Introduction: On Theater and Exile: Toward a Definition of Exilic Theater as Performing Odyssey

When individuals come unstuck from their native land, they are called migrants. When nations do the same thing . . . the act is called secession. What is the best thing about migrant peoples and seceded nations? I think it is their hopefulness. . . . And what’s the worst thing? It is the emptiness of one’s luggage. I’m speaking of invisible suitcases, not the physical, perhaps cardboard, variety containing a few meaning-drained mementos: we have come unstuck from more than land. We have floated upwards from history, from memory, from Time.

(Rushdie, Shame, 85)

In the summer of 2008 I traveled to Holstebro, Denmark, the hometown of Eugenio Barba’s company, Odin Teatret. I joined the Odin’s actors and the Jasonite Family, an international group of thirty theater youngsters, at the Holstebro Festuge (Festive Week), a celebration of the people and the city of Holstebro. The 2008 Festuge opened with a meeting for the participants and the guests, who were asked to introduce themselves to the “family.” In my short speech, I said that I study the lives and the art of those theater makers who left their countries to find a new home in a different land. I explained that I was in Holstebro to visit Barba and the Odin Teatret, an example of a theater company working in exile. A young man approached me after the meeting. “I’m in exile!” he exclaimed. “Your project is about me. I’m from Greece and I left home when I was eighteen. I first moved to Paris, and then to London, now I’m here and hope to go to New York next fall. I’m an artist in exile, a theater maker who left his country to find a new home in a different land!” The boy was excited – we had found something in common. I smiled too: “No, I think you’re your own project, the theater of nomads . . .”

I begin the book with this anecdote to illustrate that in today’s globalized consciousness one’s attitude towards exile as banishment or as a necessity to leave one’s home, to seek refuge elsewhere, has changed. Today, the very
word *exile* often sounds like an invitation for a personal adventure. Taken as one’s personal quest and cultural expedition, such a view of exile refers to something that Julia Kristeva calls “the height of the foreigner’s autonomy” (*Strangers to Ourselves, 7*) or what I call nomadic consciousness, and thus makes the contemporary paradigm of exile quite different from that of the past. This rendering of exile as a new economic and political condition of today’s cosmopolitan world requires a proper description and examination of what the exilic state in its historical and modern interpretations entails, and a reminder that even the very globalized exile “cannot be treated as a mere metaphor,” a “somewhat facile argument that every intellectual is always already in a ‘spiritual exile’” (Boym, “Estrangement as a Lifestyle”, 243).

I dedicate this book, therefore, to the description and analysis of the life and art of those contemporary artists who by force or by choice find themselves on other shores, for whom the hardship of exile is both an existential ordeal and an opportunity to exercise their creative abilities, professional competence, and artistic resources. In the following pages, I intend to prove that the exilic challenge enables the émigré artist to (re)establish new artistic devices, new laws, and a new language of communication in both one’s everyday life and one’s artistic work. I offer this work as a reminder of the creative propensity and artistic success that the state of exile can give to an artist forced to deal with the typical exilic conditions of pain of displacement, nostalgia, and loss. The creative output and the fame of the selected artists (Joseph Brodsky, Eugenio Barba, Wajdi Mouawad, Josef Nadj, Derek Walcott, and Atom Egoyan), present a variety of “success stories” in exile, stories that challenge the view of the exilic state as one of mourning, depression, disbelief, and constant suffering.

I envision this study in response to the vast critical literature on exile that explores this condition as a state of mourning, nostalgia, displacement, and depression. Being an emigrant myself, I embarked on this research to find ways to speak about the complexity of the exilic condition that not only can manifest an exilic subject’s humiliation and challenge, but also can reveal one’s dignity and prepare one’s personal, economic, or artistic success. It is indeed true that only some exilic individuals (perhaps a bit luckier, perhaps more adaptable) make it in another land, but here I wish to address a wide range of exilic subjects, artists or not, to appreciate their hard work, to bring to mind their broken family ties, and to honor their hopes for success in the new lands. Those exilic artists who have succeeded and who have been heard in their new circumstances are my chosen subjects. Their stories are celebrated both by their respected communities and often back at their homes. These artists’ journeys set an example of how a misfortune of the exilic state can turn into the condition of personal and professional growth, the victory over oneself in the struggle with the new given circumstances and in the war with personal inflexibility.

Although the choice of six artists was partly arbitrary (all six chosen figures are male), it denotes an interesting question of gender-determined success in