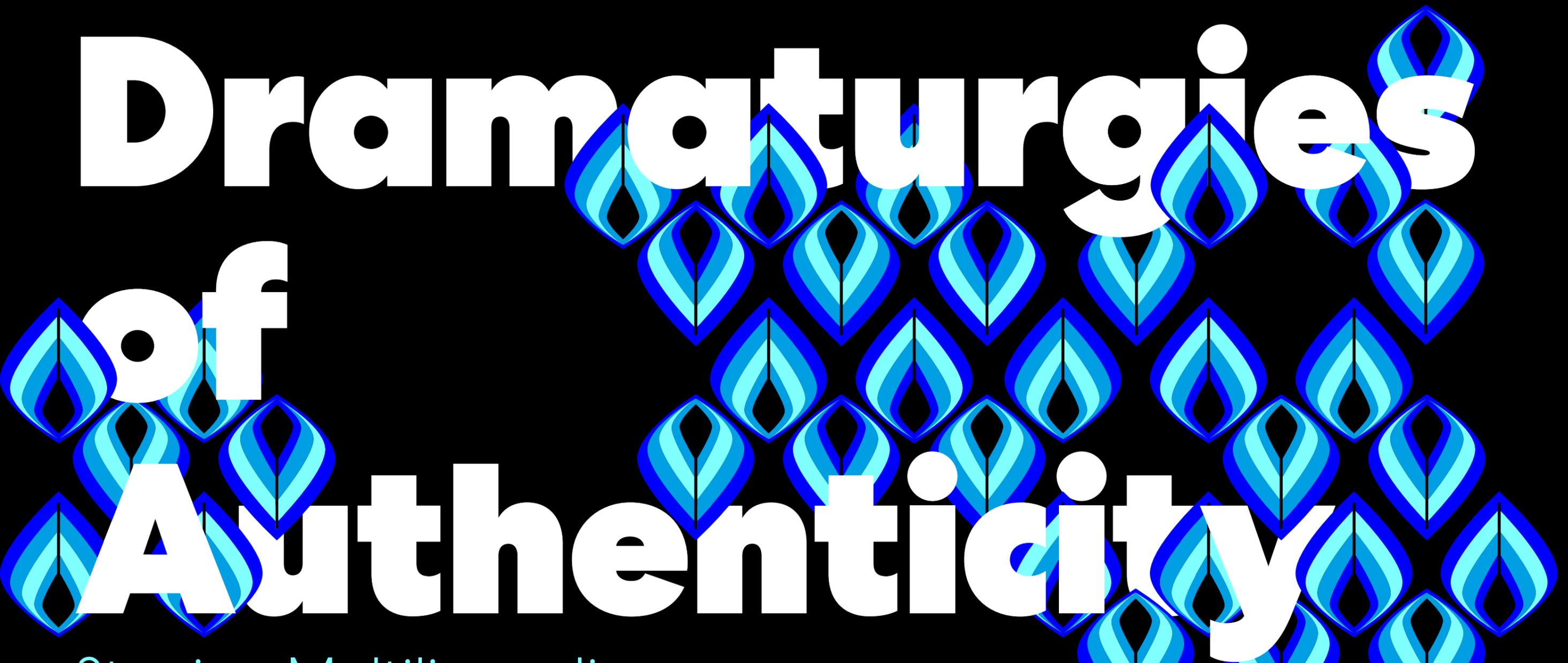


Dramaturgies of Authenticity

A decorative graphic consisting of numerous stylized blue leaves of varying shades (light blue, medium blue, and dark blue) scattered across the background. The leaves are layered, with some appearing in front of others, creating a sense of depth. They are positioned around and behind the main title text.

Staging Multilingualism
in Contemporary Theatre Practices

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KEYWORDS

Wajdi Mouawad, dramaturgies of authenticity, multilingualism, migration

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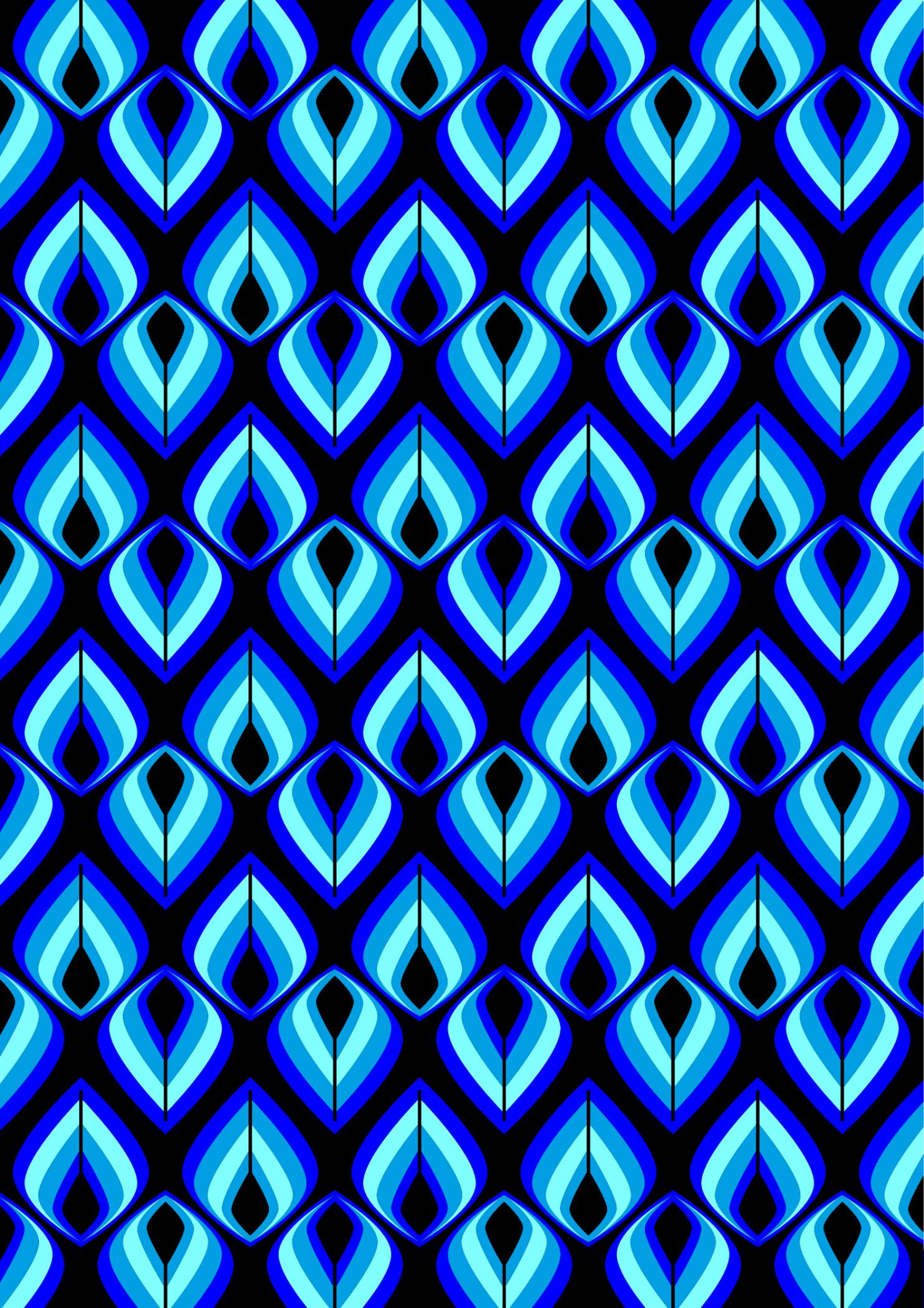
Wajdi Mouawad, dramaturgies de l'authenticité, multilinguisme, migration

