Staging Migrant Stories between Turkey and Europe

Dr. Pieter Verstraete

Turkey has been recently the stage for transnational projects giving voice to the often-unheard stories of migrants at the margins of globalization. It may set the tone for a trend that has already a longer though still fairly recent history in Europe. Since last year, we have seen Mehmet Ergen’s impressive play Önceler Bir Bosluk Oldu Kalp Gidince, Ama Simdi İyi at Talimhane Tiyatrosu in Istanbul.

Although this Turkish-spoken play toured extensively and was part of the Orient Express season this early January at the Arcola Theatre in London (Mehmet Ergen’s first home in Hackney), it may still be seen in Istanbul. In February, there was Ismail Deniz’s German-spoken piece Warten, dass das Leben beginnt with Landestheater Burghofbühne Dinslaken at Tiyatro Tempo in Ankara. Both plays give us insight into the histories of migrants: Önceler Bir into the human trafficking of Eastern-European women in Turkey’s sex industry, Warten into the economic reasons of the first Turkish migrants, ‘Gästarbeiter’, into Germany. Although singular projects in themselves, there seems to be a growing transnational network of theatre and art venues that give voice to the people living in the margins of a world that is increasingly migrating. And Turkey plays a vital role, albeit indirectly, in this: on the one hand, in its emigrant-artists who seek opportunities in Europe, on the other, in its role as a transition country for international migrants today.

The epicentre of this theatre trend lies in Germany. In Berlin, Shermin Langhoff (born Şermin Özel, 1969, Bursa) is a key figure, who created a space for German-Turkish artists in 2008: the Ballhaus Naunynstrasse at Berlin’s suburban area in Kreuzberg. From the fringe in Berlin’s vibrant theatre scene, this theatre puts to the stage the stories that are often unheard in a migrating Europe. Langhoff developed the term ‘post-migrant’ after German-Turkish author Feridun Zaimoğlu, a term that has gained currency in literary circles. Post-migrant can

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refer to the identity politics of German citizens with a migration background, born in Germany but in a second or third generation after the migration of one or both of the parents. It equally calls for a perspective on the migration histories that are beginning to fade from memory, while the stories in these plays address complex issues of Germany’s multiculturalism, racism/discrimination, integration/assimilation, education, equality, religion, tradition/roots, citizenship and above all, identity of the ‘new Germans’ (Neudeutsche) who reside somewhere in-between Turkish and German cultures and yet, belong to neither of them. An example of this is Verrücktes Blut (2010) by Nurkan Erpulat, which is still on the Ballhaus stage. The play is set in a classroom of a secondary school where pupils with a migration background make the teaching of their female white German teacher impossible until a gun rolls out of one of the pupils’ rucksacks. The teacher seizes the moment, grasps the gun and starts teaching the youngsters some good old German Enlightenment through excerpts by Friedrich Schiller at gunpoint. Issues of language, ‘othering’, racial superiority, integration, and education form the ingredients of this modern anti-morality play that reflects upon the hegemonic views on migration and multiculturalism in Germany today.

Berlin’s Ballhaus Naunynstrasse surely produced a small seismic wave in the German art scene and art policies when it got immediately considerable funding (for which an explicitly Turkish-German theatre, Tiyatrom, had to loose its subsidy). With this, a theatre is in the making that can combine its social function in supporting cultural diversity as well as cultural education with its artistic aspirations to break through in the experimental (often called, post-dramatic) theatre scene and festival circuit. Also in Turkey, artists of the Ballhaus Naunynstrasse occasionally find their ways to show their art, such as the Film and Theatre Festival “Beyond Belonging – Almanci” which took place in June 2009 around the Bosporus. Or more recently, in September 2012 at the Bedesten Festival in Antakya, the Tandem-project, The Country on my Back, which was a collaboration between Ballhaus Naunynstrasse artist Çagla İlk and Im Atölye artist Barış Onur Örs. The support of the ECF (European Cultural Foundation), mainly
through funding by the Stiftung Mercator, and collaboration partners such as Anadolu Kültür, MitOst and Bilgi University, are not insignificant.

However, besides the Ballhaus Naunynstrasse there were already other waves of projects and cultural programmes that were instrumental in the breakthrough of post-migrant theatre in Germany. Neuköllner Oper worked for instance since 2008 with German Turkish actors and Turkish composer Sinem Altan (born 1985, Ankara) on a number of music theatre productions that addressed Germany’s multicultural reality, which culminated in the production *Tango Türk*: a semi-documentary music theatre that used Turkish tango as a metaphor for the fragmentation in the lives and memories of Turkish families living in two countries. On the stage, political refugees who fled Turkey after the 80s coup d’état told their experiences on the stage in-between the scenes. Typical of such theatres that support post-migrant work, such as the Neuköllner Oper in Neukölln, is their direct relation and contact to the surrounding multicultural community.

