

Traversée: Crossing Borders in Search of the Emancipatory Theatre for Children

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Résumé de l'article

Comment le théâtre doit-il parler aux enfants de politiques d'immigration, de la mort, de la séparation, de l'arrivée dans un nouveau pays et de nouveaux espoirs? Quel ton doivent adopter les artistes pour parler de violence et de torture, d'injustice, de manipulation politique, ou pour dire la perte de sa famille et de sa langue, la quête de sécurité et la recherche de nouveaux amis? Cette conversation doit-elle être pédagogique, protectrice, prudente, neutre ou divertissante? Comment les artistes doivent-ils façonner leur oeuvre destinée à de jeunes publics pour les aider à saisir des sujets si complexes? La pièce *Traversée* (2011) d'Estelle Savasta fournit quelques pistes de réponse à toutes ces questions. Elle tient compte des traditions pédagogiques et artistiques du « théâtre de l'émancipation pour enfants » et favorise une conversation sur la guerre et la migration. La mise en scène par Milena Buziak de cette pièce en 2016 est un exemple de théâtre pour jeunes publics qui assume la responsabilité de conscientiser son auditoire aux réalités politiques, notamment en ce qui concerne des injustices sociales contemporaines. En abordant des questions politiques urgentes liées à la migration mondiale, Yana Meerzon montre comment on peut faire du théâtre jeunesse un instrument politique.

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Mots clés : migration, enfants réfugiés, théâtre politique pour jeune public, théâtre de l'émancipation pour jeune public

How should theatre talk to children about migration and its politics, about death and separation, about arrival and new hopes? What tone—when speaking of violence and torture, injustice and political manipulation, losing one's family and language, seeking safety and new friends—should the artists take on? Should this conversation be educational, protective, cautious, neutral, or entertaining? How should artists shape their work for children of different ages to help them respond to the scope and complexity of the topic? Estelle Savasta's play *Traversée* (2011) provides some responses to these questions. It engages with the pedagogical and artistic traditions of making “emancipatory theatre for children,” and it allows the conversation about war and migration to take place. Director Milena Buziak's 2016 staging of *Traversée* presents an example of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) that takes on the responsibility of making its spectators politically aware and emotionally engaged, specifically when it comes to their understanding of social injustice today. By engaging with the most urgent political issues related to global migration, this article provides an example of making theatre for children political.

Keywords: migration, children refugees, political theatre for children, emancipatory theatre for children



Theatre may help you to find yourself in society, drama requires you to find society in you. To find, that is, your humanness and accept responsibility for being human. (Bond, Foreword xii)

An image of Alan Kurdi, a Kurdish boy who drowned near the Greek shores in September 2015, has become a tragic symbol of our times. Photographer Nilüfer Demir made it her personal duty to document the story of Alan's death and commemorate his innocence (Walsh). The images the artist produced brought the horror and the incomprehensibility of his death to light. They also stirred unprecedented fury and sparked protests across the world, with many artists calling for world leaders and politicians to stop the tragedy of mass migration and to find better ways to help refugees—especially children—in their flight for safety. Unfortunately, nothing has really changed since the fall of 2015. According to a report from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, children represent more than 50% of refugee populations:

In South Sudan, 64% of the refugee population were kids. The population of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) was composed of 54% children. In Africa, 59% of the total refugee population were children. By the end of 2017, Burkina Faso, Chad, Congo, the DRC, South Sudan and Uganda hosted refugee populations with more than 60 percent children. (Pitofsky)

This list of shame goes on and on. But despite its horrifying statistics, the numbers cannot convey the desolation or the uniqueness of each refugee's journey. Performance arts—much like photography—have a special power to turn impersonal numbers into individual stories. Theatre can provide a “voice” and return dignity to a victim.

Estelle Savasta's play *Traversée* (2011) is one such story. Based on the conversations with refugee children in France, Savasta's play speaks directly to the reality of what an unaccompanied child refugee endures. “Whenever children are traveling alone they are vulnerable, far more vulnerable than adults. They are at greater risk of being exploited, or being hurt, of falling into the hands of traffickers,” says Gary Seidman, the spokesman to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (Seidman, qtd. in Pitofsky). Often, these refugee children are very young and very scared, with very different coping skills than adults. Seidman elaborated that “children traveling alone are at a much higher risk for sexual violence and abuse. [...] They don't know who to trust or what questions to ask when they meet with authorities” (Seidman, qtd. in Pitofsky).

In telling the story of a child refugee on stage, as Savasta's play demonstrates, theatre takes on special ethical and artistic responsibilities. It must avoid telling patronizing or sentimental stories, and it must not proliferate injustice or bolster stereotypes on stage. It needs to make the suffering of migration relatable and urgent to its young spectators, specifically those who have never experienced banishment or displacement themselves. Children are the architects of tomorrow, so it is crucial that theatre “seeks to engage young people [to look to] the future” and to “[articulate] a vision of social change and educational aspirations” (Nicholson 13). But how should theatre talk to children about migration and its politics, about death and separation, about arrival and new hopes? What tone—when speaking of violence and torture, injustice and political manipulation, losing one's family and language, seeking safety and new

friends—should the artists take on? Should this conversation be educational, protective, cautious, neutral, or entertaining? How should artists shape their work for children of different ages to help them respond to the scope and complexity of the topic?

