

Multiculturalism, Theatre and the Politics of Liberation: The Melbourne Workers Theatre and the Turkish Community

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Multiculturalism, although not fully defined as a policy in the strictest sense of the term, was nevertheless given official status by the Whitlam Labor government during its brief period in office from 1972 to 1975. This recognition from 'above' was a delayed reaction to Australia's cultural diversity 'below', in civil society, in that the mass immigration of non-Anglo/Celts to Australia had begun towards the end of the Second World War and had continued unabated through the fifties. By the seventies, then, mass immigration had radically altered the ethnic mix of the country whose heterogeneity the existing predominantly British colonial institutions were singularly ill-equipped to handle.

The patterns of immigration were quite clear. The immigrants of the post-war years came from the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe.¹ They were principally from the working class or peasantry and became the industrial, construction or rural workers required for Australia's economic expansion. The immigrants of the sixties were of a similar kind, although they now included better educated and also professional people, some of them recruited under the family reunion program.

The beginning of the seventies saw an influx of Arabic-speaking people, among them Lebanese who went into small business. A variety of Muslim communities appeared at this time. Then followed a whole range of non-European immigrants including South Americans and Turks. The latter, who are of special interest to this paper, provided factory labour above all else. The eighties saw more Turkish and Middle Eastern immigrants of one kind and another, as well as Asian groups,

the Vietnamese being the largest of them.² Immigration policy towards the end of the eighties focused on Asians, and particularly on those who were supposed to invest their capital in Australian business and thus 'save' Australia from economic recession.

This panorama, while incomplete, at least helps to mark out which major groups besides Anglo/Celts constitute Australia's ethnic-cultural diversity today. Secondly, it shows that the diversity is made up of several layers whose 'texture' is defined by the time and type of immigration involved. Thus talk of multiculturalism in the nineties must include factors and therefore meanings that were weak or even insignificant in the early seventies. Nevertheless, whether we look at the predominantly European-based diversity of the pre-Whitlam period or the wider spectrum since then, what is especially noteworthy is how all the non-Anglo/Celtic groups, past and present, have had to struggle against, come to terms with, embrace or ignore Anglo/Celtic hegemony in all spheres—economic, political, social, linguistic and artistic.

In short, what is at issue here is Anglo/Celtic *cultural* hegemony, the adjective retaining its strongest anthropological meaning; and the prevailing culture is the direct outcome of a colonial history which systematically alienated anyone who was alien, in other words, not English or of English stock, Protestant, loyal to the British Crown, and aspiring to the upper classes. Hence, of course, the problematical relationship between the 'Anglo' and 'Celtic' (notably Irish working class) components of a culture that, by exercising internal control—the Anglo over the Celtic—nevertheless succeeded in maintaining a 'British' profile. Unlike other countries of the New World, whether Second or Third, Australia had never had a war of independence or a civil war. Nor had she developed a 'melting pot' ideology, however fraught with ambiguities and inconsistencies such an ideology may be. Consequently, the mechanisms for ethnic self-definition and pride, on the one hand, and for the integration of different ethnicities, on the other, simply had not been put into place.

Both of these apparently contradictory elements (that is, unicity and integration) are arguably essential for any society that claims to be multicultural in anything other than a purely tokenistic sense of the word. 'Integration' as conceived of here should not be confused with 'assimilation'. The first involves the idea that disparate groups come together without losing their distinctive character. The second suggests

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that disparate groups merge and blend to form what is intentionally meant to be a homogeneous whole.

Given the circumstances which, despite the undeniably multiethnic composition of society, were nevertheless unfavourable for the growth of multiculturalism as understood above, the emergence not only at the grass roots but among non-Anglo/Celts of the *consciousness* of multiculturalism seems, in retrospect, to be quite remarkable. However, this awakening needed to be channelled. The Whitlam government may have been slow in acknowledging a social fact. But when it set up social services for ethnic minorities, it endorsed the *practice* of multiculturalism. Concrete action of this kind not only affirmed the very existence of ethnic difference, which difference had been ignored for so long, but also 'taught' tolerance for it. Furthermore, it gave credence to government propaganda on the necessity of forging a national culture from the heterogeneous cultures in Australia, that of her indigenous peoples not excluded.

