Accented Actors: From Stage to Stages via a Convenience Store

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Manole explores how an exilic actor's foreign accent can evolve from a barrier to working in mainstage theatre to a site of simultaneously acknowledging and negotiating differences between natives and exiles. As a case study, she discusses the career of Nada Humsi, an Arab Canadian born in Syria, who reinvented herself as a hyphenated Arab-Canadian theatre artist. Manole emphasizes not only her professional but also her emotional journey, from a theatre star in her native Syria to a retail associate in a Canadian convenience store, to an actress and an Artistic Associate with the MT Space theatre company in Kitchener, and finally to one of the founders and the Artistic Producer of the Kitchener-Waterloo Arab Canadian Theatre/KW-ACT. The second part of the article analyzes Humsi's performance in Hazim Kamaledin's *Black Spring*, where she played both an Iraqi immigrant and an American journalist.

Manole explore comment l'accent étranger d'un comédien exilé peut évoluer et passer d'un obstacle au travail sur les scènes conventionnelles à un outil permettant de reconnaître et de négocier les différences entre natifs et exilés. Dans cette étude de cas, Manole étudie la carrière de Nada Humsi, une Canadienne d'origine arabe née en Syrie qui se réinventer en tant qu'artiste de théâtre arabo-canadienne. Manole s'intéresse non seulement au parcours professionnel de Humsi, mais aussi au cheminement intérieur de cette vedette de théâtre en Syrie devenue vendeuse dans un dépanneur au Canada avant de s'associer comme comédienne et adjointe artistique à la compagnie de théâtre MT Space de Kitchener, puis co-fonder la compagnie Kitchener-Waterloo Arab Canadian Theatre/KW-ACT, dont elle est la directrice artistique. En seconde partie de cet article, Manole analyse la prestation de Humsi dans la pièce *Black Spring* de Hazim Kamaledin, dans laquelle Humsi tenait les rôles d'une immigrée iraqienne et d'une journaliste américaine.

> For it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other.
> —Frantz Fanon

Accents and Prejudices

A friend who immigrated to Canada several decades ago shared with me an incident from the first year in her new country. At a public reception, a stranger abruptly criticized her pronunciation and asked her where she came from. Surprised but also hurt to be singled out as an alien, my friend proudly replied: "I came from Dublin (Ireland), where the best King's English is spoken." The stranger was unmistakably Canadian-*Canadian*, to use Ewa Mackey's term to describe those who are "unmarked, non-ethnic, and usually white" (20). The short

encounter reflects several ongoing debates regarding multiculturalism and the perception of immigrants in Canada, as well as the more general questions related to the status of present and former imperial languages: when more people speak English, for example, outside England, which regional and/or national variant is now the "real" one? The question my friend and many so-called First Generation Canadians, like myself, encounter on a daily basis also points to the accent's role in their daily lives.

When language functions not only as a means of communication, but also as a creative medium and/or tool, its ability to represent a specific cultural code and express an artist's political attitude increases. For example, literature written not in a postcolonial author's ancestral mother tongue, but in the former colonizer's language has been thoroughly analyzed from linguistic, political, and psychological perspectives (Gilbert and Tompkins, Ashcroft et al., Dharwadker, Marciniak). At the same time, scholars have paid special attention to exilic writers who use the languages of their adoptive countries; important examples include Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett (Esslin), Vladimir Nabokov (Kristeva), Joseph Brodsky (Meerzon), Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, V.S. Naipaul (Dascalu), and Eva Hoffman (Marciniak).

In contrast, this article focuses on the spoken mode of language and particularly on the impact of a foreign accent on the careers and performance styles of professional actors who live outside their home countries and do not work in their mother tongues. The term "accent" is commonly understood as a "distinctive way of pronouncing a language, especially one associated with a particular country, area, or social class" ("Accent"). Marvin Carlson reminds us that "anyone with an ear trained to notice verbal distinctions is aware of what linguistic theory stresses, that no one speaks without an accent, even if that accent (as is almost the never the case) is perfectly attuned to the standard speech of the surrounding culture" (11). In many countries, a unanimously accepted "standard, neutral, and value-free" (Naficy 23) accent is usually disseminated through the newscasts of the main and usually state-funded national television and radio networks, the public education system, and mainstream theatre. In contrast, even though all other accents are equally important from a linguistic point of view, they have different cultural, social, and/or emotional value: "Depending on their accents, some speakers may be considered regional, local yokel, vulgar, ugly, or comic, whereas others may be thought of as educated, upper-class, sophisticated, beautiful and proper" (23).

In this study, however, I only refer to the accent as a national identity marker, which signals the distinction between natives and non-natives. As Murray J. Munro[1] concludes:

> It is now widely accepted that the acquisition of a second language after early childhood almost inevitably results in speech that differs from that of native speakers [. . .] largely because knowledge of the sound system of the first language (Ll) influences the perception and production of the phonetic patterns of the second. (38)

Research indicates that people are very sensitive to accent differences and can perceive a foreign pronunciation in less than a second (39). Thus, the accent remains "one of the most intimate and powerful markers of group identity and solidarity, as well as of individual difference and personality" (Naficy 23).

Even in a country like Canada, which has a diverse population and officially celebrates multiculturalism, an accent can act as one of the characteristics, "along with skin color, dress, or mannerisms, that may be used to identify someone as 'foreign' or 'different' and that can serve as an excuse for discriminatory treatment" (Munro 39). This can range from misjudging the non-native speakers' personality, "e.g. kindness and sociability" (39), to actual infringements of human rights, such as harassment and discrimination in employment (38). In addition to this kind of subjective and/or local prejudice, further misconceptions may be also generated by the beliefs in the profound connection between languages and nationhood (Anderson 67-82).