Savasta's *Traversée* provides some responses to these questions. It engages with the pedagogical and artistic traditions of making “emancipatory theatre for children,”¹ which is exemplified in the work of the German GRIPS Theater whose European practices, I would suggest, were brought to Quebec by *Traversée* director Milena Buziak (Zipes, “GRIPS” and “Political Children’s”).

Intended to be performed by professional actors for an audience of adolescents (ages nine to fourteen), their parents and adult companions. Buziak's *Traversée* premiered in November 2016 at MAI (Montréal, arts interculturels) and continued in over seventy productions to Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto, and throughout France.² Reflecting on the artistic mandate of Buziak's own theatre company, Voyageurs Immobiles (founded in 2009), *Traversée* sought to reveal “the paradox of displacement and immobility” and wished to foster “the inner journey of the actor and the audience: a journey to be made together for the duration of the performance” (Voyageurs Immobiles).³

The performance featured adults—professional theatre actors—from culturally diverse backgrounds, and it aimed to stimulate political thinking among its young spectators by establishing an educated and artistically enhanced dialogue between the performance on stage and the audience. In its focus on visual metaphors and multiplicity of languages on stage, *Traversée* challenged “the intelligence, imagination and emotional capacity of the spectator” (Voyageurs Immobiles). When the company played in rural Quebec and Francophone Canada, it often organized post-show conversations and school workshops. These post-production encounters were to help children better understand emotionally difficult moments in the play, such as a separation between the child and her parent and the fate of unaccompanied minors traveling across Europe. In other words, in its pedagogical work, political implications, and artistic experiment, Buziak's *Traversée* reflected leading principles of emancipatory theatre for children.

I saw *Traversée* twice: once in April 2017 as a staged reading at the international Migration/Representation/Stereotypes conference in Ottawa, organized by a joint initiative between the research group Studies in Migration, the Department of Theatre and the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at the University of Ottawa, and the Centre for Public History and the Department of Migration and Diaspora Studies at Carleton University; and for the second time during its November 2017 run at Théâtre français du CNA (Centre national des Arts) in Ottawa. This time my ten-year-old daughter accompanied me, and I will refer to her reactions later in this text.

Buziak's *Traversée* presents an example of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) that takes on the responsibility of making its spectators politically aware, emotionally engaged, and also emancipated (in Jacques Rancière's understanding of this term), specifically when it comes to their knowledge and understanding of social injustice today. By engaging with the most urgent political issues related to global migration, this work provides an example of making theatre for children political.

Before I offer a more detailed analysis of this work, I will briefly lay out a theoretical framework useful for this discussion.

Political Theatre for Children—The Pros and Cons of an Experiment

The earliest conversations on the process of making political theatre for children date to the beginning of the twentieth century, to those pedagogical experiments that took place in post-revolutionary Russia and Germany in the 1920s. For Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht—the earliest advocates of this movement—and Edward Bond, who wrote on this topic much later—political theatre for children, including theatre that speaks about migration, must address social injustice and be educational and dynamic (Nicholson 10–11, 28–32; Bond; Zipes, “Political Children’s”). Made in the format of Brecht’s “learning-play,” this theatre is “to show the world as it changes (and also how it may be changed)” (Brecht 79). It envisions its audiences as a “collection of individuals, capable of thinking and of reasoning, of making judgments even in the theatre; it treats it as individuals of mental and emotional maturity, and believes it wishes to be so regarded” (79). It must “unleash in children the most powerful energies of the future” and present its viewers with the lessons of “authentic moral authority” (Benjamin 202–03).

Over the last century, however, making political theatre for young audiences has gradually evolved. Today professional theatre artists and activists make performances *for* and *with* children. This work is often based on such pedagogical principles as “‘involvement’, ‘participation’, ‘process’, and ‘activity’” (Nicholson 24). Emancipatory children’s theatre seeks to focus its audiences’ attention on the themes of “social efficacy,” place, identity, and belonging, and aims in its learning and artistic objectives to mobilize children’s imaginations and to challenge “the role of creativity” in education (46). To this extent, Rancière’s politics of the emancipated spectator forms an ideology of emancipatory theatre for children, whereas Brecht’s theatre aesthetic influences its performance style. Most importantly, this practice asks “how theatre might maintain its traditional position as cultural provocateur in an educational context in which creativity is regarded as an economic necessity” (Nicholson 46).