Summary

Theatrical multilingualism has recently come to be a focus of many contemporary theatre practices and scholarly studies that recognise communication between those on stage and those in the audience as being tightly linked to realities of forced migration and rising nationalism. Building on the potential ethical functions of theatre, multilingual performances often pursue theatrical verisimilitude and thus rely on what I call *dramaturgies of authenticity*. This is when the characters of migration speak in the language of the actors who enact them. Wajdi Mouawad's play *Tous des oiseaux* (2017) presents a compelling example of this practice. Written originally in French, the play has been translated into four languages: English, Hebrew, German, and Arabic. Enacted by a team of international performers, this play uses multilingualism as an iconic sign of the characters' experiences.

Résumé

Le multilinguisme théâtral est devenu un aspect sur lequel de nombreuses pratiques et études théâtrales se sont focalisées à travers un acte de langage ou un acte de parole qui met en scène et étudie les migrations mondiales. S'appuyant sur les fonctions éthiques du théâtre, les représentations multilingues poursuivent souvent une vraisemblance théâtrale et s'appuient donc sur ce que j'appelle une *dramaturgie de l'authenticité*, lorsque les personnages de la migration parlent dans la langue des acteurs qui les interprètent. La pièce *Tous des oiseaux* (2017) de Wajdi Mouawad est un exemple convaincant de cette pratique. Écrite en français, la pièce a été traduite en quatre langues : l'anglais, l'hébreu, l'allemand et l'arabe. Jouée par une équipe d'interprètes internationaux, elle utilise le multilinguisme comme un signe iconique des expériences des personnages.



Theatrical multilingualism has recently come to be a focus of many contemporary theatre practices and scholarly studies that examine economic, political, cultural, and linguistic realities of global migration. A type of artistic experiment and a form of activism, theatrical multilingualism helps artists investigate the potentials of everyday communication within the relational and liquid nature of transcultural encounters. Multilingual performances often pursue theatrical verisimilitude and as such they rely on what I call *dramaturgies of authenticity*. Such dramaturgies evoke the encounter between multilingual on- and off-stage actants of global movement. The characters they portray appear on stage in the complexity of their multiple linguistic identities, enacted by the actors who speak many languages and whose mother tongue might be identical to the mother tongue of their character. In this case, the notion of ‘dramaturgies of authenticity’ refers to the situation when an actor — a native speaker of German, for example — is cast to play a character whose native language is also German.

In this article, I will examine the foundational devices of such dramaturgies of authenticity and demonstrate how the divided self of a migratory subject, characterised by a separation between ‘I’ and ‘myself’, is linguistically constructed on stage. My focus of analysis is performance that creates its fictional worlds in a realistic mode of representation and in which communication between the characters is made exclusively through language. In such theatre, the non-verbal semiotics of a ‘performance text’ (De Marinis 2007: 232-233), including acting, costumes, or theatrical technology, is of secondary importance. Multilingual dialogue, I argue, emerges as factual and authentic in relation to the truth of the theatrical narrative it produces and to the truth of its own representation, similarly to how documents help mobilise ‘the discourse of factuality’ in documentary theater and verify its ‘truth claim’ (Schulze 2017: 203). In a multilingual theatre, each separate verbal language creates the materiality of the linguistic sign. Like with an acting sign, in which materiality takes over its semioticity — precisely because acting is deeply rooted within the physicality or corporeality of the performer’s body (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 75-138) — in a linguistic sign within a multilingual dialogue its materiality takes over its semioticity. This sign is rooted in the linguistic competence of each performer, who speaks one or several languages of this multilingual dialogue as a native speaker. In this context, multilingual dialogue appears factual and it is able to ‘authentica[t]e its own narrative’ structures and dimensions (Schulze 2017: 203).

Wajdi Mouawad’s play *Tous des oiseaux* (2017) presents a compelling example of dramaturgies of authenticity and therefore serves as my central case study. Written originally in French, the play was then translated into four languages — English, Hebrew, German, and Arabic — and was subsequently enacted by a team of international performers who spoke in their native languages on stage. In many cases, the native language(s) of each actor were also identical to the mother tongue(s) of

the characters that they played. In this way the multilingualism of *Tous des oiseaux* served as an iconic sign to the multiple linguistic and cultural identities of each of its characters. The young protagonist Eitan spoke English to his lover Wahida, German to his mother, and Hebrew to his father David; whereas Wahida spoke English to Eitan but Arabic to the character of Leo Africanus (Hassan El Wazzan). Speaking in their mother tongue(s) functioned as an emotional connector between these characters, whilst the situations of multilingual code-switching also often created comic effect. For the performers, this practice of multilingual communication provided a chance to stay true to their personal — off-stage — linguistic identities or truths. For audiences, the multilingual dialogue of *Tous des oiseaux* invited spectators to relate to the words spoken on stage in what Daniel Schulze calls a ‘default mode of “factuality”’ (2017: 203). Such dialogue reflected the cultural, linguistic, and economic environments of today’s multicultural urbanites. It presented spectators with the off-stage realities of their own everyday communication and prompted them to employ what linguist Suresh Canagarajah calls ‘compensatory strategies of comprehension’ (2013: 173). To follow a non-translated multilingual dialogue, spectators were to pay more attention to the physical work of the actor and the materiality of the stage signs, as well as the rhythms, the atmospheres, and the energy flows engendered by the performance.

Neither the published French text of *Tous des oiseaux* nor its English translation contains proper traces of the inter-linguistic switches that took place in performance. For this reason, my analysis of the play’s theatrical multilingualism is based on the French and Canadian productions that I saw live and the detailed notes that I took while sitting in the audience.

Spoken in four languages, the original production of *Tous des oiseaux* directed by Wajdi Mouawad for *Théâtre national de la Colline* in Paris¹ was aimed at its predominantly French-speaking spectators and used

French surtitles to help them follow the action. The 2019 version of the play, translated into English by Linda Gaboriau as *Birds of a Kind*, was directed by Antoni Cimolino for the Stratford Theatre Festival in Canada.² It was addressed predominately to the English-speaking audiences and used English surtitles.³ In both cases, I argue, multilingual dialogue served a symbolic function of truth and authenticity on stage. This dialogue was to reflect a complex linguistic project of challenging the homogenising power of a mother tongue in a world marked by multiple intercultural encounters and displacement. To contextualise my claims, I will first briefly look into the issues of authenticity and multilingualism in performance.