The concept of multiculturalism, then, that was propagated in the early seventies was based on the assumption that Australian culture could no longer be derived from British models nor hope to grow in a subservient relationship of any kind.³ In view of the delicate political balance between Australia and Britain and, again, between Australia and the USA, multiculturalism as doctrine and deed had enormous political importance. It was a form of polynational nationalism, if I may so express it. (How, moreover, does it differ from the new nationalism we are witnessing in Eastern Europe where, increasingly, notions of multiculturalism hold sway—but collide with ideas of *national* identity and national *hegemony*, on the one hand, and with ideas of State leadership, on the other?) This multiculturalism-as-polynational-nationalism represented a politics of economic independence, sovereignty and identity which Australia had more or less abandoned since the beginning of the century. And it supported the Enlightenment values of equality, liberty and justice, as well as the democratic ones of the equitable distribution of cultural goods and open access to them.

Where does the theatre, a specific form of culture, fit into this seventies picture? Needless to say, the subject requires a far more detailed account than can be given here. Several main points will thus have to suffice.

The arts in general went forward in leaps and bounds, 'community

theatre' not least among them. Community theatre in the seventies was predominantly an Anglo/Celtic affair. The so-called 'ethnic' arts of the period were confined to their communities of origin, plays, for example, being performed by amateur or semi-professional groups in Italian or Russian, or whatever. When viewed exogenously, these manifestations had the aura of folk-art and, even when 'high' art, tended to be seen as folksy.

The fact that a good deal of folk art was indeed being preserved—particularly folk dancing, folk songs and 'traditional' music—did not change in the slightest the perception of Anglo/Celts that non-Anglo/Celtic communities were the repositories of exotic or quaint lore. The fact that folk traditions were part and parcel of certain communities because of their rural origins (for example, peasants from Calabria who were factory workers in Sydney) did not alter the general view that, say, all Italian culture was folklorico-touristico alias 'colourful': in other words, that it was, by definition, what I call 'pasta and pizza culture'. Most telling of all in this porridge, where 'multicultural' arts were indiscriminate lumps, was the distinction between 'ethnic' and 'non-ethnic', the former being everyone but Anglo/Celts, and—when one bothered to think about them—Aborigines.

Multiculturalism, in other words, had fences and limits. There were great gaps between institutional will and public reception, and between the means established for artistic creation and the beneficiaries of those means. Anglo/Celtic community theatre, for example, flourished during the seventies partly because a government policy highlighting the importance of community arts was backed by subsidies that facilitated their proliferation.⁴ Yet the same policy, despite its convergence with the push for multiculturalism, failed to link up the community theatre movement, and the community arts movement in general, with non-Anglo/Celtic communities. The message received was that non-Anglo/Celtic communities had restricted rights to culture. They were, moreover, effectively excluded from what, to all intents and purposes and irrespective of current rhetoric on multiple cultures, was only one culture, the Anglo/Celtic one.⁵

The hiatuses and contradictions relevant to the Australian context throw into relief the problematical character of multiculturalism as such in contemporary societies, particularly in respect of the arts. The issues, although broached according to the conditions peculiar to each society,

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recur across the spectrum. Take, for instance, the relationship between plural cultures. Is one of them dominant? In what sort of minority is a 'minority' culture? Or take again the difficult relationship between art and politics, which is exacerbated in a multicultural situation precisely because the demands *of* power, and the demands *upon* power, are decentred, scattered across various interest groups. Besides which, artists cannot be created by decree. Governments may wish to fill ethnic quotas—X number of artists for Y number of ethnic groups. Even so, there is no guarantee of a direct correspondence between institutional projects and the socioartistic dynamic in which artworks are produced.

