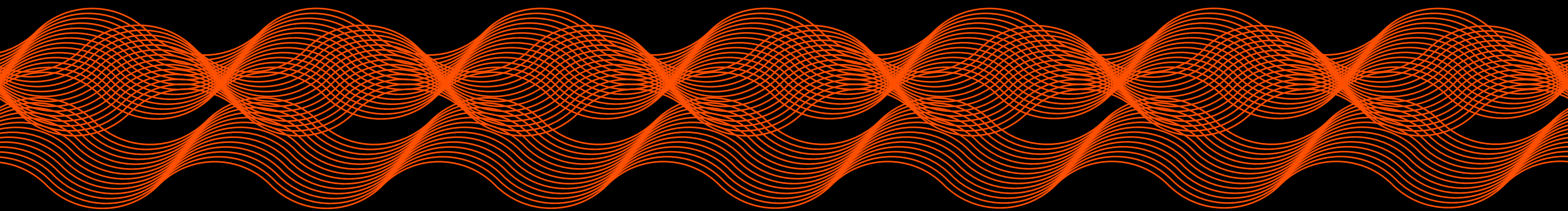


Intersectional Perspectives on Identity in Theatre



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Introduction

I wish that we were perceived as how we really are and not as Gadje present us. I wish we finally stood for our own identity. That we spoke for ourselves and that we pursued our own politic.¹

The quote above comes from the show *Roma Army* that premiered at Maxim Gorki Theatre in September 2017. The project was based on the idea of two Romani actresses and Roma-activists, Sandra and Simonida Selimović, and was directed by one of the Gorki's resident directors, Yael Ronen. The performance starred actors Romnija, Roma, and Romani travellers from Austria, Serbia, Germany, Kosovo, Romania, England, and Sweden. On stage, they developed the idea to form a self-empowering, feminist, and queer Roma army, to fight structural discrimination, racism, and antiziganism, but also to emancipate themselves from an internalised victimisation.

1. Quote from the premiere version of *Roma Army*.



Roma Army, 2017. Actors: Mehmet Ateşçi, Simonida Selimović, Sandra Selimović, Mihaela Drăgan, Lindy Larsson, Orit Nahmias. Director: Yael Ronen.

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Two senses of representation

Beginning from *Roma Army*, in this article I will analyse the implications of the wishes that the actress expresses in the quote above from a theoretical point of view, as well as in the context of my own dramaturgical practice in a German state theatre. In doing so, I have to acknowledge my own entanglement: I am writing here as a graduate of Goethe University, but, as a dramaturg at Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin, I somehow carry on a certain political and aesthetic approach, promoted by artistic director Shermin Langhoff and her team. Clearly, I cannot represent the diversity of opinion and access to theatre practiced at Gorki, but of course I have been dealing with questions of representation, identity politics, and similar issues in my everyday practice. For this reason, I feel I am in a position to share some insights, experiences, and thoughts with the reader.

Additionally, I will further elaborate how the concept of intersectionality can serve as a tool in a critical theatre practice and prevent an essentialist understanding of identity. Finally, I want to carve out which specific role a dramaturg could play in all of that.

Coming back to the above-mentioned show, in this combative confessional-like monologue, created in the process of devised theatre in a group of marginalised people (Roma in this case), some key aspects in the confrontation of identity and politics within theatre emerge. Firstly, it is evidently a call for authenticity: to be seen how we *really are*, combined with the refusal to be attributed by white, non-Romani people (*Gadje*). Secondly, the issue of self-empowerment arises: to be proud of one's own identity, in contrast to trying to cover differences up. Lastly, the actress expresses the aim of speaking for oneself, and of making one's own politics. Thereby, she addresses the complexity of the term of representation.

The complexity of the double meaning of the word *representation* surely needs a deeper examination. According to Gayatri Spivak, there are two senses of representation. While talking about the relation between theory and practice, Spivak² suggests that Gilles Deleuze — like many other Western philosophers — mixes these two senses. Specifically, philosophers like Deleuze state that suppressed people dispose over knowledge themselves, and therefore are able to articulate themselves without any support from intellectuals. However, Spivak's accusation is of a veiled eurocentrism that systematically ignores the question of ideology and entanglement in an intellectual and economic history. Spivak differentiates between a representation as *speaking for* such as in politics, within state formation and law (proxy), and another kind of representation as *re-representation*, as in art or philosophy (portrait). This second concept of re-representation can be understood as a staging, or even a making of significance, since one attributes certain characteristics to a subject in order to produce a meaningful statement. A representative mediates and translates the subaltern position, referring to the subaltern as a homogeneous group and re-presenting them in this way.³

The first concept of representation as *speaking for* (as in politics) includes the inner dynamics of advocacy (*Für-Sprecher*innenposition*). The advocate's position is laid bare and requires the localisation of those spoken for. The subalterns are represented as a heterogeneous group, lacking

2. Gayatri Spivak, *Can the subaltern speak?: Postkolonialität und subalterne Artikulation* (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2008).

their own acting power. Advocates draw attention to the fact that they can only contribute the subaltern's concerns to the hegemonic discourse as a translation. Naturally, translations cause several shifts in meaning.