From this perspective, Frantz Fanon argues that to speak means "to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of civilization" (18). Hence, the foreign accent may sometimes alert the natives of the danger for their culture to be appropriated, hybridized, and/or displaced by the newcomers. In contrast, Edward Said identifies an interesting paradox: "Modern Western culture is in large part the work of exile, émigrés, refugees" (173), whereas Yana Meerzon argues 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" (2). Without discounting the hardships of the exilic experience,[2] Meerzon challenges "the view of the exilic state as one of mourning, depression, disbelief, and constant suffering" and rather sees it as "the condition of personal and professional growth" (2).

This article explores how an actor's foreign accent can outgrow its perception as a barrier to working in mainstage English Canadian theatre, an expression of threatening, invasive, and often self-diminishing alienhood, as well as a strong drive towards experimentation beyond language. Rather than an inhibitor, a foreign accent can become a means for simultaneously acknowledging, negotiating, and integrating difference on stage and in the audience. I argue then that it also might be employed and perceived as a performance sign (or a *floating signifier*[3]) that gestures toward a type of globalization in theatre that does not strive for homogenization and hierarchy, but diversity and equality. Accordingly, accented actors may evolve from being perceived and even perceiving themselves as displaced/misplaced outsiders to gaining (or regaining) the status of transnational artists who feel at home on any stage in the world, Canada included.

In the first section of this article, I discuss the use of text, language, and accent in dramatic theater. In the second part, I briefly look at the work of Portuguese-born Aida Jordão and Croatian-born Cynthia Ashperger (the latter also featured in the Forum section of this issue), two Canadian actresses and academics. As a case study, I discuss in greater depth the career of Nada Humsi, an award-winning theatre professional who was born in Syria and established herself as a successful and innovative artist there before immigrating to Canada to continue her career. The final purpose of this article is to initiate an academic dialogue on the theory of (foreign) accents in English Canadian theatre.

Language and Accent in Performance

In *Speaking in Tongues: Language at Play in the Theatre*, Marvin Carlson asserts that modern linguistic theory may have had the most direct influence on theatre through the recognition that "each language, like the concept of language itself, is a social construction, and that languages on the stage as elsewhere are recognized and coded as languages by their employment of features culturally related to that construction rather than by comprehension or noncomprehension" (9). Theatre itself is then perceived as "a communication system" (3), presented with the "challenge for a rethinking of theatrical language and of the various ways that language can function in the theatre" (1). Drawing on J.L. Austin's theory of language as a mode of social action and his emphasis on the total speech situation, Keir Elam also argues that dramatic discourse is "a network of complementary and conflicting illocutions and perlocutions: in a word, linguistic *interaction*, not so much descriptive as performative" (159). As a result, the "language of the drama calls for the intervention of the actor's body in the completion of its meaning" (142).

This perspective positions the performer as the first reader of the play. As Patrice Pavis argues, the actor's function is to stake out "choices of signification: in these open [dramatic] texts which are submitted to his understanding, he is called upon to recognize an order, to make a choice between interpretations, to write a 'text within a text,' to play off the latent meanings" (79). Beyond the words' meaning (the "signified," from a semiotic perspective), the actors' live presence on stage includes them in the semanticization process as "the very *transmitters* or even, in certain performances, the *sources* of communication" (Elam 42). According to Elam, even in mimetic theatre the message (the dramatic text) inherently draws attention to the channel of communication (the performer): "The actor's voice and body, considered as signal-transmitters, are rendered pertinent to the text in their materiality, since his personal stature, vocal qualities and physical idiosyncrasies, however incidental to the drama, will influence the spectator's perception and decoding of messages" (43). Audience members are required to complete the communication process by deciphering it, thus becoming active participants in the speech acts and the production of meaning. The text-actor-spectator *ménage à trois* also reiterates one of the ongoing questions regarding live theatre: "Who is it who actually performs the illocution: the dramatis persona or the actor who utters his words?" (169). The possible answers point out one more semiotic level of live dramatic theatre. When the emphasis is on the character, like in realistic theatre, the performer openly functions as a floating signifier who lends her body to the character and agrees with temporarily suspending her own identity. In turn, the emphasis on the actor, in epic and postmodern theatre, positions the character as a floating signifier whose meaning is finalized through performance. However, the actor's real-life identity remains usually muted. In other words, even Brechtian-style performers or those acting out their own life stories in solo shows are no more than *characters performing characters* in a play-within-a play. An exilic performer, however, cannot achieve semiotic neutrality on stage: "When an emigrant is invited to perform in a language among actors who are native speakers of it, his/her *accented behavior*—not only speech but also movement, gestures, and kinetic manifestations—illuminates his/her stage presence" (Meerzon 54).

The marks of foreignness also activate the metalinguistic function of theatrical communication, even if a specific production does not reflect upon language as an object of

discourse. According to Elam, this often has "the effect of foregrounding language as object or event by bringing it explicitly to the audience's attention in its pragmatic, structural, stylistic or philosophical aspects" (156). Not only on stage but also in everyday life, a foreign accent draws attention to the physical aspects of spoken language, while acting as a national identity marker. This implicitly restores the metalinguistic function of communication that allows the participants "to check up whether they use the same code" (Jacobson, qtd. in Elam 154). No matter *what* a foreigner says, *how* it sounds but not what she says becomes more important for her listeners on the emotional level. Her accent signals alienhood, which, according to Katarzyna Marciniak is "always envisioned as the opposition to the self and conceptualized as undesirable difference" (9). Like immigrants in general, performers who speak with a foreign accent may find themselves stereotyped as representatives of a different culture and national identity.

The opposite also stands true. Drawing on Jerry Blunt, Carlson defines stage dialect as "a normal dialect altered as needed to fit the requirements of theatrical clarity and dramatic interpretation" (11). It presupposes the accent of the standard language variant in a national culture, which is perceived as "'normal' speech, speech 'without and accent'" (11). As Carlson explains, especially in the classic and neo-classical comic theatre, "the speaker of the foreign language or dialect is marked as a figure of ridicule, or at least condescension" (10). Yet, her mother tongue, likely unknown to the audience, is not used in the representation of foreignness on stage. Instead, the actor skilfully produces a foreign accent that is no more than a code (11) or, from a semiotic perspective, a signifier. As such, it requires the audience's suspension of disbelief. Nevertheless, as Angela Pao also argues, the foreign accent as part of the stage dialect in realistic theatre is developed with no significant engagement of its source culture. Hence, it "carries the potential for ethnic stereotyping" (qtd. in Carlson 12). In reverse, the foreign accent of non-native actors often stereotypes them as generic aliens and hence keeps them on the margins of mainstream theatre production.