In the case of Australian multiculturalism and the theatre, there is a striking disconnection between theatrical creativity, social reality and institutional political programs. This is because pluriethnicity and its formalisation in a 'policy' (albeit several steps behind the former) were both way ahead of the theatre. It was not until the early eighties that productions in tune with the principles of multiculturalism began to emerge from non-Anglo/Celtic communities. There was, notably, the Italo-Australian company, Doppio Teatro, in Adelaide and the Greek-based Filiki Players in Melbourne. Their primary objective was to construct the immigrant experience from the point of view of immigrants so as to give this experience (or, more accurately, lived trauma) appropriate dignity in their own eyes. They culled life-stories from their communities, making performances from them that evoked the performance styles of their ancestors. Performances were in two languages in the same show, and sometimes in three or four—regional languages included. The purpose of performance bilingualism—English always being used—was to help reclaim the culture of origin. It intended, at the same time, to demonstrate this culture's viability to Anglo/Celts, while helping them through the language barriers—irony of ironies, since foreign, 'wog' languages had had a hard time of it, particularly in the fifties when the parents of those who became bilingual performers were usually held in contempt for speaking their native tongue. The aim, overall, was to impose upon the national consciousness the contribution that non-Anglo/Celtic groups had made to the nation, the ethnic identity of these groups being redefined through the theatre so that they could take their rightful place in the nation.

Multicultural theatre as it is known in the nineties (although the euphemistic 'ethnic' is still used) is the outcome of a drive to empower

communities that had been virtually disenfranchised. In this lies its political significance. But not all groups under the same banner have militant, explicitly political intentions. Here is where the Melbourne Workers Theatre steps in.

The MWT was founded with the support of trade unions in 1987 in order to close ranks with trade unions and their members. These were now under attack in a society that had long since seen the best and the worst of the Whitlam period and was about to be hit by a backlash against multiculturalism as well as against the relatively liberal immigration policy that had been nurturing it. The company is a professional one in residence, until 1994, in a train maintenance depot in the heart of Melbourne. Its aim, as formulated in a 1991 mission statement, is 'to make theatre for, with and about working class people in a way that reveals the complexities and contradictions of current working class struggles to improve living conditions'. It tours workplaces for lunchtime performances of 25 minutes. Sometimes 50 minutes of performance time is allowed by agreement with employers and unions. Public performances of the longer version are given in community halls. They target a specific, non-English-speaking community which is linked in several ways with the production at hand.

The strongest link is with the working-class component of the designated community. This, apart from being consistent with the MWT's ideological position, is totally logical given the considerable number of non-Anglo/Celts in the Australian working class as a whole. The remaining connections have to do with the preparatory processes of productions, and their content and manner of presentation. Theatre practitioners and liaison officers are chosen from the targeted community so that real-life events pertinent to the community can be staged authentically. The principle of authenticity extends to the use of non-English in productions which, however, is not as extensive as occurs in the bilingual companies referred to above. The aesthetic decisions on form, structure, style, and so on, which are necessarily involved in the company's creative work, are thus sustained by its belief that whichever community is selected for special attention is best served when its members participate in both the preparation and the performance of a production.

The notion of 'service' being evoked here was integral to the community arts movement of the seventies and remained valid for the

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multilingual theatre of the eighties to which the MWT, for all its distinguishing characteristics, is indebted: what *distinguishes* it most is its goal of political intervention, in a very organised manner, in the processes of society itself. Now, insofar as the MWT is part and parcel of the sociological phenomenon we know as multiculturalism, it shows the difficulties that arise from multiculturalism's incarnations in multicultural *theatre*. Although I am taking the Australian model, I believe that these difficulties are just as relevant to any situation where multicultural theatre or multicultural arts in any shape or form are practised. They are also bound to be pertinent to any situation where the idea of multicultural arts is entertained merely theoretically.

