

Humanism through performative arts: A comparative study of *My Papers Weren't Done?* and *Zapi Rouge*



My Papers Weren't Done? (original title: *Wara' m? khalassh?*) 2017, by the Egyptian theatre company Outa Hamra (Red Tomato). Courtesy: Festival d'Avignon.

In recent years, political migration has been one of the hottest topics in international politics. Its real moral complexity is often bypassed in the rush to make various nationalist assertions, while the pervasive media coverage spreads continuous quick images of this “no-man’s-land between public law and political fact” (Agamben 2005: 1). In this period, also thanks to international cultural promotion, dramatic arts have abundantly dealt with the subject of migration. In France, the 73rd edition of the famous Festival d’Avignon, in 2019, inspired by the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, focused on freedom and on refugees. In the UK, Refugee Week, in its Horizons Festival 2019, has hosted many theatrical events, together with some workshops. In 2016 alone, at least 140 cultural projects and initiatives regarding migrations took place in the world, and most of them were theatrical in their nature (IETM 2016). Facing such a delicate issue, where solidarity, belonging, identity, ethics and empathy are just a few of the questions arisen, approaches to the topic can be very different. Moreover, not every realization pursues or achieves a social aim, which is something one might expect given the deadly aspect of the phenomenon. Besides, despite their social aim, performances can address audiences that are already aware of the issue and share exactly the same idea as the one brought on the stage. The message, in such a case, would be ineffective. Moreover, and even worse, despite the best intentions, the depiction of otherness always risks having unintended effects, such as stereotyping, or even ridiculing the “other.” Performance and performance theorization, as a consequence, are exemplary sites to interrogate the issue of migrants (Gilbert and Nield 2008, 133).

Within this complex picture, I want to focus on two plays about refugees that manage to deal with the issue in a “humanistic” way: *My Papers Weren’t Done?* (original title: *Wara’? m? khalassh?* 2017), a community play produced and directed by the Egyptian theatre company Outa Hamra (Red Tomato) and *Zapi Rouge* (2016), written by Françoise Glière and realized by Lili Label Compagnie. Despite the evident differences between the two plays, such as the language, the context of production, the context of reception and, consequently, their audiences; despite the different number of characters, setting, rhythm of the story, and, generally, the way the topic of migration is dealt with; despite all of this, the two plays have something very important in common: they share a deep connection in the humanism they indirectly represent and spread.^[ii] And in my opinion, this genuine commitment, which is admirably realized, makes of them two exemplary works.

In particular, *My Papers Weren’t Done?* and *Zapi Rouge* represent refugees in a way that recalls the theories of Emmanuel Levinas (born in 1905) in his work *Humanism of the other (L’Humanisme de l’autre homme, 1987)*. The book is a collection of three articles where the philosopher argues that it is not only possible, but of the highest urgency to understand one’s humanity through the humanity of others. In his new appreciation for ethics, Levinas takes distances from phenomenology, idealism, and skepticism to rehabilitate humanism. Given the apotheosis of dehumanization during Nazism, Levinas does not underestimate the difficulty of reconciling oneself with another, but believes that the humanity of the human has to be found in the recognition that the other person comes first, that the suffering and mortality of others are the obligations and morality of the self.

My Papers Weren’t Done? is the result of a one-and-a-half year interactive workshop of collective creation with a group of performers: all youngsters between the ages of 18 and 23, from Egypt, Eritrea, Somalia, Syria, Sudan and South Sudan who enact students coming from different countries dealing with the complicated bureaucratic process of applying to a University. In *My Papers Weren’t Done?* we do not

find the red noses from which the company Outa Hamra (meaning “red tomato”, in Egyptian) derives its name. However, their mission statement is fully respected:

Street clowning and social theatre for change through workshops and performances in public spaces with a focus on the underprivileged of Egypt. The group concentrates on street theatre to present its social and awareness projects. Especially by means of clown performances in the streets and villages of Egypt, to reach the most needy and marginalized audiences. The group also puts emphasis on drama workshops as a pedagogic tool to stimulate social creativity and cooperation.

