As the actors turned their back to the audience, it seemed as if these interchangeable masks were staring at the audience. The scene became even more complicated when the actors welcomed all the "party people in the house" from different parts of the world with an enthusiastic "Hello Africa", "Shalom Israel", "India Hello" and "South America in the House", before launching into an intriguing choreography that mixed western club elements with Orientalist hand movements straight out of an Artaudian fantasy. Based on the cacophony of sounds pumping out of the loudspeakers and the curious choreography that at one point saw the actors on all four, imitating spider-like movements, it was hard to tell whether the scene constituted a spoof on commercialized multiculturalism or an embodied manifestation of Said's critique of Orientalism. Eventually, a solemn voice-over informed audiences: "Der wahre Abulkasem – alle Rassen, alle Farben, alle Religionen" (The real Abulkasem – all races, all colours, all religions). This attempt at universalizing the concerns of the play, rooted in Enlightenment philosophy and dramatic humanism indebted to Lessing, was followed up by a clever device to bring the point home for a Hamburg audience.

Thalia in der Gaußstraße is a black box venue also known as the "Garage". The entire backdrop of the small performance space consists of an electrically-operated gate. After the Bollywood scene, director Nunes opened this gate to literally open up the play to the outside world and allow the four actors to extend the performance space into the adjacent parking lot. The last scene, in which the Playwright's Little Brother narrates how he witnessed a desperate asylum seeker erase his own finger prints by forcing his hands onto a burning hot cooking plate, might have been set in the Swedish country side according to the text, but the *coup de théâtre* of opening up the theatre to the surrounding apartment complex made it unmistakably clear that the same tragedies were also happening in Hamburg.

New York 2011: Speaking the unspeakable

The Brechtian approach in Hamburg can be contrasted with the 2011 New York production of *Invasion!* (opening at Walkerspace on 21 February and revived at The Flea Theatre on 13 September), in which the Panel of Experts were sartorially identified as a conglomerate of political scientists, military experts, politicians and security advisers. Impeccably coiffed, they donned horn-rimmed glasses, a formal jacket or, in case of the military advisor, a green uniform. They spoke in a firm, slightly monotonous tone, enunciating every syllable to express authority. An American flag was conspicuously positioned at house left side of the stage. Here, the Experts embodied a rather realistic representation

of an image with which US audiences would have been most familiar from endless news reports in the wake of 9/11, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the constant state of alert of a nation afraid of further terror attacks.

The New York production marks a successful attempt of cultural translation, which, as Burke points out, can only be meaningful for audiences in a new context if it manages to “support ideas or assumptions or prejudices already present in the culture.”³¹ Before opening off-Broadway, an English version of *Invasion!* had already been staged in London. However, not only did the Play Company run into complications when it tried to secure the rights to that version, but that particular translation, with its specific idioms and references to London settings, seemed designed to first and foremost appeal to a British audience. In a post-performance talk, Khemiri and director Erica Schmidt reflected on the process of culturally translating the play to New York audiences. While an early workshop had confirmed that keeping the play set in a Swedish context made sense, the desired effect was, however, not as visceral as intended. The references to Sweden created a sense of distance that involuntarily caused audiences to laugh off certain lines of dialogue as a silly joke rather than feeling the gravitas of the scene, both intellectually and affectively. Schmidt explained: “It felt important that the play is breathing the same air as we all and it felt like it was kind of a lie to say ‘well, it’s actually placed in Sweden’. [...] It feels like it has to be of the room.”³² In other words, the play’s Swedish origins had to be masked in order to make it work in a New York context.

Rachel Willson-Broyles, the play’s American translator, engaged in some subtle, yet highly effective means of cultural translation, not least when it came to cultural references and places in order to make the play intelligible to audiences in the US. This was most prominent when she altered the Swedish names of detention centres where desperate asylum seekers had committed suicide to the equivalent American facilities, a change that added to the urgency of the play. The *New York Times* raved about how both the translator and the company successfully managed to “effectively translate colloquial (not to mention topical) speech into English.”³³

Unlike the Hamburg production and its broad take on the question of identities, the New York production was, perhaps not surprisingly, received and reviewed under the shadow of the ten-year anniversary of 9/11. A second review in the *New York Times* praised Khemiri’s play as “an aggressive work of theater” that revealed “the semantics of prejudice, the way foreign words echo and mutate in provincial ears,” while simultaneously maintaining a consistent awareness of the limitations of language to grasp the magnitude of an event like 9/11: “There is art — heroic art — to be mined from the struggle to speak the unspeakable.”³⁴ Ten years after 9/11, the play had lost none of its urgency.