Several main difficulties may be put in the form of the following questions. Let us take the notion of 'service' as redefined by the MWT's work, and which means something like 'facilitating practice'. The question then is: What are the social limits of facilitation through the intervention of someone else? The MWT wishes to empower communities by giving them the means to express problems that are vital to them, but which are not necessarily confined to them. Yet this empowerment is mediated twice over, firstly, through a team of theatre workers who, although sharing a general viewpoint, or who are at least sympathetic to it, are not necessarily deeply in touch with the prescribed community; secondly, presumed empowerment is mediated through a theatre production that, although performed by actors of non-English-speaking background, is not performed by the colleagues of the train drivers, welders and other blue-collar workers (or hospital workers or white-collar workers, as the case may be) who are watching in the audience. This is not, in other words, a case of worker-controlled—because worker-propelled and worker-performed—empowerment.⁶ Furthermore, let us assume that empowerment can operate effectively at the consciousness-raising level, that is, at the mental-emotional, representational and symbolic level of apprehension. What, then, is the role of multicultural theatre when it also aspires to being a catalyst for social change? Can it pass from the symbolic level to the level of action? Does a non-English-speaking community, which is also disadvantaged economically (the case of MWT audiences), start to inhabit social space beyond its determined 'ethnic' space by virtue of an objectivised projection of its condition?

The passage from art to reality is full of traps. Theatre workers,

especially when professionals (as is the case for the MWT), have artistic criteria for their work, no matter what social meaning is contained in it or imputed to it. When is multicultural theatre merely illustrative? When is it merely a tool in the hands of organisations, governments and administrations for ends that may have little to do with art, let alone with the benefits supposedly reaped by minority communities? And when is multicultural theatre a mere gesture, a technique for skirting around urgent social problems whilst giving the impression that they are being seriously met? What, then, is the role of so-called multicultural artists? Should they be hired because they look and sound like 'wogs', or because they fulfil in some other way whatever ideological aspect of whichever version of multiculturalism is the order of the day? Or are there only *artists*, multiculturalism not being an attribute of artists, but only of the kind of *works* they create?

With all these questions in mind, let us turn to my survey of audiences for the MWT's 1991 production of *No Fear*, a play devised by and for the Turkish community, and specially for Turkish workers in the motor car industry. It was performed by two Turkish actors and one Anglo/Celt. Lines were delivered here and there in Turkish. English, however, dominated. The actors participated in the research stages from which, two months later, grew the production.

My survey did not ask spectators the questions I have raised above. It would have been quite impossible to do so for numerous reasons, including the little time left after the show—especially in the workplace—for spectators to fill in the questionnaire. These questions, then, are part of my reflections on the subject. Ideas for some of them may be gleaned from replies to four open, qualitative questions in my questionnaire: 'What did you like about *No Fear*? What did you not like, and why? What would you change? What do you think is the main purpose of theatre?' There were 22 questions in all of a socio-demographic or sociocultural kind. (Take, for an example of the sociocultural kind of question: 'Is this the first play you have seen in Australia?') All were in Turkish or English.

The script of *No Fear* was inspired by the hunger strike of a Turkish worker in the Ford car plant in Melbourne. Ford's management was demanding the use of a new method for speeding up production in a tradeoff for wage rises. A Turkish shop steward who claimed that the new method was not efficient and would only increase workloads was

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sacked. Some 200 workers on his shift stopped work immediately. All but about 20 were persuaded by the Vehicle Builders' Union, which supported management, to go back. Those who did not were sacked. The shop steward continued his hunger strike for a month. He was joined towards the end of his campaign by two or three more hunger strikers who were also Turks. None was re-employed. These events provoked hot debates on the rights and obligations of individuals vis-à-vis their unions and on what a unionist's position should be as regards individual extreme actions.

The real-life incident is changed in *No Fear* where two Turkish workers, a man and a woman, are sacked for refusing to trial a new speed line. They occupy the factory manager's office spontaneously, not by design, which action sparks off an animated discussion between them as to the meaning of what they have done. Along comes the union organiser who continues the debate with them while she is locked out of the office. They eventually let her in and give in to the union's arguments without, however, leaving the impression that their show of force had been useless. The fact that their colleagues go out on strike against the new speed line, thereby showing their solidarity with the two renegades, suggests that collective action negotiated through unions and with their support for the interests of workers is the true way to act. This conclusion is, in fact, the *opposite* of what happened at the Ford plant; and the solution given by the stage production was received unfavourably by the Vehicle Builders' Union as a criticism of its actions.

