

Worlds Within: Hayes Gordon, Zika Nester, Henri Szeps and the Transformations of Australian Theatre

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In *Worlds Within*, Vilashini Cooppan challenges the idea that the movement of global capital acts as a homogenising force, arguing for the significance of the ‘cultural and psychic’ connections it engenders, which operate variously with, against and beyond the flow of capital (3). This is important as a way of linking our understanding of individual lives to national life. Australian literature and particularly Australian theatre are located in and connected to world literature in many important and unexplored ways. Yet some significant contributions to this placement, this series of connections with world literature and theatre, are as yet undocumented. This essay seeks to address a gap in the understanding of modern theatre in Australia and its direct connections with European and American theatre. It explores the ways in which the actors Hayes Gordon (1920–1999), Zika Nester (1928–2014) and Henri Szeps (born 1943) lived out, and in Szeps’s case continue to live out, what Cooppan calls ‘twinned identifications and doubled dreams’ (4). Cooppan does not accept that globalisation is a ‘heterogenising’ force in which national cultures are transcended, instead charting a ‘politics of relationality’ in which the national and the global are dual ideas held in balance though subject to change (4). This is a useful idea for understanding any nation, including Australia.

The contribution of Gordon, Nester and Szeps to ‘national culture’ in its most expansive and ideal form in Australia is immense. Theirs is a socially radical and highly ethical contribution inspired by internationalist ideals. It derives primarily from their training in the techniques of Stanislavsky as interpreted by Hayes Gordon. These actors contributed to the development of the most successful independent theatre in Australia, the Ensemble Theatre in Sydney. Each of the actors also contributed to the development of a strong and vital national theatre in Australia.

A politics of relationality that transcends the national and the global is particularly relevant to these three actors because they have dedicated their lives to using the acting techniques of Stanislavsky, a system of acting in which relationality is central. At its core this relationality refers to an understanding of one’s own life, emotions and feelings, one’s own psyche, and the lives of others, through acting. The social context for this relational acting embodies a cultural ideal of creating a theatre for the people irrespective of their income or class. This ideal infused the work of the Ensemble Theatre from its inception, connecting Australian theatre to theatre in both Russia and the United States.

Before analysing the work of Gordon, Nester and Szeps it is important to clarify the framing histories of the nation that help us to understand their lives. Cooppan’s analysis of nations and the effects of global flows of capital, people and ideas is relevant to Australia. There is also a parallel analysis of postwar Australia that is useful in understanding the work of actors and writers, and informs national culture to this day. In short, Australia may usefully be understood as having entered a postimperial period of history following World War 2. This ‘stage’ of history is not over.

express their appreciation for the actors, with the actors standing on stage (Pender, interview with Zika Nester).

Gordon's teaching of Method acting techniques drew on his own understanding of Stanislavsky through Meisner, Strasberg and others. It was revolutionary for many local actors who were more accustomed to obeying a director and being told what to do on stage and how to do it. According to Zika Nester Hayes Gordon 'asked us questions . . . it wasn't a didactic way of teaching . . . we were there for the audience . . . he was such an idealist . . .' (Pender, interview with Zika Nester).

By 1970 Hayes Gordon was in demand as an actor and director. In that year he directed a re-enactment of Captain Cook's landing in 1770, at Kurnell, in front of an audience of some 50,000, and in the presence of Her Majesty the Queen and Prince Philip. The event, for which Hayes had spent many weeks preparing, was interrupted by some noisy university students, who upstaged the actors, and there were problems with the sound system (Curran and Ward 206). Yet Hayes Gordon, the once blacklisted American director of this strange pageant, who had arrived in Australia with no money and his reputation in the US smeared, had by this time achieved considerable success as a performer, actor trainer and theatre director. The invitation to direct the re-enactment on this historic occasion demonstrates that he had also secured insider status in his adopted country. Gordon brought his talent as a performer, his experience of various acting teachers and Broadway musical theatre as well as a fierce sense of independence as an artist to his new life in Australia, and into the lives of many actors who went on to make a major contribution to theatre in Australia. One of these actors was Zika Nester.

Zika Nester

When Zika Nester arrived in Australia in 1953 she looked forward to furthering her career as a concert pianist. Born in Harbin, China in 1928 to Russian parents, Nester played with the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra at the age of 11. She spoke and read Russian fluently. In spite of her father, Mikhail Goldberg's disapproval, she also took acting lessons from theatre director and actor Zoya Arkhadava Prybiskava (Pender, interview with Zika Nester).⁴ Nester's teacher had been a student of Stanislavsky and took the young girl under her wing, helped her to develop as an actor, and encouraged her to perform on stage in Shanghai. But her parents steered her towards a career as a concert pianist.

Zika and her husband Dimitry struggled to make a living when they first moved to Sydney, having been prevented from taking any money out of China. Nester taught piano to children and attempted to break in to the concert scene in Sydney. Romola Constantino told her that her concert appearances kept her in stockings (Pender, interview with Zika Nester). This did not dampen her hopes. But it was Nester's appointment with Eugene Goossens that forced her to reconsider her career plans:

. . . he asked me to play for him, and I asked him what he wanted me to play. To cut a long story short I ended up playing a whole concert for him. And I was getting quite worried because he kept saying, 'What else can you play?'—Doesn't he like anything? Were the people in Shanghai so wrong? Was I just hopeless? And then I remember he got up—and he was a big man, and there's little me. And he comes towards me, and I thought this big bear of a man, is he going to strangle me or what? And he put his paws on my shoulders, and now