← 1. Produced by Théâtre national de la Colline, Paris (17 November 2017), *Tous des oiseaux* was written and directed by Wajdi Mouawad, with Jalal Altawil as Wazzan, Jérémie Galiana as Eitan, Leora Rivlin as Leah, Judith Rosmair as Norah, Rafael Tabor as Etgar, Raphael Weinstock as David, Souheila Yacoub as Wahida, and Victor de Oliveira and Darya Sheizaf as Eden. Dramaturgy was by Charlotte Farcet. François Ismert was the literary consultant and Natalie Zemon Davis was the historical consultant. It was translated into German by Uli Menke, English by Linda Gaboriau, Arabic by Jalal Altawil, and Hebrew by Eli Bijaoui, with French surtitles composed by Audrey Mikondo and Uli Menke.

2. *Tous des oiseaux*, translated into English as *Birds of a Kind* by Linda Gaboriau, ran between 30 July to 13 October 2019 at the Stratford Theater Festival, Ontario, Canada. This production was directed by Antoni Cimolino, with Jakob Ehman as Eitan, Deb Filler as Leah, Alon Nashman as David, Harry Nelken as Etgar, Sarah Orenstein as Norah, Baraka Rahmani as Wahida and Hannah Miller as Eden. Artistic credits include Designer Francesca Callow, Lighting Designer Michael Walton, Projection Designer Jamie Nesbitt, Composer Levon Ichkhanian, Sound Designer Adam Harendorf, Dramaturge Bob White and Intimacy Coach Anita Nittoly. Linda Gaboriau received the 2019 Governor General's Award in literary translation for her translation of *Tous des oiseaux*. It was Gaboriau's second Governor General's Award in collaboration with Mouawad, the first one having been awarded for her work on his play *Forests*.

3. In this article, I do not focus on the correlation between the spoken multilingual dialogue and the surtitles. I treat theatrical surtitles as a separate type of meta-text to be studied elsewhere.

Theatre in a Culture of Authenticity

The term 'authenticity' refers to notions of the 'original' and the 'true'. It speaks to the candour and faithfulness of our intentions and actions in relation to our own self and often bears metaphysical, social, and political connotations. According to philosopher Charles Taylor, we live today in a culture of authenticity and so a more nuanced definition of the term is in order. A culture of authenticity, Taylor suggests, is 'the understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late-eighteenth century, that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity' (2007: 475). In this respect, it becomes important for each individual to 'find and live out one's own [humanity]', against any other type of human behaviour 'imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority' (*ibid.*).

In the history of Western philosophical thought, this view of authenticity goes back to the teachings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In the book *Confessions* (1770), Rousseau put forward an idea of authenticity related to the 'inwardness, self-reflection and introspection' of an individual. Rousseau understood the self as 'the space of interiority' that functions as 'a guiding authority' to one's actions and choices (Varga and Guignon 2020: para. 12). The space of interiority or the space of self is something unique to each individual and it is associated with a particular 'set of virtues'. This space, however, can be compromised under the pressure of society and circumstances imposed from outside. It also serves as a social contract when we need to perform our own selves for others. Starting from the age of Romanticism, authenticity has been recognised as the actions and feelings of an individual aiming to '[be] true to oneself for one's own benefit', whereas 'earlier, the moral advice

to be authentic recommended that one should be true to oneself *in order thereby* to be true to others' (*ibid.*: para. 7). In the nineteenth century, this formula of authenticity gained a new meaning wherein 'being true to oneself is seen as a *means* to the end of successful social relations' (*ibid.*). Accordingly, questions of personal behaviour and morals arose and they prepared the idea of the ethic of authenticity or a new moral code of behaviour (Taylor 2007: 475). This new moral code advocated the self-governing abilities of an individual — that is one's aptitude to decide for oneself politically, culturally, and otherwise.

Today, in the society of consumers and individualists, 'besides leading an autonomous life, guided by one's own, non-constrained reasons and motives, authenticity requires that these motives and reasons should be expressive of one's self-identity' (Varga and Guignon 2020: para. 9). Searching for the authentic self makes a special appearance first during the historical avant-garde of the early twentieth century and then in the 1960s within the movements for social liberalisation, civil rights, and quests for equality and truth (Taylor 2007: 476-78). Today this search for authenticity is connected not only to 'the affirmation of sensuality, as simply egoism and the pursuit of pleasure' or 'consumer choice' but also to the 'simultaneous mutual presence' and 'mutual display' of multiple selves, which appear in a collective singular space of a multifaceted cultural habitat both as the producers of action and as its witnesses (*ibid.*: 481).

Within a society made of individuals who claim and share multiple belongings and who speak many languages individually and as a group, multilingualism serves as a signifier of this new authenticity. Today's theatre seeks to both reproduce and challenge this phenomenon, while it also pursues the authenticity of its own representation. As Daniel Schulze observes, today's theatre often aims to express 'a structure of feeling which has superseded Postmodernism with its irony, detachment and pastiche. It instead reconstructs concepts of telos, engagement and

closure' (2017: 2). What I call dramaturgies of authenticity refers to this set of strategies. Specifically, in relation to multilingualism on stage, dramaturgies of authenticity describe the linguistic identity of the dramatic actants. It also implies and even pre-structures the iconic correlation between the languages spoken by these actants and the languages of the actors who enact them. To this extent, theatrical multilingualism and its dramaturgies also reflect the linguistic identity of its makers. That is to say that dramaturgies of authenticity suggest how a multilingual performance may be constructed in such a way as to reveal and highlight the linguistic idiosyncrasy of a multilingual group of performers. In this scenario of multilingualism, the linguistic identity of the performer acquires the same degree of iconicity or 'truth' as this performer's physical or ethnic identity. In this scheme, the voices of the performers serve as the containers, the keepers, and the conveyers of their personal experiences, as well as the guarantors of the so-called historical truth.

On the other side of this spectrum there are postdramatic theatre experiments in which authenticity of representation is not necessarily based on the truth of the past experiences of the performers but on their physical presence within the singularity of the shared temporal and spatial setting of the stage. Hans-Thies Lehmann attributes similar processes to the work of language on stage when he claims that in post-dramatic theatre, dialogue is approximated to an object: '*The principle of exposition* applied to body, gesture and voice also seizes the language material and attacks language's function of representation' (2006: 146). Lehmann traces the history of the 'exposed language' to Gertrude Stein's plays, in which language

loses its immanent teleological temporality and orientation towards meaning and becomes like an *exhibited object*. Stein achieves this through techniques of repeating variations, through the uncoupling of immediately obvious semantic connections, and

through the privileging of formal arrangements according to syntactic or musical principles (similarities in sound, alliterations, or rhythmic analogies) (*ibid.*: 147).