The gestures and movements of the performers are eloquent, vivacious. Black wire-metal boxes serving as tables, chairs, windows and doors give a minimalist set. Music written for the show and songs in Turkish give the production a 'folk' dimension.

It is essential to note, first of all, that my sample of 224 respondents is small in respect of the several thousand who are presumed to have seen the production. It is impossible, moreover, to say what percentage this 224 represents of the (unknown) total. Be this as it may, 53% of the respondents are skilled as well as unskilled workers. Among the remaining occupational categories, as listed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, are 15% of professionals (union leaders, project officers, writers, arts workers and bureaucrats responsible for government grants who came to see how their money had been spent!). Nurses are well represented. Since the show was also performed in a male prison, my

sample includes inmates. They usually sabotaged the question on employment, stating that they were car thieves, bank robbers, drug dealers, and the like, which descriptions could well explain why they were in jail! When replies were straight, prison inmates usually had a trade (plasterer or motor mechanic, for instance) or a menial job (kitchen hand, car cleaner).

The ethnic composition of these respondents gives us 53 people of Turkish background (24% of the total, including those who say that they are Turkish-Australian). Forty-seven of these respondents were born in Turkey, while 37 replied in Turkish. Another 14% were of non-English-speaking background (notably Indian, Greek and Maltese). The majority at 53% is Anglo/Celtic Australian, a tiny few saying that they are English or Anglo-Scottish, but not using the adjective 'Australian'. Those remaining either did not reply or gave such answers as 'citizen of the world', 'socialist', 'democrat' and 'human being'. Most of the respondents in this remaining group were born in Turkey (which could make 28% of those of Turkish background in the sample).

By force of circumstance, all Turks and Turkish-Australians in the sample attended the public, community-hall performances given by the MWT. The great majority of them, men and women, are skilled blue-collar workers. According to the actors in the show, there were many workers from the Ford plant at these performances. A number of high-school students, children of these immigrants, appear in the sample.

Since my focus is on the Turkish community—essential to the present discussion on multiculturalism/multicultural theatre—I shall concentrate on the observations of Turks in reply to the four qualitative questions posed in my questionnaire. References to other ethnic groups will be made in order to highlight a particular point or draw a significant comparison or contrast between different groups.

Turkish respondents who declined ethnic definition of any kind (thus they were 'socialist', 'democrat', 'internationalist', and so on) were the only ones of the whole total for whom the strike at the Ford plant was an *interpretative* rather than merely informational point of reference. Thus a motor mechanic remarks in English: '[the play's] issues are based on the current crisis in the industry'. Another representative statement comes from an electrical welder who replied in Turkish. He liked the production because 'the topic was real and current; it was about an event that occurred only a short time ago'.

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When not referring to the incident that had inspired the production, Turkish respondents, and notably those writing in Turkish, point out how the production deals with 'the story of the working class'. Or else they draw conclusions from what they have just seen. This statement from a machine operator, who describes himself as a democrat, centres more explicitly than anyone else on the labour issues explored. He writes in Turkish: 'The working class cannot achieve state power as long as it is intimidated; especially if it is divided'.

Observations as close to the bone as these were made by a few Anglo/Celts who describe themselves as political organisers or are tied up with leadership in some way. Only one rank-and-file worker, a fitter's assistant, belongs to this group of ideas. He states that 'management did not have the right to push people beyond their capacity and that by the unions and employers uniting anyone can achieve their aim in life; sackings are not the answer'. These respondents generally point out that what, on the other hand, they did not like about the production was its 'dubious' presupposition that 'the union organiser could be won to the workers' side so easily'. This point of view, as well as variations on it, is rarely to be found among Turks. Its scarcity makes the criticism of a Turkish factory worker all the more noticeable. He explains how he did not like the way the play 'made the workers seem stupid', especially as management 'doesn't always agree to it easily like they made it show'.