One more paradox occurs: whereas having a foreign accent is often perceived as problematic in mainstream English Canadian and Quebecois theatre, an actor's ability to produce accents is a well-sought skill. Voice/dialect coaches, such as Eric Armstrong, note that actors are now expected to know not only standard accents of English, such as American and Asian, but also New York, Pittsburgh, Southern Illinois, and, respectively, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean; because "people are becoming much more aware of accent and dialect because we're living in a much more global market [. . .] So our ears have become attuned to a higher standard of precision and accuracy" (qtd. in Ross). However, as Colleen Ross notes, there are "multiple challenges in getting actors to sound like they're from a different place and time," especially when they need to speak in a foreign language. Not only do they have to deal with distinguishing sounds they are not used to, gaining what Ross calls "phonemic awareness," but they also have to produce them. Armstrong explains this difficulty: "Part of it is oral gymnastics, making their tongues, lips, jaws go into new places" (qtd. in Ross). Yet, putting on an accent is increasingly rendered as a mandatory acting skill: "From *Sophie's Choice* to *Out of Africa*, *Evil Angels* and the recent *Julie and Julia*, [Meryl] Streep proved it could be done and encouraged actors to be brave and do it as well. [. . .] Her take was: You've got the hats, the clothes, the sets, how can you not speak as if you're from that place and time?" (Ross).

Responding to this need, Paul Meier established in 1997 the first online International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA) at the University of Kansas, providing actors with "primary-source recordings of English dialects and accents as heard around the world" (Meier). IDEA has since proved useful in many other fields, such as international corporations "helping customer-service personnel become familiar with their customers' accents and dialects" (Meier). This initiative reaffirms not only the growing relevance of accents in any realistic form of representation (television, film, theatre), but also the greater need for tolerance and flexibility in everyday life.

English Canada, however, sees a proliferation of "accent reduction" business,[4] from flyers posted on the Toronto streets advertising private tutors and/or coaches to professionally established companies. Columbia Speech and Language Services, for example, was founded by award-winning speech-language pathologist Wendy Duke and has offered foreign Accent Reduction courses in Vancouver since 1987. The range of therapy services offered (for stuttering, aphasia, brain injury rehabilitation, autism, Parkinson's, and other communication disorders) is consistent with Munro's conclusion that foreign accents have been often perceived as "a type of speech defect" (40). Even more, Columbia Speech and Language Services does not target performers, but "busy professionals, managers, and students" and promises that learning the pronunciation and intonation of Canadian English can have positive results in day-to-day activities. The clinic's success, combined with testimonials from its clients, reaffirms the importance of reducing one's accent in order to succeed in English Canadian job market: "This program reduced my accent a lot! I have more confidence than before when talking to people" (Columbia).

My own foreign (Romanian) accent has helped me become aware of an immigrant's everyday "need for negotiation of meaning and constant code-switching, as well as an ongoing fear of being 'lost in translation'" (Meerzon 4). This experience has been instrumental to my investigations of the roles foreign accents can play in making and watching theatre productions featuring immigrant theatre artists.

Accented Actors: In Canada and Abroad

In her ironic and highly insightful comparison of human and extraterrestrial aliens as depicted in *Men in Black*, Marciniak argues that, "the border-crossing creatures are already positioned outside the space of the privileged human 'I'" (4). The declassifying process that occurs for most displaced persons is more apparent in the case of actors. To them, it not only affects their personal identities, but also their professional selves. The actor's accent names the character's voice "the basis of an auditive semiotics, it separates it from meaning, conceiving of the sign-making as a gesticulation of the voice [. . .] It is not 'I' but 'it' that is speaking, namely through/as a machinized composition" (Lehmann 149). Often, accented actors move away from text-based theatre towards non-verbal performance (Meerzon 5) or at least performance in which "breath, rhythm and the present actuality of the body's visceral presence take precedence over the logos" (Lehmann 145). These choices are determined by the relatively common rejection of foreign accents in mainstream dramatic theatre, as well as by the artists' occasional self-censorship and sense of rightful marginalization. For example, the world-famous Serbian-born performance artist Marina Abramović and her

German-born collaborator Ulay (Uwe Laysiepen) started their non-verbal experiments before immigrating, as well as before meeting each other and working together abroad. Once in the US, however, they have felt that their initial stylistic preference has become their only option: "for non-English speaking people, as we are, the term 'performance' exists only in the visual arts context" (Abramović 19). Eugenio Barba, another world-renowned exilic theatre artist, explains that Odin Teatret was "excluded often from using texts, because it would not be appropriate and indeed rather *grotesque* if an actor is reciting a very tragic, pathetic monologue with a heavy accent and no diction!" (Barba, qtd. in Milosevic 293, emphasis added).

When accented performers choose to work in mainstream dramatic theatre in their new countries, they are usually forced to accept ghettoization in "ethnic" characters. For example, Cynthia Ashperger ("Cintija Ašperger" in the original spelling) earned a prominent place in Croatian theatre and film of the 1980s, playing leading roles such as Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Lady Ann in *Richard III*, and Mrs. Peachum in *The Threepenny Opera*. Since immigrating to Canada in 1986, however, she has faced discrimination in mainstream theatre casting practices. Thus, she has discovered herself identified as "an audible minority actor" (Ashperger) with access to a limited range of characters and unable to compete on equal terms with her native-born fellow actors: "I would say 98% of the roles that are available out there don't have an accent." With one exception, which I discuss later, Ashperger has never played "Canadian-*Canadian*" characters in mainstage theatre productions and/or films. Unlike in her home country and despite her skills, her foreign accent has also denied her access to leading characters in classical plays. Instead, she has been usually typecast on mainstream stages: "When I first came to Canada I expected to play Hedda Gabler and Helena and all the good parts. I CAN play these parts well. I did play Ophelia for Tibor Feheregehazy in Saskatoon. Yet mostly I was cast in roles of immigrants or foreigners" (Ashperger).