According to Spivak, a radical practice should consider both modes of representation. She further states that critical intellectuals who occupy key positions, or are in touch with the privileged, should reflect on and use their privileges to make the subaltern's voice heard. In particular, Spivak argues that the subaltern can neither speak nor act, unless their heterogeneous positions are being represented in the discourse (by proxy). The second level of representation harbours the danger of 'essentialising' the subaltern by robbing them of their diversity of voices. This is because the term *re*-presentation assumes the meaning of something essential that can be brought back to presence. In terms of a theatre practice, this position tries to take a postcolonial perspective, that includes gender or critical whiteness studies, and usually leads us to call for the authenticity of an absent other. One can argue that reaching out for an authentic representative is necessary to provide visibility to a demographic group of people who are structurally excluded from the hegemonic discourse, meaning the dispossessed and disenfranchised: sans-papiers, refugees or 'experts of everyday life' (senior citizens, teenagers, unemployed people, etc.), who have been invited to participate in theatre performances as experts in their specific situations and struggles. However, in doing so, we may disguise our own position in the neo-colonial system and promote an outdated idea of identity.

← 3. The use of the term 'subaltern' in Spivak's essay can be seen as a further development of reflections by the Subaltern Studies Group. The Group formulated 'the subaltern' following Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), who coined the term to describe those who do not belong to any hegemonic class and who neither possess political nor economic agency. Spivak sees the position of the subaltern beyond the dualistic Western logic of thought and outside the discourse about the establishment of new power structures. According to Spivak, subalterns are therefore unable to develop a common awareness for their condition and cannot organise politically in order to fight for their concerns. This is due to the fact that subalterns are not perceived in the hegemonic discourse.

Intersectionality

There is another trap related to the second sense of re-presentation: the representation as a portrait or a depiction. It not only assumes that something essentially absent can be *re*-presented, but it also assumes that it is something visible and distinct. I have noticed professionally that institutions who are attentive to these issues were increasingly criticised for over-engaging in particular marginal spheres. This has not only been the case in the theatre or the cultural industry, but also in a wider political and public sphere. Discussions about the use of the 'N-word' in the staging of canonical plays, as well as the use of a gender-neutral language, have led many agents in the art and culture business to conjure the end of artistic freedom.⁴

Above all, one accusation is that of having lost sight for the main type of oppression, namely class oppression. For example, analyses like Stegemann's *Die Moralfalle: Für eine Befreiung linker Politik* (2018) or *Lob des Realismus: Die Debatte* (2015) play off main and side contradictions, in Marx's terms. The main contradiction is meant to be *class*, whereas contradictions between genders and races are perceived to be side issues. The basis of this is formed through the assumption that the resolution of the classes would consequently lead to the general emancipation of the society.⁵

4. Wolfgang Engler, *Authentizität!: von Exzentrikern, Dealern und Spielverderbern* (Berlin: Verlag Theater der Zeit, 2017).

5. Karl Marx, *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie*, in Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Iring Fetscher, *Studienausgabe in 5 Bänden (Bd.1). Philosophie* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2004), pp. 22-36.

Word limits dictate I must abstain here from examining the playing-off of a main contradiction against a side contradiction. However, what is at stake here is that there are types of oppression which cause structural exclusion and are less visible than others, for example the above-mentioned class oppression. Also, we tend to overlook the complexity of these types of oppression and their interrelation. Considering that, the antagonism between the multiple contradictions in our society, as formulated by theatre makers like Stegemann and Engler, seem one-dimensional and need to be challenged by the concept of intersectionality.

The paradigm of intersectionality, coined by the American civil rights activist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, can help us to rethink the representation of identity and its deconstruction in theatre. The theory emerged from the *Black* feminist movement and considers the entanglement of oppressions due to the coordinates of race, class, and gender in one person. In order to overcome social injustices, the individual must think of each element as inextricably linked with all the others. This forces us to a more complex understanding of any presumed identity — *Black*, worker, etc. What identity is, and who determines, it should be negotiated again and again and remain disputable.