Similarly, in multilingual productions the use of different languages contributes to several layers of signification: on the one hand, a multilingual dialogue fulfills its meaning-forming functions and is therefore locutionary, to use J.L. Austin's terminology (1975); on the other hand, it acts 'like an *exhibited object*' and hence it is performative or illocutionary.

Theatrical Multilingualism

Marvin Carlson traces the history of theatrical multilingualism — or what he calls the 'macaronic stage' (2006: 20-60) — to Renaissance Europe, when passages in Latin and vernacular were spoken on stage without any translation. This type of multilingualism did not present a problem of comprehensibility because before the appearance of nation-states 'audiences were themselves macaronic' (*ibid.*: 41). The historical avant-garde of the twentieth century and its intercultural theatre practices presented new attempts at theatrical multilingualism, often marked by what Emma Cox describes as 'mismatches of intention' and 'the risk of decontextualization, appropriation and commodification' (2014: 12). Today's theatrical multilingualism is mostly practiced in the context of international theatre festivals, co-productions, and touring shows that echo and appeal to the strategies of communication in multicultural urban centres, where individuals tend to switch freely from one language to another. It is slowly becoming a prominent element of productions created by and featuring migrant artists or those that address migration as a theme. The Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin serves as one of the primary examples of this tendency.⁴

Prompted by questions concerning truth and authenticity, multilingualism in theatre tends to merge and absorb its many languages and so it bears resemblance to 'theatrical syncretism' (Balme 1999: 1-2). To better reflect the 'global pathways' of the post-nation (Bhabha 2014: 259-275), theatrical multilingualism conjures a performative version of utopian siblinghood made of diverse but equal subjects. As such, it seems to inquire 'whether our obsessive interest in language and its identitarian qualities should necessarily be read as a reification of alterity' that leads to 'a rigid association between state, language, identity and the apportioning of rights' (Polezzi 2012: 347). Methodologically, theatrical multilingualism relies upon syncretic tactics of intercultural performance; politically, it provokes and intervenes; artistically, it borrows and builds upon the communication strategies of vernacular multilingualism. As a system of multiple code-switching and code-mixing, it relies on our ability to construct meaning by engaging with para-linguistic signs vital to any speech-making such as changes in rhythm and intonation, use of pauses and tones, speed of delivery, gestures, body postures, and facial expressions.

The accessibility of a multilingual dialogue marks the scale of openness and comprehensibility which theatrical multilingualism offers. To monolingual citizens, a multilingual production might remain mostly closed, as Marvin Carlson proposes (2006: 180-215), but if its spectators are multilingual cosmopolitans themselves, it can be partially open. Defamiliarisation of audience perception is one of the artistic devices of such performance. The act of estrangement puts a monolingual audience member 'into a critical stance or puzzlement' (Phipps 2019: 13). What moments of this multilingual dialogue will be accessible and

← 4. The Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin was featured in the Artist in Focus Section of this journal's previous issue. See *European Journal of Theatre and Performance*, Issue 2, 2020, pp. 464-589.

to who varies from one encounter to the next. This ambiguity, I believe, represents the most challenging and exciting work of theatrical multilingualism. I will examine some of gains and failures of this ambiguity in my discussion of Wajdi Mouawad's 2017 *Tous des oiseaux* and its 2019 version *Birds of a Kind*.

Dramaturgies of Authenticity: The Case of Making *Tous des oiseaux*

Linda Gaboriau, the English language translator of Mouawad's plays, has said that writers 'are the witnesses of our time. They're people who really take the time to look more deeply into what's going on in human nature or in the political [and] social world around us' (Gaboriau in Giammaria 2019: par. 6). Mouawad is one such writer. A Christian Maronite, Mouawad was born in Lebanon in 1968. He experienced the plight of war and exile at a very early age when his family fled to France in 1978 and then, after they were refused the necessary papers, to Montréal in 1983. Mouawad translates these personal experiences into his theatre and literary works. His tetralogy — *Le sang des promesses – Littoral* (1997), *Incendies* (2003), *Forêts* (2006), and *Ciels* (2009) — stages the world's recent history with its wars, mass migration, and hatred of the other. Mouawad makes the protagonists of each play responsible for setting this history right, often against their will or knowledge. In *Tous des oiseaux*, the convoluted history of one family emerges as a troublesome legacy, which the younger generation is called to commemorate. Unpacking the layers of secrets that make up the story of his family allows Eitan, the central character, to challenge the idea of personal and national identity as something fixed and singular. In this way, as

one critic notes, the play 'takes us to the heart of the political, existential, and religious debates that upset today's citizens' (Poncet 2017, para. 8; my translation).

As often is the case in his theatre, language is the focus of Mouawad's artistic and political investigation. The aesthetic and ethical potential of on-stage multilingualism drives Mouawad's message forward. *Tous des oiseaux* evokes today's vernacular, when different members of a nuclear family can share several languages and can switch from one linguistic idiom to the other. This multilingualism serves as a mechanism of the play's factuality: it is an authenticator of each character's linguistic and cultural identity, with the result that it becomes a special dramaturgical tool of theatrical verisimilitude (Mouawad 2017b: 1:25 min).

Mouawad wrote the original text of *Tous des oiseaux* in French, because this way he could better articulate 'the story he wanted to tell' (Gaboriau in Giammaria 2019: para. 8). For the purposes of linguistic authenticity on stage — that is, to allow his characters speak in the languages true to their dramatic universe and background — he invited four translators fluent in French, English, Hebrew, German, and Arabic to work on the script for the performance. Known for his habits to research and write his texts together with his actors as well as designers and to pursue what he calls a 'polyphonic writing' (Mouawad in Farcet 2017: 5; my translation), this time Mouawad had to finish the core of the dialogue before the translators and the actors joined him in the rehearsal hall. This condition created new circumstances for Mouawad's writing. It forced him to become more self-aware as a writer and to make the text more definitive and less lyrical both on page and on stage (*ibid.*). Whilst Mouawad 'wrote and rewrote the play, scene by scene, constantly tweaking language and dialogue based on the actors' input as they rehearsed' (Gaboriau in Simmons 2019: para. 5), the team of translators worked on bringing the emerging linguistic authenticity forward:

[Each morning he] would come in with a new scene in French, and [Linda Gaboriau] would translate it into English even if it was going to be performed in another language because English was the lingua franca (common language) of this motley crew (of actors) who had come from Tel Aviv, Vienna, Berlin. So we often had certain conversations in English because several of the actors did speak English as a second language, but not French. [...] And then Wajdi would decide which scenes would be in German, or Hebrew, or Arabic, and then those translators would translate them (*ibid.*: para. 6-7).