Aida Jordão encountered similar challenges, as she too has been perceived "not as an actor but as an ethnicity" (251). Portuguese-born and Canadian-raised, she grew up accustomed to "non-traditional casting (also known by the problematic term, colour-blind casting)" (250). At the Oakwood Collegiate Institute in Toronto and the Drama Studio in London, England, which she attended, students were cast regardless of their nationality, gender, and/or race. Thus, Jordão was more than surprised that her "slight European accent and a racially denoted 'olive' skin complexion" (251) drastically limited her acting possibilities in Toronto theatre:

> Oh, the aggravation of being a Portuguese-Canadian actress and waiting for the role of The Great Portuguese Cleaning Lady to be written so I could appear on a Canadian mainstage. In the meantime, I played Italian and Latin American cleaning ladies, lesbian cleaning ladies, and a Victorian ghost cleaning lady. (Jordão 250)

As she points out in her essay "Performing the Portuguese Cleaning Lady: Subverting Gender, Class and Ethnic Typecasting on the Canadian Stage," real-life Canadians have a multitude of cultural backgrounds, races, and accents. And yet, their embodiments in mainstage productions continue to be stereotypically white and with an English-Canadian accent, consistent with previous definitions of Canadian identity that Jordão argues are now

outdated: "The cultural nationalism that created the marvellous theatre of the seventies, the theatre that fought the colonizing imports from the U.K. or the identity-engulfing dramatic productions of the U.S., is what now strangles our contemporary theatre. Is this why a Canadian of Portuguese background cannot play a Prairie girl?" (251).

Numerous theorists and historians come to a similar conclusion but from different perspectives. According to Eva Mackey, for example, Pierre Trudeau's 1970s policy of "Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework" failed to integrate a diverse population into a new model of national identity. Instead, it perpetuated "acceptable forms of difference" (66) and implicitly reinforced "the idea of British Canadians as the 'norm,' in relation to 'multicultural' Canadians" (67), the latter including Aboriginal Canadians and often French Canadians. However, this discrepancy between real-life multiculturalism and artificial linguistic homogeneity in mainstage theatre, where most (and often all) characters speak with Canadian accent, may be explained as the persistence of a tradition that goes well beyond national history and prejudices. Drawing on Crystal's *Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*, Carlson argues that actors have been expected since classical times to reinforce the official cultural model and use a "'stage language' [. . .] generally understandable [to] its audience but distinctly different from what they actually spoke" (7). Whereas jargons, dialects, and sociolets are increasingly more acceptable in mainstream arts and in English Canadian theatre, foreign accents generally remain a "deal breaker," as the experience of many immigrant actors has proven. This idiosyncrasy may also signal what Aparna Dharwadker identifies as "the gap between Canada's self-image and immigrant reality" (144). From Munro's perspective, this can be considered a case of "accent discrimination," similar to the "human rights cases involving language-related issues in Canada [. . .] where acoustic speech patterns (i.e., pronunciation) are implicated in a claim of discrimination" (Munro 41). As she also notes, most instances are not formally reported and/or are resolved without the implication of a judicial body. Those presented to the Human Rights Commissions usually "pertain to employment, tenancy, or the provision of services" (41). To my knowledge, however, there are no cases of actors filing official complaints of accent discrimination against theatre companies or casting agencies in Canada.

Like many other exilic performers, Ashperger and Jordão have found their own alternatives to being stereotyped on stage. Ashperger has produced her own work, such as *Out of Spite, Tales of Survival from Sarajevo* (1995), and *A Summer's Day* (2009); worked with other immigrant artists such as Silvija Jestrovic (between 2000 and 2005) and Zorana Kydd (2000); became a professor of acting, an expert in Michael Chekhov's acting technique, and a successful director in alternative Canadian theatre. Jordão has chosen to subvert ethnic stereotypes by "creating independent productions, working in alternative or experimental theatre, or directing popular theatre with community groups" (250), as well as with the Company of Sirens and Nightwood Theatre. These companies have sought to counteract "the class determinism and gender/ethnic typecasting on the English-Canadian stage" (Jordão 249), which reflect in fact what Wenona Giles identifies as "the gendered multicultural immigration and citizenship practices of Canada" (qtd. in Jordão 251).

The issue of foreign accents on stage may, however, be a two-way street. Jordão and the companies she has worked with reclaimed the Canadian real-life multiculturalism on stage against "the stereotype of the immigrant speaking in broken English" (Jordão 254). In

contrast, years of being type-cast have led Ashperger to what she self-ironically identifies as her Stockholm syndrome: "It ingrained in me a belief that my presence on the stage must be explained by my 'otherness' or I will not be trusted. It is a very difficult position for an actor to be in and I think it is false thinking born out of fear" (Ashperger). This became evident when rehearsing the part of Canadian-*Canadian* feminist professor Ramona in Nightwood Theatre's production of *Who Killed Snow White* by Judith Thompson. Although the author specifically recommended her for the role and Ashperger was delighted to play it, she became concerned during rehearsals:

> I started to worry that if my accent wasn't explained the familial relationships will come into question; so, Judith added a plot point that I lived with my father in Slovenia during my formative years and therefore have a different accent than my mother in the play who was played by Caroline Hetherington. It is interesting that it was I and not Judith who insisted on this. (Ashperger)

Her reaction highlights how, in an ethnically diverse country, an immigrant's need to be "like everybody else" may move and/or expand from the *visual* to the *auditory*. When faced with the impossibility to blend in, she may perceive herself as an "accident" that needs to be explained in a host culture in which she often feels not only *displaced*, but also *misplaced*. In other words, she becomes "more Catholic than the Pope," in this specific case, more Canadian than some of the Canadian-*Canadians* in the way they "sound" on stage. Thus the accent plays the role of the insurmountable marker of foreignness. For Ashperger, this encounter between an immigrant actress and a Canadian-born character has had a cathartic outcome, restoring her sense of identity as "an actor capable of playing any part." As I show in the next section of this article, this is how Nada Humsi has always perceived herself.