Coming back to the quote at beginning of this contribution, I would say that it does not matter if the actress describes what is *actually* true or authentic for a Roma experience. It is also not about preferring the narrative of history as imperialism as the correct version of history. What should arouse interest from a theoretical point of view is to retrace how one narrative of reality — Roma as victims, as persecuted — was established as normative. In this way, the audience will experience tensions within the group, since all individuals suffered in different ways compared to the ones labelled as Roma, due to their skin colour, their economic status, etc. From this perspective, intersectionality argues in support of a less accumulative idea of oppression and hegemony.

It points to the horizontal junctions and particularities, grasping the mechanisms and structures of power that promote a specific and inadequate concept of identity more accurately.

As an intellectual, a curator, a dramaturg, one should keep the double meaning of representation in mind and dare to confront oneself with these delicate issues. I believe that those who can speak — in Spivak's terms — have the responsibility to include in the discourse those who do not have access to it for several structural reasons. According to this intellectual position, I have tried to point out the associated consequences and difficulties regarding the double sense of representation. Nevertheless, one should see the intention to incorporate the theory of intersectionality in artistic creations as a continuous practice and reserve the possibility to make mistakes, to self-reflect, and communicate with other theorists, practitioners, and experts.



Roma Army, 2017. Actors: Mihaela Drăgan, Lindy Larsson. Director: Yael Ronen.
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What to do? Conclusion

As stated above, it is difficult to enable participation to marginalised identities without blundering into the trap of ‘essentialising’ someone’s identity. To refer to artistic practice, this means that claiming that a role written as a *Black* character (such as Othello) can only be played by a *Black* actor only supports the idea that there is something essentially different in the *Black* body acting on stage. Doesn’t this only reverse the disastrous passed-on technique of *Black facing*, and excluding *Black* individuals or People of Colour from classical plays? As we can see, the concept of authenticity is tricky. So what can we do?

Following the argumentation of Spivak and Nandi,⁶ I would also distance myself from a deconstructionist and anti-essentialist approach. I am convinced by the application of a *strategic essentialism* as a postcolonial strategy of resistance. Spivak introduced the concept of *strategic essentialism* as a political strategy in which minority groups mobilise on the basis of shared cultural or political identity to represent themselves. Although these groups are heterogeneous and may disagree on many issues, a temporal *essentialism* of their identities can be useful to gain visibility in the hegemonic discourse and bring forward shared interests and goals.

I have to confess that the sentences I quoted in the beginning evoked some reluctance in me, since they completely reproduce ‘essentialised’ concepts of identity in a bold and simple way. Nevertheless, the marking of the speaker’s or actor’s position in this case is crucial. Additionally, we should not neglect the power gaps that underlay our society, and the

political dimension of a Roma ensemble which is given space in a German repertoire theatre for the first time. Perhaps, one has to first accept these gaps in perception, aesthetics, etc. as they are caused by diverse accesses to cultural and economic capital, as noticed by Bourdieu,⁷ and give a platform to those outside the discourse, while never stopping dealing with one’s own position in all of that. I believe that the dramaturg can serve as a critical intellectual, as described above, facilitating and including the subaltern in the hegemonic discourse. The dramaturg is part of the artistic team, but can also be external from it. The dramaturg works as a translator, critic, producer, and consultant, and should pursue the strategy of *strategic essentialism*, so that a second step can follow.

As a curating team, dramaturgs select people and topics to whom they are willing to offer a platform. As translators, they are usually responsible for communication with the audience and the public in form of publications, leaflets, and social media, providing and generating contents that are associated with the in-house debates. As producers, dramaturgs can try to find new structures of decision making and ways to include diverse voices and bodies in a continuous artistic practice. This could also mean youth development in all divisions.

The dramaturgy of a state theatre can invest in unlearning patriarchal and euro-centric power dynamics in the production of art. If we make an effort to differentiate between bodies, languages, and settings and listen with patience, it is possible to reshape institutions like the German state theatre with its century-old tradition of racism, sexism, and antisemitism.

If we make an effort we might be able to rehearse something here that can be transferred to the public sphere of our society. •

6. Miriam Nandi and Gayatri Spivak, ‘Übersetzungen aus Anderen Welten’, in S. Moebius and D. Quadflieg eds., *Kultur. Theorien der Gegenwart* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2006), pp. 129-139.

7. Pierre Bourdieu, *Die feinen Unterschiede. Kritik der gesellschaftlichen Urteilskraft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982).