Outa Hamra, then, do not perform in grand venues nor in alternative theatres in Cairo, since their goal is using social theatre to create change and the underprivileged is their main and targeted audience (Sobhi 2017, Sharobeem 2018). Indeed, the troupe formed in 2011 after some of its members attended workshops from Clowns Sans Frontières, an international organization that, according to their website, seeks to offer humor as a means of psychological support to communities that have suffered trauma. Past projects by Outa Hamra include “*Awatna Hafash*,” a community theatre project focusing on the issue of refugees that was supported by UNHCR; “*The Transformers*,” that focused on the gifts and talents anyone has, not only the strongest; and “*Super Douda*” (Super Worm), celebrating the theme of empowerment (Sharobeem 2018). Bakhtin’s concept of the carnival as liberating the audience from any form of hierarchy, as well as Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* are part of their philosophy (Ibid.)

On the other hand, Lili Label Compagnie, born in a French town in 2008, seeks to reach different kinds of audiences and to adapt its means of expression according to the projects, varying styles and genres. Its *ligne artistique* aims at being part of the Truth of the World (*la Vérité du Monde*) exploring the social themes that disturb today's world. The body and the word are both important in this process. Past projects were about different social topics, such as the power of image and its necessary alienation (*Souriez on vous regarde*, Smile, People are Watching You, 2008), the destruction of imagination and freedom by totalitarian states (*Nous Autres*, We – the Others, 2011) and the confrontation with the other, the stranger, the foreigner (*Ces Gens là*, Those People, 2013). The company is regularly supported by the French Ministry of Culture - Auvergne Rhône-Alpes, Auvergne Rhône-Alpes Regional Council and Puy-de-Dôme Department. *Zapi Rouge* explores the theme of kids' and minors' confinement in centres. The show was born in 2016, during the young public season of Graines de Spectacles (Clermont-Ferrand) and it represents the experience of “Toi” – meaning “You” in French – a kid detained in a ZAPI - *zone d'attente pour personnes en instance*, an immigration waiting zone. Toi's story is told by the women working in the center who encountered him during his stay there. Toi does not have a precise identity, but like all children, he has dreams. His dream is to work in a circus.

Both Outa Hamra and Lili Label follow social missions in their aims. Both plays represent humans trying to achieve their dream: working in a circus – or maybe simply continuing to play – in the case of Toi, and continuing their studies in the case of the students. Their condition as refugees is an obstacle to them and creates an opposition with the humans who are not in the same condition and who work in the offices. Opposition is not confined to the plays. Outside the fiction, we all know the controversies the subject of migrants and refugees provoke in political debates. According to Levinas, to achieve mutual tolerance, one should distinguish between the significations (with their cultural pluralism) and the direction – orientation and unity – of the human being. Direction is common to all human beings (Levinas 39). Both in *My Papers Weren't Done?* and in *Zapi Rouge*, identity and identification, namely the significations that distinguish us from the Other, are mainly obtained through the characters’ depiction. In *Zapi Rouge*,

Toi is a 13-year-old child who looks older, so he has no precise physical connotations. Indeed, in the most recent productions he was performed by David Cami de Baix, a young white actor, acrobat and mime. The other people waiting in the center do not appear on the stage and they are called “the OTHERS” (*les AUTRES*) or by numbers, the numbers of their rooms within the ZAPI:

WOMAN 4. — You can’t even pronounce their name. It’s too hard.

They do it on purpose to have names one cannot even say.

We call them by the number written on the door.



Lili Label Compagnie and Françoise Glière’s play *Zapi Rouge*. Courtesy: Festival d’Avignon.

Due to cultural difference, and certainly also to indifference from the women working in the center, the identity of the refugees is deleted, starting from their name. However, at the end of the play, the women get to know their names, country of origin and the reason why they are in the center. We can assume that the refugees of the ZAPI are taken as symbols of different realities which are not explored in greater depth, like Toi’s identity. However, their *significations* are acknowledged with the plot’s development.