31 Burke 2007, 20.

32 Schmidt quoted in Idea Lab Series 2011.

33 Zinoman 2011.

34 Brantley 2011.

Metz 2010: National identities and anxieties

The French premiere of *Invasion!*, directed by Michel Didym, took place on 9 February 2010 at the Espace Bernard-Marie Koltès in Metz and, over the next three years, was performed throughout France and even in Brussels. Sarah de Battice designed an intricate set with a spiral staircase at house right of the stage and a brick tower centre-stage. On top of this tower was a tiny studio with room enough for two live musicians who were fully integrated into the *mise en scène*. Flavien Gaudon and Philippe Thibault followed the plot from their watch tower, which meant that they could comment on the action with musical interludes but not interfere in it. Their musical contributions, ranging from electronic beats peppered with the occasional spoof on 'Oriental' sounding instruments to the pop melodies of ABBA, created a cabaret atmosphere and lent the production a distinct rhythm. Over the course of each performance an oversized red balloon became gradually inflated, representing the increased threat posed by Abulkasem as well as the web of lies spun around this phantom terrorist. Furthermore, Didym inserted a couple of fake commercial breaks (cheekily misspelt as *reklâm*) and news reports between scenes that gently poked fun at stereotypical notions of Sweden by including ample references to Volvo, crisp bread (*knäckebröd*), a moose, a long blond wig, even a sauna and, of course, ABBA. These scenes also point to the heart of Didym's cultural translation of the play and the way he negotiated the Swedish versus the French context:

[I]t is true that the play can be transposed to France: We examine the Swedish situation with a magnifying glass, then draw parallels with the French situation. If the staging had been French, it would have resulted in an exhibitory form of theatre [théâtre d'exposition], a genre that I dislike. But more generally, the play can be adapted to all Western societies.³⁵

By anchoring the play in a Swedish context, Didym left room for the spectators' own critical imagination and allowed them to draw their own parallels and conclusions without imposing his own politics. As opposed to the New York production which recontextualized the entire play within a US setting, Didym kept and even emphasized the Swedish origins of the play which gave him an opportunity to gently poke fun at romanticized notions of Sweden and, in turn, use this technique in a non-dogmatic way to encourage audiences to draw comparisons between Nordic whiteness and notions of French identity.

When *Invasion!* opened, France was in the midst of its renewed "débat autour de l'identité nationale", which had first been hinted at by then-presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy ahead of the national elections in 2007 and was officially initiated in late 2009 by the short-lived Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-development. Politicians, journalists, artists, and regular citizens (who were encouraged to participate by the launch of a specifically created website) engaged in a debate on the effects of a globalized economy and immigration, but also, more specifically, the position of Islam, the use of the hijab and niqab in public, the construction of minarets on

35 Didym quoted in Crézé 2012.

mosques, and how these related to and conflicted with French nationality and national values as well as the position of the French language.³⁶ The production managed to make a contribution to and theatrical intervention into this debate without hitting audiences over the head with a simplified message. Didym's cultural translation paid off and *Le Figaro* praised it: "It's funny, moving, jubilant, it's smart and political. This speaks to us about contemporary Europe today. Remarkable!"³⁷

Chicago 2013: Racial profiling

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha reflects on the condition of migrant workers and argues that they represent "part of the massive economic and political diaspora of the modern world [and] embody the Benjaminian 'present': that moment blasted out of the continuum of history."³⁸ An argument that is equally valid in relation to refugees and asylum seekers. In Scene 5 of *Invasion!*, we meet the Apple Picker who is working in an orchard while waiting for the Migration Agency to make a decision on his application for asylum. When he is finally called for an interview, an interpreter initially translates his background story in an accurate way, but increasingly deviates and freely improvises to portray the Apple Picker as an Islamic fundamentalist who is driven by hatred against the US, wants to exterminate all Jewish people, and plans to blow himself up in a suicide attack.

