

Editor's Note: *Performing Ground* received the 2015 Ann Saddlemyer Award/Prix Ann Saddlemyer from the Canadian Association for Theatre Research/Association Canadienne de la Recherche Théâtrales.

YANA MEERZON

Performing Exile, Performing Self: Drama, Theatre, Film.

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 350 pp.

MATT JONES

Should we be worried that the age of globalization is fast becoming, as Arjun Appadurai claims, an age in which the state of exile is the norm (293)? Today's condition of mass exile has produced a far more sombre literature than other after-effects of global trade liberalization like cosmopolitanism, the opening of borders, or the global village. Yet even Edward Said, for whom exile was a lifelong personal and political tragedy, acknowledged that the phenomenon is "strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience" (qtd. in Meerzon 296). If exile is universally terrible, then why, asked Milan Kundera, did none of the great émigré writers who fled the Soviet Union return to Russia following the collapse of Communism (296)? What draws so many to remain in exile or even, for those who are not coerced, to seek it out? There appears to be something compelling not only to think about but also to live through in exile, no matter how traumatic its beginnings may be.

This mysterious combination of trauma and fascination at the heart of the exilic experience is the subject of Yana Meerzon's *Performing Exile, Performing Self*, which attempts to correct what she considers to be our overly negative assessment of the exilic state as "one of mourning, depression, disbelief, and constant suffering" (2). To be sure, all of these phenomena show up in her analysis, but Meerzon wants to draw our attention to the ways that such suffering also provokes creativity. She suggests that the destabilization provoked by exile demands to be worked through in ways that produce a new kind of artist, whose work is often characterized by a high level of self-reflexivity, a hybridity of styles, and a tendency to avoid representational forms.

To set up this argument, Meerzon first asks us to expand our usual understanding of an exile. She refers not only to political exiles but also economic migrants, children of migrants, and even voluntary nomads: anyone who has been separated from their place of origin and has to reconceive of their identity in the negotiation between an absent homeland and the somewhat alien new culture in which they find themselves. This new deterritorialized identity is both liberating and bewildering, which provokes a lifelong search to come to terms with it through art. As aspects of quotidian life such as language or appearance (skin tone, clothing, mannerisms) become markers of the exile's otherness, the exile develops heightened attention to the performative nature of everyday existence. This tends to make for a high degree of self-reflexivity in performance, generated by what Meerzon neatly describes as "the exilic artist's self-alienated gaze" (302).

Meerzon tests her theory in six case studies of artists in exile working in performance, organized as three pairs of “types” of exile. Only the first follows the familiar narrative of exile. Russian-American poet Joseph Brodsky appears as a case of exile as political banishment (he was “strongly advised” to emigrate from the Soviet Union for political reasons). But Brodsky seems to have been courting something like an exilic identity before he left his country with his attempts to write poetry in Russian using the style and syntax of John Donne. The other familiar case is the journey from the periphery to the centre of the culture industry, which Meerzon traces in Derek Walcott’s frustrated attempts to stage European-influenced tragedy in Trinidad and theatre about Caribbean issues in the United States.

In her second section, Meerzon moves on to the nomad artist, a figure that has been widely documented but rarely linked to exile. She finds a textbook example in Italian expat Eugenio Barba’s *Odin Teatret*, probably the closest anyone has come to forming a pure theatre of exile. A student of Grotowski, Barba arrived in small-town Denmark in the mid-1960s, where he started a company made up of theatre nomads from across the globe that aimed to uncover the pre-cultural universals of performance. Unlike Brodsky, the forced exile, and Walcott, the reluctant one, Barba is an enthusiastic exile, and he celebrates the idea of his troupe as a “floating island” with no roots in its surrounding community. The second of this pair is Josef Nadj, a Serbo-Hungarian dancer and choreographer working in France since 1980. Nadj’s move to France was professionally motivated, linking him closer to Walcott than Barba, but Meerzon is interested in Nadj’s attempt to archive “the memory, the feel, and the imagery of his homeland” in non-linguistic forms (171).

The final two artists examined are Wajdi Mouawad and Atom Egoyan, both of whom Meerzon considers as second-generation exiles, though Mouawad was old enough when he emigrated to remember his childhood in Lebanon. Despite growing up mostly in Canada, their careers are marked by an obsession with the culture from which they are estranged both have only ever returned to their country of origin as part of artistic research projects. Meerzon’s point is that exile continues to haunt identity even in the second generation, and she goes as far as to claim, rather too unequivocally, that “even if the exiles do not [return], then their children eventually will seek their way home” (213).

By broadly defining both exile and performance, Meerzon makes visible a number of significant commonalities between aspects of migration and the art it produces that are often treated as separate. However, it is not always entirely clear in what sense these case studies are representative of more general trends. Each of these artists has such a distinct, idiosyncratic, and sometimes eccentric practice that it’s difficult to see their relation to the larger body of exile performance, much of which, like non-exile performance, remains conventional, unselfconscious, representational, or traditional. The most valuable aspect of Meerzon’s study is her careful unearthing of the connections between exile and creativity. While it is not clear if this means we should think more favourably of exile—just as an abundance of good haiku should not make us look fondly at internment camps—she makes a compelling case that the existential uncertainty provoked by exile might offer the consolation of creative enterprise.