Through its experience, Outa Hamra has become aware of the importance of a human being’s *significations*. Jakob Lindfors, from Outa Hamra, has noticed that audiences often commented that watching a play performed by people from several different countries, with different religions, languages and cultures, creates a beautiful mood and sends a message of peace within itself (El Shimi, 2014). In *My*

Papers Weren't Done?, an Eritrean student, a South Sudanese student, a Sudanese student, a Somali student, a Syrian student and a Yemenite student, performed by actors coming respectively from each of the countries, share the same problem: they all want to be students, but their documents are not yet ready. Singular cases are only briefly recounted in the shape of memories of the past reenacted as flashbacks within the story of play (where migrants are applying in an office for their papers). Cultural differences shape their identities, but they are all on the same level as they share a common objective and common problems. Besides, the refugees here represented all have a high school education and want to apply to a university. Even if, at least at the beginning of the play, the connotations of the characters are symbolic, they attempt to change the stereotypical view of migrants. In such a representation of the migrants, both plays' depictions of the characters challenge stereotypical perceptions of the foreigner and warn against taking them for granted.

Another point in common between the two plays, and which relies on “humanism” is a highlight of the different perception of the human being by himself and by the Other. The students of *My Papers Weren't Done?*, as well as Toi are defined as *sans papier* (without papers) and as *l?gi* (refugee), so, according to their legal status in arrival countries, which clearly is not a condition that oneself determines. On the other hand, the students of *My Papers Weren't Done?* as well as Toi feel themselves as exiled, a term which traditionally means being forcibly removed from one's native country, namely victims of a condition they have been subjected to. Both plays underline that refugees have less freedom despite their will or their past action: Toi doesn't even understand where he is and what the papers he doesn't have actually are, but he will be sent back to his country because he doesn't have those papers certifying that he is a child. The dialogue between him and the doctor trying to explain to him where he is and why is both funny and deeply sad:

WOMAN 4. — Waiting zone...

TOI. — Waiting for what?

WOMAN 4. — Papers.

TOI. — Like the oranges!

WOMAN 4. — The oranges?

TOI. — I've done this in a factory, wrap up oranges in paper. To store them. I am not an orange.

WOMAN 4. — Of course, you aren't an orange. That's not the same thing. It's just a paper where someone writes your name, your age and your country.

TOI. — To do what?

WOMAN 4. — To know who you are.

In *My Papers Weren't Done?*, inequalities based on their legal status are made evident through clear examples: all refugee students can apply for secondary education, but they cannot apply to a university, while students with a passport (like a Sudanese girl) can. Because of the documents defining one's social

status, refugees have to live as if they were less human. Focusing on specific human cases serving as examples, both plays make clear that some humans are discriminated against by the system on the simple basis of the documents they are represented by.

Opposing the Other, characters from the local community (and so French and Egyptians) are also present in the plays. In *Zapi Rouge*, the same actress plays the roles of the four women working in the ZAPI: Woman 1 is a guard and a police officer, Woman 2 is the ZAPI's custodian, Woman 3 works in an NGO providing aid to the refugees, and Woman 4 is a doctor. In *My Papers Weren't Done?*, characters from the local community are the *Mud?r* (the director), the *Wak?l* (the deputy director), the Secretary and Fawz?, an assistant. The formal opposition between the groups of locals and foreigners is clear, at least in the beginning. Interestingly, both the secretary in *My Papers Weren't Done?* and the third woman, the one working in the refugee aid organization in *Zapi Rouge* are represented as repressed women who have a sad life. After having been rude and having showed that she doesn't care about the students, the secretary reveals through a song, at the end of the play, that she suffers for them and that she has not chosen her job. In some ways, she is another victim of a dehumanizing system. Woman 3 in *Zapi Rouge* admits she does not know how to laugh and she prefers to see the OTHERS crying:

WOMAN 3. — (*Addressing the OTHERS*). Shut up, you, the OTHERS, shame on you! When one is unfortunate, he doesn't laugh!

TOI. — You are unfortunate...

WOMAN 3. — Why?

TOI. — You never laugh.