As indicated by Khemiri's stage directions, the Apple Picker is supposed to speak a foreign language, while the Translator speaks the respective official language of the country where the play is performed.³⁹ This stage direction was respected in Stockholm where Shebly Niavarani spoke Persian and in the Chicago production from 2013 where Kamal Hans spoke an imaginative mix of Arabic, Hindi and Urdu.⁴⁰ Even for audiences who have no knowledge of any of these languages, it soon becomes apparent that the Apple Picker is being deliberately misrepresented and misquoted. As he enthusiastically declares his discovery of Swedish pop music, the Translator makes up an imaginary background story of the Apple Picker's youth in extremist circles that nurtured him to become a terrorist. The chorus to ABBA's "Waterloo" is twisted into: "Before I strapped on the dynamite belt [...] I recorded a farewell film in which I praised the prophet Mohammed" [Fig. 3].⁴¹

Theatre scholar Yana Meerzon's work on exilic identity is helpful to tease out the implications of this scene. Building upon Rustom Bharucha's discussion of intercultural performance as a concept that is often predicated on western hegemony, Meerzon suggests to discuss *the exilic self* as a temporal and psychophysical venue where cultural contexts intersect. When applied to the discussion of exilic identity, the dynamic of the intracultural takes on a

36 Jeannot, Tomc and Totozani 2011; Martigny 2009.

37 Hélot 2010.

38 Bhabha 2004, 12.

39 Khemiri 2013, 37.

40 Bahow 2018, 46.

41 Khemiri 2013, 42.

different meaning: it identifies the exilic self as a territory of multiple, unmarked discourses, the discourses that are still waiting to be recognized, acknowledged, and brought into coherent dialogue with each other.⁴²



Figure 3: Isabel Munshi and Shebly Niavarani in Invasion!, © Kulturhuset Stadsteaterns pressarkiv; photo: Petra Hellberg

However, rather than encouraging such an intercultural and coherent dialogue – which Khemiri’s play and in fact his entire oeuvre seeks to invite – the Translator’s misconduct immediately forecloses this possibility. The challenge that the Apple Picker is faced with is that, no matter how enthusiastically he proclaims his love for his new home country, he is racially and religiously marked as a threat – an invader. The long history of Orientalism outweighs any individual attempt to shift the narrative and Abulkasem will forever remain the ‘Other’. Said has argued that western colonial representations actively block the possibility for Middle Eastern, African and Asian people to talk back on their own terms. Once the “Oriental” has been assigned their identity, they are no longer able nor allowed to speak on their own behalf.⁴³ In the play, this act of silencing is manifested by the Translator, who speaks for and over the Orientalized other. The exilic self’s own discourse will never be recognized and any attempt at a coherent dialogue with the host culture is perverted by stereotypical assumptions and manipulations. At the end of this abuse, the

⁴² Meerzon 2009, 83.

⁴³ Said 2003, 19-25.

confused Apple Picker is on the verge of internalizing the false identity as a religious fundamentalist that has been ascribed to him and anxiously wonders: “Abulkasem everywhere... Watching... Threatening... Maybe Abulkasem is me? Maybe Abulkasem is you?”⁴⁴

The unwillingness to let go or, at least, suspend prejudice became apparent after the play opened in Chicago where it was staged by the Silk Road Rising company in 2013. The ensemble was founded in 2002 as a reaction to the attacks on 9/11 and with the explicit intention to use performance as a means to combat the ensuing wave of anti-Arabic and Islamophobic sentiments. As the company’s agenda states: “Our vision was to counter negative images and stereotypes of Middle Eastern and Muslim peoples with representation grounded in authentic, multi-faceted, and patently *human* experiences.”⁴⁵ The production of *Invasion!* had a multi-racial cast and was directed by Anna Christina Bahow who later wrote about the production and its controversial reception in her master’s thesis, which offered a relevant account of culturally translating the play from its original Swedish context to the director’s own attempts to resist Orientalizing stereotypes in the United States.⁴⁶