This new multilingual dialogue was chosen to speak to the truth of the fictional situation of the multilingual family on stage and to the authenticity of the performers' linguistic background, even though Mouawad had to accept the fact that his original French dialogue would not be spoken on stage, a feature to which I will return later.

The Legend of the Amphibian Bird

Set between New York and Jerusalem, *Tous des oiseaux* unfolds across three generations of one Jewish family whose history is tightly linked to the multiple Israel-Palestine conflicts. The Canadian theater critic Barbara Gabriel asks 'how does one 'translate' one person's story into another's, one people's history into that of their enemy?' (2019: para. 6). Mouawad places domestic conflict within a framework of historical trauma, central to 'his reading of the Israeli-Palestinean *agon*' (*ibid.*). To elevate the story of *Tous des oiseaux* to mythological dimensions, Mouawad uses the life narrative and the philosophy of Hassan Ibn Muhamed el Wazzân, the protagonist of Natalie Zemon Davis' book *Trickster Travels: The Search for Leo Africanus* (2007).

Known in the West as Leo Africanus, el Wazzân was a Berber diplomat from sixteenth-century Granada. Enslaved by Spanish corsairs, he ended up at the court of Pope Leo X. Leo Africanus spoke many languages and to save his life he agreed to convert to Christianity. In Italy, he studied Latin and Italian, taught Arabic, and wrote a book about Africa. For Mouawad, this enigmatic and symbolic character of the past consolidates many questions that have been haunting him for years, including 'How do you become your own enemy? or, how does one become an "amphibian bird"?' (Duplan et al. 2017: 6).

The legend of an amphibian bird — as narrated by Leo Africanus on stage — is the principal metaphor of Mouawad's piece. It speaks of the inner and outer metamorphosis one must undergo to understand oneself and the other. The bird, as Leo's tale goes, was so drawn to the life of the fish that despite his family's warning it plunged into the water to join them. When the bird fell, it grew gills and began to breathe, and so it turned into a fish:

And breathing, flying-swimming, he moves among the fish with scales of jade, gold and pink, as fascinated with him as he is with them, and the bird greets them, saying "Here I am! It's me! I am the amphibian bird arriving in your midst. I am one of you. I am one of you!" (Mouawad 2018: 109).

To Mouawad, this tale of transformation speaks to the truth of a migrant's journey and is called upon to teach his audiences something profound 'of our time, of our world and our relationship to the Other, to the enemy, so to speak' (Mouawad 2017a: 5). Like Leo Africanus, Mouawad tends to think of himself as an eternal traveller, a penguin 'for whom there is no centre, only the voice that becomes home' (Mouawad in Farcet 2017, 9; my translation). Identity, he continues, 'is a movement, there is no fixed centre, only relativity. For a traveller,

when they are asked “where are you from?”, it is possible to answer “I am from here or there”, but it is impossible to say “my identity is my origin” without denying the road they have travelled upon’ (*ibid.*).

With travelling, the need for survival and adaptation comes. The story of Leo Africanus refers to one possible strategy of such adaptation or *taqīyah* (Duplan et al. 2017: 6), which in Islam describes ‘the practice of concealing one’s belief and foregoing ordinary religious duties when under threat of death or injury’ (Stefon 2020: para. 1). Even if there is no definitive proof that the historical Al-Wazzân used this tactic of survival in his exilic journey (Duplan et al. 2017: 6), the play makes a suggestion that he could have resorted to it. *Tous des oiseaux* does not tell us much about what really happened to Al-Wazzân at the Pope’s court, but it makes use of the symbolism of his performative presence on stage. Most of the time Leo Africanus remains silent, but when he does decide to communicate he speaks in Arabic and uses the language of metaphors. Through his silent presence, Leo Africanus connects the characters’ past and present. His unspoken story of choices and survival underlines every internal conflict that each of the play’s characters faces. In *Tous des oiseaux*, Leo Africanus’ story of exilic metamorphosis and simulacrum is the subject of Wahida’s doctoral dissertation. This research and the presence of Leo Africanus on stage helps Wahida connect back to her own roots and better understand the fragments of her shattered identity. A speaker of many tongues, Leo is also summoned at the most crucial moment in the play: he is called to speak to David, the father of protagonist Eitan, in David’s lost mother tongue and so help him peacefully transition from the world of the living to that of the dead.

It is not by chance, therefore, that the play is entitled *Tous des oiseaux* — as already in its title it refers to the multiple truths and journeys that each of its characters possesses. To Antoni Cimolino, who staged the play in Canada, the title suggests that ‘Wazzan is intrigued by the [amphibian]

bird’s ability to defy the conventional demands of identity. Birds are not bound by walls or borders. If you could ask a bird, “Where are you from?” it would likely answer, “From all over!” Birds’ migratory routes inform their sense of identity, but no single place defines them’ (Cimolino 2019: 10). Consequently, this idea of fluent or malleable identities that make up the subjectivity of migrants and that define their sense of multiple belongings becomes central to the play, whilst the multilingual dialogue testifies to the ambiguities and ruptures that these migrants face.

At the same time, in the Parisian staging of this play, the dialogue spoken in four languages but not French created a special effect of disappearance. Projected onto moving vertical panels, the French dialogue written by Mouawad turned into a technical element of the production, used to make the action accessible to La Colline’s audiences. For Mouawad himself, losing the auditory presence of French on his stage brought back the traumatic experiences of his childhood, when he was forgetting his mother tongue.⁵ Although losing one’s native language as a child might not always be as painful as we might imagine, understanding what this loss means can be distressing, especially if this understanding comes to this person in their adulthood. It can make one’s need to re-learn this language ‘a terrible paradox’:

No one can relearn one’s mother tongue. The verb ‘learn’ poorly connects to the concept of the mother tongue. A mother tongue cannot be studied. It is acquired. Relearn is a powerful disenchantment. It’s an assumption, a hypothesis. As adults, we feel the need to go back to this experience of losing one’s mother tongue, so to be able to observe it consciously, to understand and to appropriate it. Maybe in the disappearance of my writing in this show, there was

5. French is Mouawad’s acquired or second language, yet it has always been the leading device of his artistic expression both on page and on stage.

a desire to return to this experience. During the rehearsals, I wondered if it was a choice just for the show, or if it was the author's pride, my ego, that forced me to investigate these sensations. I did fear what might happen when the audience would no longer have access to my language! (Mouawad in Farcet 2017: 7; my translation)

This fear forced Mouawad to respect the language of each character. It marked the search for linguistic truth or linguistic authenticity in the play, in which one's identity and one's mother tongue are deeply interconnected.