WOMAN 3. — First, I've never learnt how to laugh...

Situations of pain are willingly extended to the local community to strengthen solidarity. And it is for the local community that both plays conceived since *My Papers Weren't Done?* was created to be shown in Cairo, and anyway it could not be shown anywhere far away since most of the actors are UNHCR registered refugees, and so not entitled to travel, and *Zapi Rouge* was shown in France, so they represent situations that are spatially close to the audience.

Regarding solidarity, it is interesting to note that the settings of both plays – the ZAPI and the office of the Educational Administration in Cairo can both be considered what the French philosopher Marc Augé calls “non-lieux”, “non-places”, namely anthropological spaces of transience where human beings remain anonymous and that do not hold enough significance to be regarded as “places” (1992). The perception of a space like a non-place is strictly subjective; non-places can be motorways, hotel rooms, airports and shopping malls. A non-place is a place we do not live in, in which the individual remains anonymous and lonely. However, the characters of both plays break this “rule,” they socialize and reveal their identity. Despite their different origins and cultures, the students help each other, showing humanity and solidarity. The same happens between Toi and the women from the ZAPI.

Both plays let the audience be *directly* present in situations where they would never be able to be, as only refugees and employees in those offices are allowed to be in a ZAPI or in an administration office. In this

perspective, both plays work as documents of reality, even if reality is represented in different ways. Extremely “real” in the case of *My Papers Weren't Done?*, where each character reenacts his own past experience and brings to the stage his or her own cultural and linguistic baggage – reality is brought to the stage in the shape of a synecdoche, where each character becomes a symbol of a general issue: the tough conditions of a refugee are shown through the submission of the papers that will allow them to pursue their studies. Sublimed through the unlikely aspects of the story of Toi, in *Zapi Rouge*, one is not led to ask how Toi can communicate with French women who hardly can say his name or to question Toi’s physical traits, nor why the same woman is both the doctor, the NGO worker, the guard and the maintainer? Clearly, in a real situation, language would be an insurmountable barrier to meaningful human interaction, but it is voluntarily ignored in the play. The same actress playing all the female roles represents the local community in opposition to the Other, so that a one-to-one confrontation exists. And this confrontation is possible because the two humans can communicate. The particular reality depicted in both plays seems to be aware of the distinction between the reality given to receptivity and signification that it can take in its reception: reality’s signification is obtained through metaphors directly orienting the audience’s reception. And this also seems to correspond to Levinas’s theory about humanism, according to which the reality given to receptivity is different from the signification it can take (17). The specific significations of reality provided by both plays defy stereotypical representations and receptions of reality.

Another feature characterizing both plays is strictly connected to the topic of humanism, and that is the use of performative arts. For “performative arts” I consider one of the many meanings the term can have: arts requiring the physical presence of trained or skilled human beings whose demonstration of their skills is performance (Carlson 1996, p. 3). Toi engages in acrobatics, while students in *My Papers Weren't Done?* rap and dance. Performative acts offer the possibility for individuals to embody themselves, beyond their real story about migration and their story in the play, beyond the labels they receive, e.g., “migrants,” “refugees” and acting, instead, as embedded autobiographical sections delivered with a direct drive to the audience.

The re-humanizing function of performative arts is something the artists themselves perceive. For instance, last year, on 20 June 2018, UN World Refugee Day, at the European Parliament, Ahmad Joudeh, the Syrian dancer, has declared:

Everything I do and now all the things I’ve achieved, I am still being considered as refugee,’ who has freedom, yes, but limited freedom – being a refugee doesn’t mean you’re not an artist, being a refugee doesn’t mean you’re not human. When I dance, I feel free and complete.

Performative acts, then, allow the characters to freely show themselves as “full humans,” despite their legal status locating them in a position where they have less possibility to be. When Toi does his clown act, everybody appreciates it and laughs. On a stage, within a play, performative acts are seen both inside the fictional framework and outside, namely, they act also on the audience, that are led to perceive the “other” as a “full human.”