Turkish respondents, when critical, did not like the style of the play (in their view not real enough). Nor did they like the too few props, 'too much lighting', or the venue where the play was performed (reference to bad acoustics). These reflections of an essentially aesthetic kind are continued through, by the same respondents, in their commentary on what they would change. Thus they would have staged the play in a 'proper theatre venue' (rather than in a community hall), and would have used more performers and created more scenes (so as to 'broaden the topic', and similar remarks). They would also have used more or 'better props and decor'. The socialist motor mechanic cited earlier suggests that the production 'needed to create a factory appearance [and the] feeling [and] sounds of [a] real working factory'.

Otherwise, critical comments from Turks focus on their language difficulties. In the words of one of them: 'I do not understand English. As far as I can tell, the company is not concerned with targeting us.' In the words of another: 'I would have liked a Turkish play. The Turks did

not understand the English and others did not understand the Turkish. Totally multicultural.' It seems that for this worker, who describes himself as Turkish-Arabic-Greek, being 'totally multicultural' is tantamount to being nonsensical: it is the *incapacity* for communication between different ethnic-linguistic groups. Apart from this terrible indictment of multiculturalism—the only allusion to the phenomenon among respondents from a Turkish background—what springs from respondents' hearts, now fairly consistently, is their feeling that they are *disempowered* by language. 'I did not understand it' or 'did not fully understand it' is a recurring theme. The fact that these respondents answer in Turkish indicates that they do not yet have an adequate command of English.

As far as our Turkish respondents are concerned, then, the bilingual nature of the production either does not warrant attention or deserves a negative assessment. Which either casts some doubt on the bilingualism of the enterprise, or suggests that bilingual theatre is viable most—or only?—when immigrants have a grasp of the host tongue. A third hypothesis is worth entertaining, namely, that, in order to succeed, bilingual theatre must develop very strong non-linguistic means of communication, as perfected by mime and dance. (The MWT, it must be said, strives to do this.)

And, of course, another cluster of issues raise their heads. Is bilingualism necessary for multicultural theatre? Can monolingual theatre which is in the majority language, as English is in Australia, be multicultural? What, though, of monolingual theatre which is in a minority language? It is proof of a multicultural society. But if it stays within the boundaries of its own linguistic community, how different is this situation from the community-bounded, even ghettoised cultures that existed before 'multiculturalism' was invented?

Perhaps it is significant that the spectators who praise the production's bilingualism, its 'real life drama of different ethnic backgrounds' and its portrayal of 'NESB [non-English-speaking-background] workers and the involvement in unions' are, with only one exception, Anglo/Celts. The same is true of spectators who say that the production 'made me feel strong' or that 'it was empowering'. Can we conclude from this that Anglo/Celts, who, in relation to the Turkish community, are outsiders looking in, are more sensitive than insiders to the issues that are presumed to be of concern to them before anyone else? Or are we

here dealing with a problem of vocabulary and, therefore, with a corresponding way of conceptualising? The terms 'NESB' and 'empowering', for example, are used by Anglo/Celtic professional people who, as the rest of their commentary on my questionnaire also suggests, speak from a position of knowing what the debates on ethnicity and multiculturalism are about. This vocabulary is shared by professional artists—theatrical, visual or musical—who work in the 'multicultural' field. It is, ipso facto, the vocabulary of the directors, writers and performers of the MWT, Doppio Teatro, Filiki Players and similar theatre groups. Just as significantly, many of their members are of non-English-speaking background, the cause of multiculturalism thereby being propelled from within, from the standpoint of insiders. Nevertheless, it is *not* the language of the blue-collar workers in the sample, nor, more importantly, of our Turkish workers.

The fact that the Turkish respondents do not speak of empowerment as such does not mean that they have a poor self-image. Nor do they project a picture of themselves as a dispossessed group. We have already mentioned the spectators who feel disempowered by their lack of English; and impotence-exclusion through language, in whichever society it occurs has, as we all know, enormous consequences for immigrants with which the discomforts of mere tourists cannot begin to compare. We have also noticed how Turkish spectators refer to bilingualism only when offering a critique of the show. Bilingualism, in other words, is not uppermost in the minds of those who praise the show with little or no reservation. What comes first to their mind (by contrast with Anglo/Celtic professionals, though not Anglo/Celtic workers) is the production's 'encouraging workers to fight and struggle'. These words come from a toolmaker and sum up accurately the general point of view of his group.