Actor Ismail Deniz (born 1979, Dinslaken) who staged *Warten, dass das Leben beginnt* in Ankara, is only one artist in the complex net of pathways that artists with a Turkish migration background make. The post-migrant art scene offers opportunities for artists like him who more than often have experienced discrimination in the highly competitive theatre profession. He worked in a number of projects with Neco Çelik at the Münchner Kammerspiele and Ballhaus Naunynstrasse. *Warten* is his first experience as a director. He assures me that neither the Landestheater in Dinslaken nor the German Turks are to be compared to the Berlin situation, but I cannot help seeing an artistic and socio-cultural landscape that expands from the centre to the outskirts where people and ideas are very mobile and influence each other. *Warten* is perhaps not aesthetically up to the self-proclaimed standards of post-migrant theatre in Berlin, it sure does on a social, communicative level what post-migrant theatre is all about: it helps to sustain a memory of migrant experiences for a generation of German-Turks who have little or no access anymore to this past.
The play came about as a response to an invitation by the Goethe Institute in Ankara, who already supported the making of the original play by Anja Tuckermann in a Turkish version by Tiyatro Tempo in 2011 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the recruitment agreements (“Anwerbeabkommen”) between Germany and Turkey. The reciprocity of two different plays in Turkish and German, based on the same material, is remarkable. The script is based on different conversations with Turkish migrants and their biographies, but Deniz brought the many texts together to present a more global and emotional story of one family, looking into the personal and economic motives as well as the sometimes-difficult situations this labour migration creates on a micro level. The original play Yaşamayı Beklerken... by Haluk Yüce – a documentary theatre with puppets – was again staged at Tiyatro Tempo in March. Goethe Institute Istanbul supports this type of work also indirectly through its relation to the newly established Tarabya Cultural Academy. Tarabya has hosted this year some interesting German-Turkish artists for a given period, such as Nurkan Erpulat and Hakan Savaş Mican, to interact with the Turkish art scene, most of whom have also worked with Ballhaus Naunynstrasse in one way or the other.

The international trend should also be understood in relation to earlier grassroots initiatives in art and theatre for Turkish migrants starting from the 1960s, such as in Belgium and the Netherlands. The Dutch government even implemented theatre in their cultural policy as a strategy to support the integration of the Turkish immigrants into the Dutch society. An important figure was Vasıf Öngenören, who not surprisingly was trained in Theatre Studies in Berlin and was invited in 1982 by OCW—the Dutch Arts Council at the time—to come and teach on an independent two-year theatre course to Turkish migrants, initiated by the Turkish Workers Union at the time. In the 1990s, we can see a shift, as social venues for migrants declined, of a migrant theatre that emancipated into a more professionalized theatre addressing more ‘universal’ topics and wider audiences. As a result, Netherlands has now Dutch-Turkish artists at Holland Opera (previously called Xynix Opera) and the Dutch-Kurdish RAST
Theatre, which successfully performed the first *Hamlet* in the Kurdish language in Diyarbakir, Ankara and Izmir between November and December 2012. The Rotterdam-based Ro Theatre also supports collaborations with Turkey and Turkish artists, which has led to numerous exchanges. Singular theatre projects with Turkish artists and communities are often realised in Belgium under the “socio-artistic” label or the broader “interculturality” policy remit within the Arts Decree that aims to bring the communities closer to each other. Structural support can be found there in the intercultural centre De Centrale in Ghent and the festival 0090 in Antwerp, which is becoming an international workplace for artists, art processes and collaborations. At the moment, Belgian-Turkish actor-director R. Kan Albay (Antwerp 1975) is presenting his intercultural project, *Na mij komt de dood* (*After me comes the death*), in Belgium on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Beltud (the Association of Belgian-Turkish Friendship and Dialogue). This play, although translated from the original text by Turkish theatre maker Serkan Öztürk, is rather an example of how a post-migrant artist engages with more universal themes, such as life and age in the face of death.

Although these are singular projects, some with support of existing structures such as art venues and associations, and most of the venues that support Turkish post-migrant theatre artists are not only dedicating their programmes and efforts on post-migrant issues solely, we can slowly see how networks gradually are getting shape through pathways of artists and collaborations between Turkish and European artists. The content of their plays is mostly a socially artistic response to crucial issues in society that are related to the history of migration and to their own mixed identity nowadays as a result of that. These performances ask the spectator for a complicity with their stories, offering a perspective on the present multicultural situation. They contribute to the cultural and political education of European citizens, as well as to an active and reflective identity politics.

All these examples in these brief analyses are stemming/supported from Europe. However, in our present conjecture, since Turkey has an increasing
immigrant population it has to tackle to the issue not only from the perspective of a country exporting migrants but also from a perspective that imports migrants. Once Bir was an example of such an endeavour. In order for the art circle in Turkey to deal with the issue of migration, not from the perspective of Turkey as a passive exporter of migrants but also as an active political actor shaping/directing the process of international migration, it is required that the issue was tackled by more texts that are local and original in character.