Songs, playing within the play, as well as direct addresses to the audience are recurrent in both works. Students act as if they were in a *baladi* café (popular coffee shops very common in Egypt), in Syria during the war, in a school in Eritrea. Such reenactments show memories, allowing the private subjectivity to be preserved. Besides, like all self-reflexive devices in theatre, such plays-within-the-

plays' metadramatic devices, draw attention to the plays' fictional status as a theatrical pretense, and so, they invite the audience to question reality and authenticity in the representation of migrants (both in theatre and in general, in "reality") and act as reminders of the reality behind the plays. As for their disruptive charge, we can consider both performative acts and self-reflexive devices as "eloquent arguments made for *including* and *remembering*, rather than for merely giving focus to or encoding crucial historical experiences" (Said, 2000, 16).

After all, the social aim in both plays is evident. Considering the transformative power of performance (Fischer-Lichte, 2008), in the case of *My Papers Weren't Done?*, it is clear that for migrants/actors enacting their experiences, the performance is a way to get rid of the burden of daily difficulties. In the case of *Zapi Rouge*, as well as for *My Papers Weren't Done?*, despite the situations of pain depicted, the smiles that the two performances intend to encourage lead to an emotional transformation of the audience, arousing emotions of communality, but also generating a sense of solidarity with the Other. For instance, in *My Papers Weren't Done?*, nobody seems to know what Eritrea is and when the Eritrean student is asked about his origins, everybody reacts first by asking him to repeat, then ignoring the answer. Once he is asked if Eritrea appears on the maps or if it is a medicine for the colon. Also, the Syrian student is discriminated against and the secretary asks him to come back the day after without providing a motivation. When she calls him terrorist (*irh?biyy*), his reaction starts to be harsh and actually people in the office also feel compassion for him, but at the same time they are scared of his actions. The two motifs are intended to bring smiles to the audience. However, the matter is serious. Considering that theatre can create a momentary, but concrete, sense of community, during which a collectivity can engage with issues, the stage becomes a platform that is an alternative to the often stereotyped, biased and uninformed mainstream media propaganda. At the same time, it also allows the performers to free their experiences of discrimination and dehumanization in a way that proves to be cathartic.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said explained that in the depiction of migrants the risk remains that the public perception focuses "on that enlightening aspect of 'their' presence among us, not on their misery or their demands, the tragic fate of homelessness in a necessarily heartless world" (Said, 1993, 183). Both *Zapi Rouge* and *My Papers Weren't Done?*, which share many principles with Levinas's *Humanism of the Other*, seem to contrast this perception as the Other is identified as a human with less rights than the other humans; namely, he is not depicted in terms of his/her specific identity but according to his/her limitation of freedom, while the "me", representing the local community has potentially full rights and, even against his or her will, he or she behaves as an opposer.

In both *Zapi Rouge* and *My Papers Weren't Done?* the identity of the Other becomes of lesser importance and the audience's attention is brought to focus on the issue causing pain. As a matter of fact, right after a performance of *My Papers Weren't Done?* held in 2017 in Cairo, when one of the actors invited the audience to a discussion, all questions were related to the issue of education and no personal questions were asked.

Far from being banal, *My Papers Weren't Done?* represents a common situation without particular elaboration in terms of metaphors or artistic competences. *Zapi Rouge*, on the other hand, is a symbolic show created for children. Both plays deal with the topic of humanism in an intelligent and serious manner and in this they are deeply connected. Performances, the sharing of experience, the presence of bodies, visual, and audio possibilities, everything serves a noble purpose: alterity is shown as a way to acknowledge the existence of the other and to know what's different, what we – "we" on the stage and

“we”, the audience – ignore and what we, opposing “the other,” who is in need of help, as human beings, are meant to do. Such theatrical experiences are an example of how “Post Migrant theatre can use its aesthetic resources to expedite a re-thinking and a re-imagination” (Sharifi 2017, 405). Collective work, experience both in life and professionally, genuinely good intentions and an artistic insight are maybe the right ingredients to spread some much needed humanism on the stage, facing the humanitarian crisis of *en masse* arrivals.

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