The data suggests that, when empowerment is at issue, our Turkish respondents feel empowered by their sense of class unity and class struggle. Put differently, what this means is that empowerment for them is not a matter of identity politics, of what might be termed ethnicity as such, but well and truly a matter of mastering their role in the productive processes of society. This control over their own labour power is, in the view of Turks, the strength of *No Fear*. It must be noted that no other ethnic group within the same occupational category, shows such strong cohesion and conviction. Nor does it,

therefore, dovetail so closely with the MWT's goals.

Once this has been said, however, it must also be pointed out that our Turkish respondents are certainly not the norm—and not even necessarily typical—of non-Anglo/Celtic spectators of comparable class and educational backgrounds. My research on Italian and Italo-Australian spectators shows that they are more receptive than the Turks here discussed to the idea of bilingual theatre.⁷ By the same token, they are more caught up in identity politics and are, correspondingly, less concerned with class politics. In addition, they are less articulate, whether in Italian or English. The Turkish respondents, whatever language they reply in, have a flow of words to express their thoughts which no ethnic group of a comparable educational level, least of all Anglo/Celtic, can match, as far as my findings to date have shown.

The question of verbal facility—or at least as it appears on paper in answers to my questionnaire—is tied up with a generational factor. Most of the Turkish respondents are in their thirties and forties. (Schoolchildren, by the way, generally echo the positions and evaluations of their elders.) Most of the Italian respondents concerned are in their sixties or older. This is to say that they belong to an earlier immigration which, although not necessarily less well educated when education is measured by the number of years at school, appear nevertheless to be less well educated. They have also been in Australia much longer, which may suggest that the fire of opinion has grown smaller in them. A small pocket of them who are more articulate than the rest do not accentuate identity politics. Like their Turkish counterparts in expressivity, they foreground class politics. Like their Turkish counterparts, they tend to have had some involvement in oppositional politics. It is important, in the framework of this discussion, to note that a number of the Turks emigrating to Australia in recent years are political refugees.

These examples cannot be taken to be conclusive. Yet I would like to posit a hypothesis for debate and discussion. The Turkish workers at issue usually have not gone beyond the second year of high school—much like their Anglo or non-Anglo/Celtic equivalents. In the usual scheme of things, they would be considered to be poorly educated. Nevertheless, they grasp issues clearly, and are bold and articulate in ways that suggest a higher education than their formal level of education would allow. My hypothesis is that their politicisation has made this

possible. It has provided them with tools not provided by their formal schooling. Furthermore, the verbal and conceptual skills acquired through their political education supersede the skills fostered at school. Much the same could be said of the politicised pockets among the Italians that I have studied elsewhere.⁸

If my hypothesis is tenable, we can argue that politicisation in class politics fills in the gaps, or even achieves more in the acquisition of basic skills, than school education. If this is so, then what are the consequences for literacy, understanding and critical thinking of the *depoliticisation* that we are witnessing across the whole world in the name of a political centre or the 'end of history', as a writer, who has been made too famous by the apocalyptic title of his book to be named, has called it? My question is of consequence to the multiple multiculturalisms burgeoning in the four corners of the world in the wake of renewed, late-twentieth-century nationalisms, all of which are heavily marked by identity politics.⁹ And what culture can multiculturalism produce if identity politics, on the one hand, and depoliticisation, on the other, erode the literacy, acculturation and socialisation which, it seems, are already being eroded within schools across the whole world?

These questions, of course, are tough, and imply a pessimistic prognosis for modern times. Let us, consequently, leave them for happier days and return to our Turkish respondents for whom there can be no doubt that theatre culture goes hand in glove with political-economic struggle. When noting their views on the purposes of the theatre, Turkish respondents *invariably* stress education, explaining time and again that the theatre should 'provide people with political and cultural knowledge', 'provide messages' or 'communicate clear messages', 'help the working class with social and cultural issues', 'help the masses' or 'take up the issues and problems of the people and educate them'. The lexical and ideational combinations and collocations of our Turkish respondents show that they use 'working class', 'masses' and 'people' more or less synonymously.