A Case Study: From an Audible Minority to a Transnational Performer

Nada Humsi's status in Canada is consistent with what Meerzon identifies as the condition of a person who has "the option of choosing between staying and leaving, between going back and making it in the new lands, [. . .who] often seeks a state of displacement and liminality, those cracks between social systems at home and abroad, in order to trigger one's creative potential" (132). Humsi was born in Damascus, Syria and, during a visit in Canada in September 1999, she decided to apply for the permanent resident visa. She had several reasons for doing so. On the one hand, she wanted to be reunited with her family, half of which was already living here. On the other hand, she envisioned new opportunities to develop her career. However, her choice had unforeseen consequences.

Despite her legal right to return to her home country any time she wanted, Humsi experienced her voluntary immigration as a painfully exilic state: "I always have my old world inside me, old poetry, old smells. The way I grew up, inch by inch, with all the details that made me a whole. I brought all those inches to a new life. And I set them up here and they still have DNA in them" (Humsi, Phone interview). In addition, she had to understand and adapt to a society that differs considerably from Syria as well as Japan, where she lived for a while, and the other

countries she has visited: "I had to learn everything. I didn't know how to take the bus; I didn't know how to open the door; I didn't know how to dial 1-888-ROGERS1" (Phone interview). In addition, the different social codes have often made her to feel anxious, frustrated, and/or mistreated. One of Humsi's casual examples reminds us that the devil is in the details, especially when it comes to etiquette: "I feel insulted if I step into a store and the sales person says 'Hello there.' In Arabic we say 'Hello Madam'" ("Letter to Someone").

As one of the many immigrants who have to express themselves in a second, if not third or fourth language Humsi is also susceptible to being misunderstood. For example, her attempt to clarify over email her position during a board meeting unfortunately led to more tension on both sides: "I printed our emails to prove to everyone that I was polite with you and I didn't use a harsh language" ("Letter to Someone"). She often finds herself "explaining and apologizing" to some of her Canadian-born colleagues and fellow citizens in situations in which she feels that she has done nothing wrong or that she was the one actually treated unfairly (Phone interview).

The incidents Humsi and other immigrants still experience on a daily basis recall some of the statements Mackey recorded in the late 1990s, which "illustrate the ways in which tolerance can and does shift easily into intolerance and a defence of white unmarked Canadian identity" (105). Indeed, Humsi often feels singled out as an alien: "I was targeted and hurt for just being an immigrant who doesn't have all the rights like the Canadian-born citizens [. . .] we, immigrants cannot feel or express ourselves as much as we want, but as much as others want us to feel and express" ("Letter to Someone"). Thus, she worries that her integrity is being threatened: "Who am I to express my feelings just like any other human being?" ("Letter to Someone"). Similar to some of the English-Canadians Humsi has encountered, a number of the people Mackey interviewed also expected the so-called "new comers" to forgo their cultural and ethnic identities at the border: "It doesn't matter that you originated from China or Japan, you are now a Canadian" (104). In contrast, Humsi's emotional journey has led her to an opposite perspective of the day-to-day Canadian multiculturalism: "I decided that I will tell my word as well, and share the idea that integration is not only the responsibility of immigrants but it is also the responsibility of the all. We all are humans, and we are equal" ("Letter to Someone"). From a more general point of view, one could only hope that attitudes like this would make multicultural local and global communities of equal people possible one day.

On a professional level, Humsi's journey is characteristic of the destiny of exilic theatre and performance artists who attempt and eventually succeed in continuing their careers in their adopted countries. As Meerzon notes in her analysis of Barba's and Joseph Nadj's works, "once in a new land, a political exile, a refugee, or a self-imposed emigrant, similarly to any displaced person, faces a need for searching and choosing strategies of survival" (126). In the Canadian context, Humsi also experienced the paradoxical consequences of official multiculturalism, which, as I already mentioned, is accused by some of its critics of reinforcing "the idea of a core unmarked white settler Canadian national culture" (Mackey 94). However, Humsi's personal beliefs and the experimental nature of her work have also helped her position herself on a trajectory that allows accented actors to free themselves from being perceived as audible minorities and to reclaim themselves as transnational performers.

Before immigrating to Canada, Humsi established herself as an award-winning performing artist[5] in the Arab world. She successfully worked in every theatre genre but mostly with directors who "rejected the 'walk-and-talk' conventional style and experimented with physicality" (Humsi, Phone Interview). She has also been considered a pioneer in her own right. The first female professional mime in Syria, Humsi wrote and performed *The Option* (1988), a monodrama directed by Riad Ismat. The show toured Syria, Egypt, Japan, and the United States, representing her consistent attempt to create theatre that transcends borders and national differences. In 1991, she established a Drama Centre in Yamato-Machi, Japan, where she taught and performed mime. In addition, Humsi has given theatre and mime workshops for children and youth in Syria (1986-2005), Japan (1990-1996), United Arab Emirates (1997), Lebanon (1997), Canada (2000-2015), Palestine (2012), and Morocco (2014). Her artistic and geographical trajectory validates John Lie's distinction between "*inter*national migration" and "*trans*national diaspora," between "a radical, and in many cases a singular, break from the old country to the new nation" and, respectively, "multiple, circular, and return migrations" (qtd. in Dharwadker 137).