Speaking in Mother Tongues

The opening image of *Tous des oiseaux* takes the audience into the heart of the play's conflict. The scene is a flashback that depicts the first encounter between the star-crossed lovers Eitan, a German scientist of Jewish background, and Wahida, an Arab-American historian. Their very first meeting takes place in a university library somewhere in New York. The book *Ibn Khallikán's Biographical Dictionary*, serves as a dramaturgical device of chance: it is a magic object that brings the lovers together. Before Eitan appears on stage for the first time, we see Leo Africanus presenting Wahida with this book. This gesture is also symbolic: it suggests a tight connection not only between this historical figure and the play's characters, but also between narratives of the past and the stories of the present.

When Eitan joins Wahida on stage, he recognises the book as a token. A 'skeptical type' who does not believe 'in magic or the mysterious meaning of life' (Mouawad 2018: 5), Eitan falls in love with Wahida and with the idea that chance brought them together. The book, which

Eitan would find in this library time and again, lands in Wahida's hands and thus serves as a connecting tissue between the play's characters and their multilayered histories. As often in Mouawad's theatre, it is a written word — a letter, an engraving on a tombstone, or a book — that moves the action forward and serves as a vessel of the play's truth.

The action reaches the next stage of dramatic tension when Eitan decides to introduce Wahida to his family. His father David, a Jew of traditional beliefs, condemns their love because of the religious and cultural differences between the young people. To David, Eitan's duty in life lays with the guilt of the survivor that many Jewish people share. This guilt imposes an obligation: Eitan must marry a Jewish woman to ensure a continuation of his tribe and his family. To David, Eitan's falling in love with someone of a non-Jewish origin and specifically an Arab is an act of betrayal (Mouawad 2018: 32), if not 'patricide' (*ibid.*: 38). To the scientist Eitan, who believes in the total power of forty-six chromosomes, 'suffering cannot be transmitted from one generation to another!' (*ibid.*: 35-36) 'Let me say this in Hebrew!', Eitan insists, '*the experiences of a human being during his lifetime do not affect his chromosomes, no matter how brutal those experiences are!*' (*ibid.*: 36).

To prove his truth and to uncover a family secret, which Eitan believes defines his identity and his relationships with his father, Eitan decides to seek the answers in Jerusalem. Together with Wahida, Eitan travels to Israel to meet his grandmother Leah, yet a terrorist attack on the Allenby Bridge that connects the Palestinians of the West Bank and Jordan interrupts this trip.⁶ Eitan ends up in an Israeli hospital in a coma while Wahida is left to bring his estranged family together. In the second part of the play, the truth — different to each character — resurfaces. This causes repercussions impossible for any of them to reconcile.

⁶ For more on the historical background of the play, see Diaz 2018: 139-155.



Tous des oiseaux written and directed by Wajdi Mouawad. La Colline – théâtre national November 17 – December 17, 2017

Jalal Altawil as Wazzan, Souheila Yacoub as Wahida

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Tous des oiseaux written and directed by Wajdi Mouawad. La Colline – théâtre national November 17 – December 17, 2017

Jérémy Galiana as Eitan, Souheila Yacoub as Wahida

© Simon Gosselin. Image courtesy of La Colline – théâtre national



Tous des oiseaux written and directed by Wajdi Mouawad. La Colline – théâtre national November 17 – December 17, 2017

Jérémie Galiana as Eitan, Souheila Yacoub as Wahida

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In Mouawad's version of *Romeo and Juliet*, Eitan stands for everything male and rational, someone 'who believes everything is an object and who doesn't waste time indulging in idle daydreaming' (Mouawad 2018: 5). Wahida, on the other hand, represents everything irrational and sensual, so her presence confuses and angers people. The ways these two characters connect to language — rationally or sensually — illustrates their differences and serves for Mouawad as the major tactic of dramaturgical authenticity. To better express themselves, the characters must communicate beyond their mother tongues; they must speak in different languages.

Eitan is both the benefactor and the victim of this multilingualism, as his ability to speak several languages reflects the consequences of war and exile. When Eitan begins to question his origins, 'a historical chasm opens, sorrows rise, and the necessity of the truth becomes as hot as a hot iron. It's a double-edged knife: this multiplicity of languages is a wealth for Eitan, but very soon, the reasons for this multiplicity will make his misfortune' (Mouawad in Farcet 2017: 8; my translation). When Eitan needs to make sure his father follows his argument, he switches to Hebrew, his father's native language. However, when the doctor tells Eitan's family that they should speak to Eitan in his mother tongue, Eitan's mother Norah volunteers German as it is her native language. At the same time, the language of Eitan's emotional attachments is English, because he uses English to communicate with Wahida.

With Wahida's bilingualism (she speaks Arabic and English), Mouawad draws a different picture of linguistic authenticity. If Eitan's multilingualism appears as something unrehearsed and unprompted, a natural outcome of his multicultural upbringing, in Wahida's case her bilingualism needs to be re-discovered, accepted, and owned as her own. Eitan has spoken numerous languages since birth and so his multilingualism challenges the notion of mother tongue as something deeply

visceral, emotionally binding, and subconscious. Witnessing the attack on the Allenby Bridge and finding herself on the Palestinian side connects Wahida back to her roots and native language:

I went to the other side of the wall', Wahida says, 'I wondered in the dust of Palestine and I felt I have come home. I slept in the homes of people I didn't know and when they asked me my father's name, I burst into tears. Never since his death had I heard my name pronounced so well (Mouawad 2018: 86).

Here not only Wahida re-discovers her bilingualism, she realises that even in the case of shifting identities, the psycho-physicality of her mother tongue serves as the basis to her own embodied identity. When Wahida hears 'the song of her name' spoken in the language of her father and when she realises that 'all of Ramallah smells like [her] mother' (*ibid.*: 88), Wahida decides to stay in Palestine. This sensorial return to the roots, the sounds, the smells, and the dust of a land that she never knew helps Wahida face who she is and fight the imposed truth of immigration, regardless of what she may have learned about herself in the United States. All her childhood, Wahida explains, she was trained to hide her identity. Raised in an Anglophone milieu, Wahida is familiar with her native language only through her parents. However, she never claimed the English language or U.S. culture as her own: 'I am an Arab and no one taught me how to be one. On the contrary, I was taught to find it disgusting and I vomited it out of me' (*ibid.*: 87). As an academic, she dedicated her life to prove 'how dangerous it is to let the principle of identity dictate your life, how stupid it is to cling to your lost identity' (*ibid.*: 89). Hearing and speaking her mother tongue in Palestine, Wahida rejects all these philosophies: 'The reality is simple', she says, 'This is what I am [...] I belong to this, and if I want to escape it, I have to start by taking a look at myself' (*ibid.*: 89).