The general pattern that can be observed is detailed in such replies as this from an electrical welder: [the theatre's purpose] is 'to form a relationship with the masses; to question and take up their problems; to make them think'. The commentary was written in Turkish, as was this: 'to unite people; to demonstrate the oppression of the people; to show

social reality to the oppressed people'. When these replies are compared with answers from other groups, notably, by virtue of their majority, with those from Anglo/Celts, two points spring to mind: first, that our Turks never refer to entertainment, whereas everyone else places it second, after education, on their list; second, that our Turkish respondents consistently give the theatre the power of awakening political consciousness, whereas such a vocation is rarely ascribed to it by the remaining groups.

My question asked spectators to talk about the purposes of the theatre in general and not about multicultural theatre in particular. How Turkish respondents view the theatre, and the responsibilities they attribute to it, is not without consequence for multicultural theatre. For them, the theatre is principally a theatre of liberation—liberation from ignorance and economic and cultural inequality. As such, it is an empowering force. Their viewpoint can perhaps guide us in untying the knot of problems that obfuscate our thoughts on the reasons for, and the roles played by, the cultures of multiculturalism. The task is urgent for we cannot slumber in the complacencies of tokenism, which leave minorities in poverty and, often invisible, oppression. Nor can we become lost in the labyrinths of identity where, as if in mythic time, dwell the monster-minotaurs of racism and ethnic hatred. We need to live in *social* time and make of multiculturalism, whether in the theatre or in the streets, which are both places of culture, a social and not a totemistic force.¹⁰

Notes

- 1 The information presented above has been culled from *Multicultural Australia, Catalogue Number 25050*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1991.
- 2 *Estimated Resident Population by Country of Birth, Age and Sex: Preliminary 1991*, Catalogue Number 3221.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1991.
- 3 For an argued case concerning this statement, see my 'Histoire/Identité: Le Contexte sociologique du théâtre australien', *Théâtre/Public* 91 (1990): 10–18.
- 4 Apart from my 'Histoire/Identité' above, see also Richard Fotheringham, ed., *Community Theatre in Australia*, North Ryde, 1987.
- 5 On the theme of the multiple forms of exclusion that plague immigrant populations, see the profoundly moving published research, essentially by interview, of Pierre Bourdieu's team of sociologists whose findings, although focused on France, are extremely relevant to the points raised in these pages. Thus, see *La Misère du monde*, Paris, 1993. For some theoretical reflections on how exclusion is generated in societies today through the hurdles set up by the triple alliance between nationalism, populism and ethnicity, see Michel

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Wieviorka, *La Démocratie à l'épreuve: Nationalisme, populisme, ethnicité*, Paris, 1993.

- 6 An appropriate contrast would be, say, the factory theatre groups known as the Blue Blouses in the Soviet Union in the early twenties. These groups were composed of working men and women whose theatrical performances were so to speak built into the factory structure insofar as they took place—in or outside working hours—in the workplace and with the full approval of the managers and commissars in whichever industrial complex was involved. These groups were usually thought of as amateur groups, notwithstanding their reputed artistic competence. They were also touring groups, playing at factories and in geographic locations where no equivalent groups were available.
- 7 As yet largely unpublished data, although information supporting this contention can be found in my 'Audiences for Filef Theatre Group's *L'Albero delle rose/The Tree of Roses* and *Storie in cantiere/Stories in Construction*', *Australasian Drama Studies* 20 (1992): 93–118.
- 8 See 'Audiences for Filef' above.
- 9 A useful discussion on world-wide contemporary nationalisms as regressive movements and on their linkage with regressive identity politics as expressed, for example, in concepts of 'ethnic purity' and similar ethnic absolutes, see Michel Wieviorka, *La Démocratie à l'épreuve*, above.
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