Bahow’s version of *Invasion!* opened on 30 July 2013, a few short months after the April bombing of the Boston Marathon, which resulted in the death of three people and left several hundred people injured. This event cast a shadow over the reception of the production. On 6 August, the *Chicago Sun-Times* asked: “But despite Khemiri’s passion, those still thinking of the horrific terrorist attacks at the Boston Marathon might well be tempted to ask: What practical alternative to profiling would you suggest?”⁴⁷ That particular quote sparked a lively debate within Chicago’s theatre community which ultimately led to the production being extended from its initially planned one-month run by an additional two weeks. Due to the immediate reaction to the controversial piece, the internet edition of the newspaper published a truncated version of the review with the quote above removed and an editorial explanation that the original “contained language about racial profiling that may have been perceived as expressing a political opinion.”⁴⁸ Bahow reacted by organizing audience talks after each performance to stimulate a critical conversation around racism and Islamophobia.⁴⁹ On 20 August, Jamil Khoury, the co-founder and artistic director of Silk Road Rising wrote an op. ed. in the *Chicago Sun-Times* and, a week later, published it as a blog entry on the theatre company’s official homepage. His response made it painfully clear who benefitted from the practices of racial profiling: “Racial profiling operates under the presumed innocence of white people and the presumed guilt of people of color. It establishes tiers of citizenship based solely on appearance.”⁵⁰ Khoury further defended the necessity of the performing arts as a forum for debate, critical

44 Khemiri 2013, 44.

45 Silk Road Rising 2020, emphasis in original.

46 Bahow 2018.

47 Weiss quoted in Bahow 2018, 73.

48 Weiss 2013.

49 Bahow 2008, 72-75.

50 Khoury 2013a & 2013b.

reflection, and anti-racist activism,⁵¹ an assessment with which Khemiri would undoubtedly agree.

Conclusion: Nordic performance beyond the Nordic region

By way of conclusion, I wish to propose a thought experiment that is inspired by Mieke Bal's *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* and her suggestion to use the metaphor of travel for conducting critical cultural analysis. Let us imagine the notion of 'Nordic performance' as a travelling methodological concept to be engaged with and put to the test. Following Bal, I am more interested in understanding what such a concept can actually *do*, that is, its performative dimensions, as opposed to trying to define and fixate on its meaning.⁵² For the purpose of my argument, Khemiri's play *Invasion!* has served as a carefully chosen case study and throughout the article I have kept this object of analysis front and centre to serve as representative for the notion of Nordic performance. The study of various cultural translations of *Invasion!* hints at the benefits of imagining Nordic performance as a travelling concept. Such an approach advocates for and even necessitates an understanding of Nordic performance that stretches beyond any regional or geographical confines and instead emphasizes the transnational cultural flows and creative patterns of migration at stake.

Since 2006, *Invasion!* has managed to capture the imagination of international theatre artists and audiences. At heart here lies an intriguing paradox: On the one hand, the play is rooted in a distinctly Swedish cultural context with ample references to ABBA, summer cottages, and the nation's literary canon. On the other, the play aims to criticize Swedish and, by implication, Nordic whiteness, and it is precisely this challenge to hegemonic whiteness that has served to enhance the play's transnational appeal and relevance in a world post-9/11. In some instances, the foregrounding of the Swedish context encouraged audiences to draw comparisons to their own respective environment; in other instances, the very Swedishness of the play provided a hindrance to making it as viscerally effective as possible and was toned down as a result. What all the productions discussed here reveal is that Abulkasem is a malleable trope onto which theatre artists and reviewers can project different ideas. Depending on the time and place in which the play is performed, Abulkasem serves to explore and unmask social fears of Muslim men, racial profiling, increased immigration, rising nationalism, and a multi-ethnic and intercultural society.

The world is significantly more complex and culturally homogenous than right-wing conservatism or national populism seek to make us believe. *Invasion!* achieves its relevance precisely because it refuses to give into any national or regional limitations. I suggest, therefore, to see it is an invitation to conceptualize and approach Nordic theatre and performance as increasingly intercultural and motivated by political concerns whose relevance exceeds Swedish exceptionalism and Nordic whiteness. To do so, we must also be

51 For a longer discussion, see Bahow 2018, 72-77.

52 Bal 2002, 11.

willing to keep putting the notion of the Nordic to the test and problematizing its (explicit and implicit) racial and racist dimensions.

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