In Wahida's case, therefore, Mouawad follows the Freudian reading of mother tongue as something that, as Yasemin Yildiz explains, helps us 'fantasize a bodily as well as familial grounding in language', tightly linked to such important manifestations of familial intimacy as 'affect, gender, and kinship' (2012: 14). Wahida's monologue, in which she explains why she wants to stay in Palestine, reinforces the idea of a mother tongue as linked to the image of a maternal body. It also evokes Friedrich Kittler's account of how the emergence of the eighteenth-century nation state was tightly connected to the implicit sexuality of the mother's body.⁷ According to Kittler — as cited by Yildiz — the mouth of the mother who reads a book to her child links together the sound this mouth makes, the written letter associated with it, and the sense of belonging. This 'manufactured proximity between "mother" and "language" stages the fantasy behind the modern notion of the mother tongue—namely, that the mother tongue emanates from the mother's body' (Yildiz 2012: 12). This statement also implies that communicating in one's native language is one's special privilege if not pleasure. The word 'mother' in the expression 'mother tongue' 'stands in for the allegedly organic nature of this structure by supplying it with notions of maternal origin, affective and corporeal intimacy, and natural kinship' (*ibid.*: 10). The ideologists of the nation state used this argument to claim the mother tongue as a foundation for the nation's homogeneity, originality, and authenticity. Monolingualism invited individuals to imagine one's mother tongue as their only true language and 'through this possession to be organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture, and nation' (*ibid.*: 2). Wahida's journey back to her mother tongue speaks to this theory of the maternal and the sensual. As she joins the Palestinians, Wahida comes to recognise her true self. By accepting — instead of rejecting, as she previously had done — her own linguistic and ethnic

identity as an Arab and as a woman, she declares her place in the world as a new cosmopolitan. In this way she also becomes a foil figure to Leo Africanus, a man of many languages and affiliations.

From Paris to Stratford: On the Concretization of a Multilingual Disorder

Contextualising the staging of the English version of *Tous des oiseaux*, translated as *Birds of a Kind*, for the predominantly Anglophone audiences of Ontario's Stratford Theatre Festival, the director of the production Antoni Cimolino said:

Wajdi [Mouawad] writes often in this play of an individual's mother tongue [...] Perhaps for all creatures this is the single strongest source of identity: the call of our mother. Respecting the vital importance of the mother tongue, this Stratford Festival production – like the original in Paris – is performed in multiple languages: German, Hebrew, Arabic and English. The play was developed with the contribution of artists from all over the world, especially Palestinians and Israelis. Its many languages, each unique, bring nuance and richness of texture to the piece. Yet – paradoxically, perhaps – this diversity also brings clarity. (Cimolino in *Stage Door News* 2019: para. 5)

Cimolino's directorial interpretation of Mouawad's play exemplifies an attempt at transcultural transposition.

To move this multilingual text into a new cultural setting, he uses what literary historian Felix Vodička calls 'concretization' — an act of cultural

⁷ Friedrich Kittler foregrounds this connection between the nation state and the figure of the mother in his 1990 book *Discourse networks 1800/1900*.



Birds of a Kind written by Wajdi Mouawad, translated by Linda Gaboriau, directed by Antoni Cimolino. Stratford Festival 2019

(L to R) Deb Filler as Leah, Baraka Rahmani as Wahida, Ron Kennell as Rabbi, Sarah Orenstein as Norah, Alon Nashman as David, Harry Nelken as Etgar, Jakob Ehman as Eitan

© David Hou. Image courtesy of Stratford Festival Archives

translation that takes place on the side of the receiver as it designates ‘the reflection of a work in the consciousness of those to whom it is an aesthetic object’ (Vodička 1975: 110). According to Vodička, a work of art — a piece of literature or a theatre performance — can be concretized in many ways: ‘not only can its schematic places be concretized, but also can the structure of the entire work if it is projected against the background of the structure of the immediate literary tradition. A work constantly changes under changing temporal, local, social and even individual conditions’ (*ibid.*: 110). The same mechanisms of concretization define the work of theatregoers in aesthetic reception, which takes place within two histories: ‘that of the work within its literary and social context, and that of a receiver in his own time, and within the system of ideological and aesthetic expectations’ (Pavis 1982: 72). Cimolino’s staging exemplifies these processes of concretization. To direct a ‘story of crossing cultural borders’, Cimolino chose *Birds of a Kind* for his 2019 season. This choice reflected the theme of the season — ‘Breaking Boundaries’ — and allowed Cimolino to ask such difficult questions as ‘how do we stay true to ourselves as we make new lives in a new society? [...] What is a life lived between two worlds? What is a migrant? A refugee? A mutant?’ (Cimolino 2019: 9).

As a cultural institution, Stratford Theatre Festival is marked by its contradictory role and history in developing English Canadian theatre. Vincent Massey, the first Canadian-born Governor General of the country, ‘believed that without art’, and very specifically without theatre, ‘there was no nation’ (Salter 2004: 149). He advocated creating a theatre festival in rural Ontario, which would serve as ‘a binding agent of nation building. Yet there was a fatal flaw at the center of this vision: the festival was in part based on the staging of Shakespeare, a foreign dramatist. He was the elusive origin, and no matter how original Stratford sought to be, it would be only an imitation’ (*ibid.*:150). Still today the paradox of the festival rests with the fact that it ‘cites and recites

the words of Shakespeare, yet its own identity is borrowed, inauthentic, and its place, both figuratively and literally, is displaced’ (*ibid.*: 150).

Recently, specifically with the appointment of Antoni Cimolino as its Artistic Director in 2013, Stratford Theatre Festival has begun questioning its place in the Canadian theatre landscape (Yeo 2019). To Cimolino, Stratford remains a home for the Canadian Shakespeare, but it is also ‘a meal of many different flavours’ (in Paton-Evans 2015: para. 30). Producing *Birds of a Kind* at Stratford was in line with the plan for diversification and authentication of difference at the festival. To a certain degree, it was an act of acknowledgement of the festival’s changing multicultural and multilingual audience, which rarely finds its representation on this stage. To achieve this objective, Cimolino invited Linda Gaboriau to transpose Mouawad’s original performance into the multilingual context of English Canada.

A longstanding collaborator of Mouawad and someone who spent six months in the rehearsal hall of Paris working on *Tous des oiseaux*, Gaboriau had a special perspective on Mouawad’s quest for linguistic truth on stage. In Cimolino’s words, Gaboriau ‘had the really challenging job of translating a poem, in French — that had influence from all sorts of other languages — into English, and keep its raw, awkward, metaphorical quality... and not try to iron it out and make it all sound normal’ (in Simmons 2019: para. 11). Preserving the characters’ linguistic identity has become ‘a key component in presenting the play to a Stratford audience in its full authenticity and with its intended impact’ (*ibid.*: para. 13). The selection and the distribution of languages took place during the rehearsal period and these decisions were ‘based upon the speaker, situation and dramatic intent’ (Cimolino 2019: 10):

We went through the script a couple of times [...] I contributed by having a few question marks. [...] Most of my questions [...] were



Birds of a Kind written by Wajdi Mouawad, translated by Linda Gaboriau, directed by Antoni Cimolino. Stratford Festival 2019
Jakob Ehman as Eitan and Baraka Rahmani as Wahida
© David Hou. Image courtesy of Stratford Festival Archives

about what was intended here and what's the back story on this. So many of my questions for Linda weren't about her actual translation, but just about the genesis of what was happening (Cimolino in Simmons 2019: para. 12).