Given her achievements, Humsi was confident and full of hope when she immigrated to Canada: "I was an established artist and I highly respected myself, my wings were broader than the eagle's ones. But my wings started to get cut intensely in Canada" (Humsi, "Letter to Someone"). Like many other theatre professionals who decide to relocate to another country, her initial plan was to further her career on the same path, "to create non-verbal monodramas and tour them in many, many countries" (Humsi, Phone interview). However, Humsi felt it was her duty to accept making sacrifices while getting to know her new country and theatre world: "I worked as a sales person in a convenience store and as a massage therapist, while trying to learn the everyday life in Canada. I also took many workshops, trying to educate myself about Canadian theatre" (Phone interview). No job offers followed, forcing her to acknowledge the de-classifying process immigration unexpectedly put her through. As an artist who was "raised to think that art is a prophecy, it has a big message," Humsi has increasingly felt useless: "I was left alone with my messages" (Phone interview).

Meerzon discusses two different ways of successfully reinventing one's professional homeland in exile, "through the creation of one's own floating island of a newly constructed artistic community, as in Barba's case, or by preserving the memory of the exile's native land within the territory of the dancer's body, as in Nadj's case" (126). The artistic survival strategy Humsi eventually developed is an interesting hybrid of these two models. Even though she did not start her own theatre company initially, in 2008 she joined MT Space in Kitchener, Ontario, a company founded in 2004 by another immigrant, the Lebanon-born director Majdi Bou-Matar. Since then, Humsi has participated in most of the company's productions and feels that she has finally reclaimed her status as a theatre artist.[6] In 2013 Humsi became one of the founders and the co-artistic director of the Kitchener-Waterloo Arab Canadian Theatre (KW-ACT). In 2014, she wrote and directed for this company *My Name is Dakhel Faraj—The Life Story of a Refugee from Iraq*, based on her interviews with Faraj, who has also made his home in the same city.

As a performer, Humsi was able to preserve and express through her body the memory of her native land and culture. When embodying Arab women in the MT Space productions,

she not only attempts to reconnect with her roots and culture, but also to give them a voice in a Western context and challenge popular stereotypes. This attempt is not singular in Canada. As Jasmin Zine states, "the complexities of how Muslim women are constituted within the nation as victims, outlaws, and outsiders and how they construct their own narratives of political and spiritual engagement as Muslims and as Canadians within the public and political sphere in ways that challenge and disrupt these same archetypes" (40) is part of an on-going negotiation of their individual and collective, as well as personal and professional identities.

Given the diverse nature of her professional activities, Humsi's journey offers an interesting example of asserting an Arab woman as a hyphenated theatre artist, who is not only bridging two cultures, but also functioning as an agent of globalization. She has started performing regularly in English for Canadian and international audiences, which affirmed her as identity as an "accented actor" who promotes theatre "as a creative art and as a reflection of human culture" (Humsi, Phone interview).

Black Spring, Floating Accents

I met Humsi in 2006, when she performed several characters in MT Space's production of *Me...Here. Me... Happy*, my one-act play about immigrants' attempts to understand and adapt to their new life in Canada. Since then, we have worked together on other projects, and I've also seen her in several MT Space productions. *Black Spring*, which I saw in 2013, is particularly relevant to this article, given its linguistic and national doubleness at both written and performance levels.

Written and directed by Arab-Belgian playwright Hazim Kamaledin, *Black Spring* was co-produced by MT Space and TG Cactusbloem (Belgium) in Kitchener, Ontario. In this show, Humsi performed the two speaking characters: American journalist Hillary Ridders and Iraqi writer Ishtar Kamaledin. The play challenges the stereotypical representation of Arabs as both victims and aggressors, and likewise challenges the depiction of Americans as saviours. It starts with the accidental meeting of Hillary and Ishtar, neighbours in a New York apartment building in 2000, when Hillary leaves her door open and Ishtar bursts into her apartment. Ishtar tells the story of the looting of the Iraqi National Museum in Baghdad during the early days of the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq, when, "for the simple primitive pleasure of destruction" (Kamaledin, *Black Spring* 1), many artefacts from the museum were stolen or destroyed in a few hours. A 3500-year-old statue of Ishtar, the Babylonian Goddess of fertility, love, war, and sex was one of them. In *Black Spring*, Ishtar's erratic behaviour makes it hard to assess if she is the realistic embodiment of the manic depressed Iraqi writer and political refuge Ishtar Kamaledin, whose last name (the same as the playwright's) we learn only in the very last lines of the play, or the embodiment of "Ishtar, Goddess of Forth Babylonian era" (Kamaledin, *Black Spring* 5), as she introduces herself at one point.

According to the playwright's statement, the character is also his allegorical alter-ego: "The name 'Ishtar Kamaledin' is no coincidence. I am referring to my own death ... or destiny. The personage has to do with myself in many ways" ("*Black Spring* Names"). After the fall of the dictatorship, the playwright returned to Iraq hoping to be part of the

country's rebuilding but he was shocked by what was happening: "I saw that the Americans were collaborating with the same guard of Saddam Hussein. They have given them priority everywhere, while the most exiles were excluded" ("*Black Spring* Names"). He struggled in vain for two years to make himself useful and then decided to go back to Belgium and "bury the rest of my life there" ("*Black Spring* Names"). As an allegory of this kind of defeat, the character sharing his last name literally dies trying to protect her culture against the Western liberators and local thieves: "Ishtar Kamaledin the Iraqi writer, who opposed the Saddam Regime, was killed by Americans in the National Iraqi Museum in Baghdad" (*Black Spring* 11). However, in *Black Spring,* Kamaledin points out that we all share the responsibility for her death: "Ishtar is here. Buried in this graveyard. You [the audience members] are sitting on her grave" (11). After Humsi cheerfully walked each of us at the beginning of the show to what appeared to be wooden boxes used as seats, it was indeed chilling to discover at the end that we have been sitting on funeral stones.

