

Editorial

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11 May 2003. As I was preparing to write the Editorial for this, my last issue as Senior Editor, three seemingly unrelated incidents of transnational significance impinged on my consciousness. First, a Nigerian woman asylum-seeker in Ireland was granted a stay of deportation, a direct challenge to a ministerial change in the Irish constitution which now decrees that foreign-national mothers of Irish-born children no longer have any residency rights. Her choice is stark, like that of Grusha in Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*: she can either take her child back to Nigeria with her, or (since the child is an Irish citizen) leave him behind in an orphanage. No sooner had I read of this woman's plight than I discovered the case of four Kosovan Albanian asylum-seekers in the UK who had fled as much for reason of persecution of their homosexuality as an escape from ethnic fighting, but who ended up, because of their statelessness and immigrational illegitimacy, being forced to prostitute that same sexuality in order to pay off their unscrupulous traffickers. And then at Paris's Charles de Gaulle airport's railway station I watched in despair as a Romanian woman risked her life to retrieve a €1 coin from the tracks, dropped inadvertently by an American tourist moments earlier.

All of this happened in the space of one week prior to watching the Théâtre du Soleil's new production, *Le dernier caravansérail*, their first devised production since the heady days of socialist politics dominated their stage practice in the 1970s. The piece is a consciously naïve recounting of testimonies by dozens of refugees/asylum-seekers, many of whom had stayed in the transit camp-cum-detention centre of Sangatte, near Calais. Much of the testimony comes in the form of voice-overs projected as surtitles, underlined by heavily romanticised western classical music. The stage images are snapshots, either of lives of repression, particularly for women, and for Afghans. We see their need to flee. But we also see their reception in Europe and it is difficult to ascertain which is the more chilling. But complicating the flight-and-arrival dichotomy is the chain of profiteers, human traffickers whose only motive is profit, who thrive on world inequity. Everyone is forced to prostitute either their bodies or human decency in their bid to make a new life which none of them wanted. And the new host states respond by creating detention centres which trap the refugees in a perpetual state of liminal rootlessness. They are constantly on the run from terror, but never arrive at peace. And to portray this condition of existence theatrically Mnouchkine prevents her characters from moving around the stage during the scenes, but instead has them transported on constantly

moving trolleys pushed from pillar to post by other human agents. And when the scenes end and the action changes locations, suddenly the whole stage erupts into a terrifying rush of human bodies as the actors, at top speed, scurry to the point of exhaustion into their positions for the next enactment of entrapment. The play, often performed in dumbshow in simple and appalling scenes, holds up the west as culpable of inflicting suffering as the so-called axis-of-evil states. It provides no answers for the problems faced by countless refugees, for whom the term 'diaspora' means a scattering in a literal sense, but also for whom a realignment and resettlement is an impossibility. For Sangatte, read Woomera, read the Norwegian cargo ship, Tampa.

The initial impetus for this collection of papers on performance and diaspora, came from Loren Kruger's focus group of papers on diasporic theatres of the US, in which the new world provided a space for the carving out of identities and the negotiation of communities within a collective civic arena. For some this has meant power struggles for hegemonic control of cultural production, while for others it has meant attempts culturally to break down the barriers of the ghetto in which settlers were locked up in the prejudiced stereotypes of imperialism. Nowadays dispersal is invariably entangled within a transnational capital flow to an extent that relations to both the home and host nations may be similarly enmeshed in the drives of cultural élitism.

I precede this focus section with two articles on negotiations of identity in other diasporas. The first centres on the recycling by Rakini Devi of signs of traditional Asian culture in Australian performance to both unlock the entrapment of stereotyping while also embodying a unique personal story. The second teases out the self-entrapment of a diasporic community in matters of gender and class at the same time as it is being embraced by others in the panoply of Singaporean society. But I end the entire issue with a cautionary tale, again in an analysis of a performance in which gender and class play an important part in the assertion of hegemonic control, otherwise seen as a neurotic anxiety. A white nation battens down the hatches, and unrolls the barbed wire to protect itself from a perceived threat of ethnic and racial destabilization. The threat of ethnic imbalance is a new form of 'plague' circling Australia in ships, just like the plague supposedly being carried by *Le Grand Saint Antoine*, that ship whose fate Artaud so famously recounted in *The Theatre and Its Double*. Asylum-seekers off the shores of Newfoundland or Australia (or wherever) are now perceived in the same light as terrorists, feared, loathed, and imprisoned despite all manner of international laws, in detentions centres or on ships which are not permitted to dock. Our perception of the diasporic condition is unsettled by the perpetually dislocated who can find no host nation, and thus are denied cultural expression or performative possibilities, as both their passports and their identities are forever held to ransom.