This approach provoked many linguistic shifts and changes in the English script. The most significant change was a transposition of the improbable encounter between Eitan's father David and Leo Africanus from Hebrew and Arabic into Hebrew and English.

To better situate the analysis of this symbolic encounter between David and Leo Africanus, it is necessary to turn to the plot of *Tous des oiseaux* once again. When Eitan begins to question his origins, he discovers that David, his Jewish father, was born Palestinian. However, David does not know this truth and will discover it only at the very end of the play. This discovery will cause his deadly stroke. As the play unfolds, we learn together with David that he was the product of nurture not nature. Etgar, a soldier in the Israeli army during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, found a baby boy in one of the destroyed Palestinian villages. He named and adopted him, and never looked for the boy's birth parents. However, when the family reconciles in Jerusalem, Leah, David's adoptive mother, insists that Etgar reveals the truth. Unable to accept his origins, David suffers a fatal stroke. To make peace with his past and to prepare to meet his eternity, David now must face his true self, and he must do it in the language of his biological mother. To mobilise this argument dramaturgically, Mouawad brings Leo Africanus into the action, who now recites the parable of the amphibian bird to David and teaches him the tale of a true self.

In the original Paris staging, Leo Africanus was played by Jalal Altawil, a Syrian actor and refugee. He recited the parable in Arabic while David responded to him in Hebrew, with the Arabic letters and French surtitles

projected onto the screens. In this scene, according to Altawil (2019),⁸ Mouawad broke the dramaturgical conventions of probability and theatrical verisimilitude that he had established earlier. Instead, he created the impossible: not only did Mouawad make his characters converse in the language of metaphors and dreams, taking their dialogue beyond the locutionary function of a referential speech act, he also brought together the past and the present. Paradoxically, this gesture of logical untruth permitted the playwright to reach the most truthful moment in the play, not factual to the reality of life but authentic to the logic of his narrative. Although Leo speaks in Arabic and David responds in Hebrew, the power of theatrical illusion allows them mutual understanding (Altawil 2019). David's line, which follows Leo's monologue, shows this: 'In your voice, I hear the language spoken by the mother I never knew. Your voice like a net cast on the sea to capture ancient fragments of me. We have to console those who are dying. Thank you. But as beautiful as your story is, it's a story to soothe the living. For the dying man, nothing is repaired' (Mouawad 2018: 109). Thus, by staging an improbable meeting between David and Leo Africanus, Mouawad wishes to overcome the political, geographical, linguistic, and symbolic borders that mark peoples' identities and histories today.

In Stratford's production, Leo Africanus was played by Aladeen Tawfeek, who spoke mostly in English. This mode of delivery created an effect of intimacy with the audience, as they were not asked to put in the additional labour of reading the surtitles. However, this gesture created a new sense of un-truth. The parable spoken in English instead of Arabic sounded more exoticised, if not objectified. It created a different type of audience and story alienation. In the original staging, the act of reading surtitles and listening to the parable in Arabic forced the audience

⁸ Altawil discussed his work during a public meeting with the audience at the Festival transamerique in Montreal on 13 May, 2019.

to pay closer attention to their own labour and to the meaning of the spoken text. When Cimolino removed spoken Arabic from his production, he undermined Mouawad's original project of linguistic authenticity, despite Cimolino's claims of following it to the 'T' (Cimolino 2019: 10).⁹ This choice also carried ideological implications. Assuming that the majority of the Stratford audience was predominantly English-speaking, Cimolino went with a different gesture of authenticity: he chose to privilege his audience's emotional attachment to the story.

Moreover, this choice undercut the implicit political project of the original script. By removing spoken French from his stage and privileging four other languages, Mouawad challenged the idea of a nation state based on the homogeneity of its citizens' language. Mouawad's performance thus spoke to the reality of today, in which neither the citizens of France nor those of Canada are monolingual. By bringing English back to the Stratford's stage and by using it in the key scenes about the characters' identity and regret, Cimolino diminished Mouawad's political quest. Instead, the Stratford's version spoke in a token version of English Canadian authenticity. It upheld the official version of Canadian multiculturalism in which one's linguistic, ethnic, and diasporic identity becomes a commodity of difference. Using the help of many language coaches, the production did not always hire performers whose native tongue was identical to that of the characters they played and it took away the voice of Leo Africanus when it made him speak in English and not Arabic. Such choices speak to the linguistic and artistic peculiarities of this work, but also — and perhaps even more significantly — to the political and ethical impact of multilingualism as a gesture of globalisation.

⁹ Cimolino claims that back in 2007 he was the one to introduce Mouawad to the book by Natalie Zemon Davis. Hence he lists a long history of this work's development, suggesting the true kinship between this work and his own artistic and political agenda (Cimolino 2019: 10).

Theatrical multilingualism subscribes to the idea that, in a world characterised by global movement, presenting the multilingual citizens of today's world as interlocutors of their own stories and as self-translators envisions them in the dynamic shift 'from [the] objects of translation to [its] active subjects' (Pollezi 2012: 348). Multilingualism constitutes an artistic and political response within contemporary theatre to the new material and political conditions of global movement. As Hans-Thies Lehmann points out, not only do 'multi-lingual theatre texts dismantle the unity of national languages', they also 'asser[t] a polyglossia on several levels, playfully showing gaps, abruptions and unsolved conflicts, even clumsiness and loss of control' (2006: 147). This new polyglossia is marked both by pragmatic and artistic reasoning, yet it also suspends the work of reception by immersing spectators into the state of not-knowing. Theatrical multilingualism reminds its audiences that one must recognise today's linguistic norm as plurilingual, with the work of translation emerging from within the multicultural spaces of strangers and neighbours. Theatrical multilingualism invites its audiences to practice skills of comprehension developed in situations of everyday trans-cultural encounter. It employs on-stage and inter-character translations to help spectators follow the action. Finally, theatrical multilingualism suggests more nuanced modes of perception, as our interpretation of multilingual performances often rests with our corporeal imagination.

As Mouawad's work demonstrates, theatrical multilingualism defines the author/audience interconnection anew and thus creates theatrical communities of hope: a utopian siblinghood of equal subjects. A multilingual performance — as the two examples studied in this article reveal — can be authentic and factual and it can also serve as a testing device for the political intentions and failures of its makers. •

فهي لا تُشبهك في شيء وإذا ذهبت إليها فسوف تموت حتماً كما
ستموت هي أيضاً إذا جئت إلينا ،



Birds of a Kind written by Wajdi Mouawad, translated by Linda Gaboriau, directed by Antoni Cimolino. Stratford Festival 2019
(L to R) Aladeen Tawfeek as Wazzan, Baraka Rahmani as Wahida, Alon Nashman as David
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