The second character, Hillary Ridders, represents not only the American saviours/invaders unaware of the culture of the country they are allegedly trying to liberate, but also a Westerner's attempt to understand a non-Western civilization and publicly share its experience. The postmodern structure of the text was further deepened in the MT Space/TG Cactusbloem production, framed as the launch of Ridders's new book, *The Lady of Babylon*, which depicted the same events narrated in the play. Through a small note inserted in the program, the fictional Publisher informed the audience that the event would start shortly and the author would greet us personally. While waiting to be allowed in the performance area, we could turn to the video monitors installed in the hallway to watch a television producer interviewing Hillary about her book and the events in Iraq. The newscast was blatantly American, given the look of the studio, the style of reporting, the accent, or rather the lack of accent of the show's host and the journalist's English-sounding name. The emphasis added in the live performance has in fact further developed the play's treatment of language as a code, as Jakobson and others identify it, as a written and auditory representative of a culture (*Language*). Starting with the pre-recorded television show, Kamaledin ironically draws attention towards the differences between the Western and the Eastern civilizations, as well as towards the Americans' infamous lack of knowledge about anything but themselves. The host has never heard of the Babylonian goddess and is unable to spell her name:

Interview between Ishtar and journalist

JOURNALIST: What is gone?

ISHTAR KAMALEDIN: عشتار The Lady of Babylon [. . .]

JOURNALIST: Ah. And who is she... he?

ISHTAR KAMALEDIN: She is a goddess from the Sumerian period. That's about 3500bc. It's a very important statue.

JOURNALIST: Can you spell the name please, one more time?

(Kamaledin, *Black Spring* 2-3)

Even more relevant, Chief Executive General Hans Bosvelt who actually contributes to the salvation and restauration of the statue has a similar reaction:

GENERAL BOSVELT: What did we find?
JOURNALIST: عشتار The Lady of Babylon.
GENERAL BOSVELT (While he is looking in a paper):
The Lady of... Can you spell it?

(2-3)

The relevance of accented speech as a marker of cultural and national differences is further amplified in the script by emphasizing how difficult it is also for Hillary to pronounce Arabic names: "My ability to memorize is weak and my tongue is heavy, I speak very slowly and I swallow characters. [. . .] I still struggle with pronouncing and memorizing their names" (Kamaledin, *Black Spring* 3, 10). However, the playwright does not take sides but chooses to emphasize the tragedy of ordinary people's death of the hands of both local and foreign aggressors from a perspective that is both diachronic and synchronic. Kamaledin's involvement is not only political but also personal: "In the text you will find also the name of my father, my mother. The rest of the names were mixed between best friends and well known Iraqis which I gave them my family name as well" ("*Black Spring* Names"). The names Ishtar passes down to Hillary in an attempt to preserve memory belong to mythological victims, as well as to people killed by Saddam's regime, the American soldiers, or both:

> My brother Gilgamesh killed my brother Ankido, Saleh Alsayegh disappeared by Gilgamesh, Hashem Kamaledin misterios [sic] death, Americans in Iraq. Hadi Almahdi, raped and killed, American soldiers, Zaki Khairi, poisoned, Americans, Muhammad Baqer Alsader, disappeared, Saddam. Amer Abdullah Kamaledin, killed, Americans. Amida Athby Haloob; killed, Americans. Hazim Kamaledin, killed, sons of Saddam. Naziha Al Dulaimy; killed, Americans. Maher Kazem tortured and killed, both Americans and Saddam. (Kamaledin, *Black Spring* 6-7)

In turn, Ishtar's bilingual lines, such as "عشتار The Lady of Babylon" (Kamaledin 2), and the character's ability to speak both languages without effort, draw attention to the non-Western perspective of foreignness. Arabic also reframes *Black Spring* not only as a play against tyranny and neo-imperialism, but also as a text about an Iraqi immigrant in the US. In her article about Canadian plays that reenact immigrant experiences, Julie Byczynski argues that including sections of untranslated dialogue "can subvert the authority of the dominant language of the theatre (and of culture) from within by making the theatre stage one's own, by establishing an unmistakable presence of minority language and culture" (68). Kamaledin, however, offers almost simultaneous translations and ironically emphasizes the Americans' inability to pronounce or understand foreign words. In contrast, and despite her predictable alien accent, Ishtar presents no difficulties in speaking English. In the play's American context, the inclusion of Arabic subverts the position of English as dominant, while it also renders the two languages as linguistic and cultural equals. In MT Space's Canadian English-speaking context, the double usage of both English and Arabic had one more effect: it exposed Humsi's ethnically marked presence, bilingualism, and, implicitly, her dual allegiance.

According to her testimony, Humsi has become aware relatively quickly of the hybridization of her cultural and national identities: "After four years living here in Canada, I became

Fig. 1. Nada Humsi in an early rehearsal for *Black Spring*. Photo by Paddy Gillard Bentley.

half Syrian, half Canadian. And this how I feel today" (Phone interview). From this point of view, her performance of both Western and Arabic characters became a political statement, emphasizing differences, but also showing that they can be overcome. As Humsi told me, she did not feel that she was performing two different characters but two facets of the same woman (Phone interview). To distinguish them in the show, she used a series of opposite physical elements, such as slow/fast rhythm of speaking and straight/slightly hunchbacked posture. She also made an abrupt gesture when switching from one to another—bringing her hair over her face for Ishtar and neatly pulling it back for Hillary. Thus, the actress's accented body and acting style became the site of negotiating and portraying national, cultural, and individual differences.

However, returning to Carlson's perspective, it can be argued that Humsi's foreign accent still required the English-speaking audience's suspension of disbelief and functioned as a floating theatrical signifier, as she consecutively delivered the presupposed accent-free English of American Hillary and the accented English of Iraqi Ishtar. Analyzing the performance of exilic actors, Meerzon warns about common misgivings:

> A popular concern of the actor-emigrants is to convey the sound of the foreign words correctly, to be less focused on the sound structure of the message than the message itself, to cover their accents with gestures and imposed meaning, not to trust their creative instincts in order to adapt to the audio-expectations of their new audience, and to act by the book rather then [sic] by the heart. (52)

Unlike many other performers who have chosen to leave their home country, Humsi did not regard her foreign accent as an obstacle: "I have been an actress all my life. I had experience performing non-verbal monodramas around the world besides my acting in Arabic. The last thing I thought about when I came to Canada was the accent" (Phone interview). As she recalls, however, she met an older theatre man who seriously advised her to learn the

Fig. 2. Nada Humsi as Hillary Ridders in *Black Spring* by Hazim Kamaledin. MT Space (Kitchener, Ontario) & TG Cactusbloem (Belgium); The Courtyard @ Bonnie Stuart, Kitchener, ON. November 14 -15, 2013.
Photo by Terre Chartrand.

"Canadian accent" (Phone interview). His opinion echoes a 1978 Canadian study, in which, according to Munro, "listeners judged speakers with a general Canadian accent as more suited than non-native speakers to high status jobs" (39). Unlike the seemingly persistent prejudice, Humsi's immediate reaction was one of dismay: "Canadian accent? What is the Canadian accent? Isn't Canada proud to be a multicultural country?!" (Phone interview). Even beyond Canada's multicultural context, Humsi feels that a foreign accent may present no limitations for actors in general:

> I'm an actress—I can play a tree, a bird, an old woman. I didn't care at all about my accent. Never wanted to learn the Canadian accent because I'm above that. I know that you can't make an American speak Arabic like an Arab; you can't make a Russian speak English like an Englishman; you can't ask a tulip to become a jasmine. Accent shouldn't matter. If the time comes to feel that accent matters, that means that I failed as an artist doing the kind of art I want to do and do what others want me to do. (Phone interview)

A performer's freedom in relationship to her accent, speech, and even facial complexion was further emphasized in the MT Space/TG Cactusbloem production. A third character was added, likely inspired by the playwright's stage directions: Canadian-born Margaret Bárdos performed as a singer/dancer with the head covered by a nylon sock, which blurred her features while alarmingly reminding of a masked burglar and/or terrorist. She wandered among the spectators in the hallway before the show started and then in the performance space between Humsi's speeches. Her broken movements and featureless face suggested a generic representation of pain beyond personal, gender, and national identities. Furthermore, the wordless singing in which "*Iraqi melodies transform in opera Castrato*" (Kamaledin, *Black Spring* 1) was naturally unaccented. Hence, whereas Humsi's double casting represented the embodiment

and negotiation of differences, Bárdos's performance emphasized their irrelevance in the face of human suffering.

Conclusion

The ethnic diversity of people living within Canadian borders and the relative openness of multicultural policies have made the so-called "colour blind" or "racially blind" casting more acceptable, despite racism and/or xenophobia still occurring in politics and everyday life. Yet, as I have outlined in this article, a foreign accent remains a strong national identity marker and theatrical sign. On the one hand, it identifies the performer as an immigrant and therefore dissociates her from the native audiences, placing her in a subaltern position. On the other hand, it makes it impossible for her to act as a floating signifier for the character she is embodying. This double effect reiterates speech's role in traditional theatre: "From classic times onward language differences have been utilized not only to place characters within multilanguage or multidialect cultures, but almost always also to reflect the power relationships embedded in language usage" (Carlson 10).

However, accented actors like Ashperger, Jordão, and Humsi make dramatic theatre possible across geographical, cultural, and language barriers. While increasing migration, the internet, and more affordable international travel have often led to the growing exposure and, thus, awareness of differences, sometimes with violent results, in performance they paradoxically make it possible to perceive, accept, and eventually cherish them. The suspension of disbelief on a visual and, more and more often, a sonic level attests to the ability of actors and audiences in accented theatre to break through inherited prejudices and contribute to the acceptance of linguistic diversity. Hopefully, this attitude will be increasingly echoed in everyday life in the world and in Canada, as Lee Maracle envisions: "Eventually, there will be no mainstream. We'll be like this country: little rivers and streams that will join each other."

Notes

1 According to her own testimony, Munro is the first to "examine accent discrimination cases in Canada in an attempt to understand how this phenomenon directly affects people's lives" (38).

2 The term "exile" traditionally means "[e]nforced removal from one's native country" ("Exile"), with people who voluntarily choose to leave their home countries considered immigrants or refugees. However, the word's secondary meaning disregards this distinction and defines it as one "who lives away from one's native country, whether because of expulsion or voluntary absence" ("Exile"). In this article, I use "exile" in a similar way, as I am interested in the displacement's consequences that are usually not determined by its causes.

3 In linguistics, *an empty/floating signifier* is commonly defined as a signifier which may "mean different things to different people: they may stand for many or even any signifieds; they may mean whatever their interpreters want them to mean" (Chandler).

4 At Columbia Speech and Language Services, the accent reduction training combines methods usually met in clinical speech therapy and education, starting with an Initial Accent Reduction Consultation with speech therapists with master's degrees and years of experience, followed by

three customized programs to choose from, which include workbooks, audio-recordings, homework, and summary progress reports. Based in Calgary, Accent on Canadian English (ACE) is a similar though smaller enterprise, which also offers an *Accent on Canadian English Pronunciation Assessment Kit* (ACE PAK) for speech language pathologists and ESL instructors who specialize in accent reduction/improvement.

5 Humsi won several national and international acting and writing awards including: Best Children Marionette Play, The International Children Theatre Festival, Tunis, Tunisia (1993); Best Actress, The Non-verbal International Theatre Festival, Calcutta, India (1993); Best Performer, Toyama Theatre Festival, Toyama, Japan (1992); Best Actress, Carthage International Theatre Festival, Tunis, Tunisia (1983).

6 Humsi has participated in most of the MT Space's productions, including the Theatre for Social Change pieces *Across The Veil*, *The Other End of the Line*, and *Me here... Me Happy*, which deal with social issues such as the mental health, immigration, and racism. Her recent acting credits include productions of other companies: *Occupy Spring*, *Body 13*, and *The Last 15 Seconds* (MT Space), *The Babylonian Mona Lisa* (a co-production between MT Space and Cactusbluem, Belgium); *The Poster* (Teesri Duniya Theatre), *Italian Funeral & Other Festive Occasions* (Drayton Entertainment); *Women in War* (a co-production between MT Space and Babel Theatre, Beirut).

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