Although in his writings Rancière does not mention making theatre for children, Merete Elnan argues that Rancière’s theory of the emancipated spectator directly applies to the practices of the emancipatory theatre for children. Rancière’s argument begins with an assumption that “to understand or to learn something, all humans [adults and children] have to use the same intelligence,” as we all share and employ “multiple accesses to wisdom aside from the purely cognitive” (Elnan 169). In their use of multiple intelligences, children are no different from adults: just like adulthood, childhood functions as a construct of biological, social, political, and ideological realities that demand children use diverse learning tools. Theatre offers a unique venue to train in these multiple skills, as it relies upon and requests cognitive, emotional, and even physical responses from their spectators. TYA is well acquainted with these affectual powers of performance: it capitalizes on the idea that in watching a staged action, “the spectator links what she sees to what she has seen, done and dreamed; she uses her imagination and her intelligence” (Elnan 169). At the same time, TYA practitioners know that children coming to see their productions are already emancipated, as they have been engaged in the act of observing and thinking of the reality around them from an early age. Rancière’s politics of an emancipated spectator, in other words, helps to envision a child spectator as an engaged political figure; whereas his aesthetics “favors a theatre that problematizes the cause

and effect relationship” (Elnan 174). Thus, to make its spectators truly politically engaged, emancipatory theatre for children must challenge them artistically: “The question of understanding is an adult problem—children create their own meaning,” and often they reimagine rather than remember the performance that they just saw (174). To appeal to children’s imagination and empathy, TYA must provide instances of “aesthetic experience, instead of focusing on morals and understanding” (174). By using artistic experimentation, it can provoke their audiences’ “curiosity and recognition” (174) and it can “contribute to changing the cultural conditions under which the performances for young audiences are generated and perceived” (175).

In its practical applications, emancipatory theatre for children came to life through the work of GRIPS Theater, which aimed at “help[ing] children develop their skills of observation and expression” and “discuss[ing] their personal problems as social problems” (Zipes, “GRIPS” 14). GRIPS Theater rendered children’s problems as relevant to all humanity. It staged its productions as “public intrusions,” through which both children and their parents could be addressed (Zipes, “GRIPS” 16). Aesthetically, the company embraced the devices of Brechtian learning plays, in which actors do not “mimic children or act naturalistically” (16). In GRIPS theatre productions, “social conditions and events [were] *explained* and *demonstrated* from a [child’s] point of view” (16); the plays were meant to stimulate discussion and not provide solutions. Primarily, they were created to raise empathy through teaching, to show children “how enjoyable it can be to master critical thinking which [would] allow each individual in concrete social situations to pose questions whose solutions bring about great class solidarity and freedom” (16).⁴ In its 1973 production of *Papadakis Throws a Party*, for instance, GRIPS Theater engaged spectators in confronting issues of migration, asking children to think about Turkish *gastarbeiters* in Germany and their exclusion from the German world, as well as the accompanying racism of such acts (Zipes, “GRIPS” 9–10). GRIPS was created to be “a theatre which wants to give its audience the courage to know that the world around them, large or small, is changeable” (“What is Grips?”).

However, the emergence of emancipatory theatre for children should not be exclusively linked to the work of GRIPS or European theatre. In Quebec, for example, TYA has been exploring similar artistic tactics since the mid-70s, when it introduced methodologies of collective creation and devising as its major artistic mechanism.⁵ At the time, most Québécois artists who worked for and with children were activists, but they also happened to be parents and/or educators themselves.

[Their work] favoured “soft” forms of socialism, a tendency which resulted more from a sympathy for the political left and for quebecois nationalism than from a strict adherence to given ideologies or specific political programmes. They wanted their theatre linked to communities, regions and, more widely still, to a society—theirs—that was seeking to name and define its cultural identity. Theirs was a theatre of commitment or of Sartrean “engagement”—a theatre of belief in social change, designed and performed to be an active ferment in consciousness raising processes. (Beauchamp, “Theatre Research”)

In the ’80s, the situation changed. Québécois TYA writers started using abstract forms, mythological figures, and epic narratives to speak about the world of injustice, corruption, violence

and war (Beauchamp, “La dramaturgie jeunesse” 146). They also began to investigate themes of identity and traumatic experiences to be discussed with young spectators. Aesthetically, they engaged with surrealistic and poetic forms of narration. At the same time, they explored documentary and testimonial performance, trying to create more authentic dialogue and situations on stage (Beauchamp, “La dramaturgie jeunesse” 147). Since the late ’90s, the Québécois theatre scene has witnessed a significant increase in productions for young audiences that address “such dangerous territories like incest, violence or death” (Turgeon-Charest 1). “These subjects are considered difficult, they are the monsters of childhood” (2). Bringing these monsters on stage and discussing them together with young spectators comprises the major tactics of contemporary emancipatory theatre for children in Quebec.⁶

These tactics find specific echoes in productions that aim to tell stories about migration and unaccompanied minors to audiences unfamiliar with these conditions in order to make young people aware of the unjust social and economic realities beyond their family setting or classroom. Wajdi Mouawad, a Lebanese-Québécois artist, has repeatedly investigated the topics of displacement and identity crisis. In his plays for adults and for teenagers, including *Pacamambo* (2000, directed by Serge Marois for Arrière Scène) and *Assoiffés* (2008, directed by Benoît Vermeulen for Théâtre Le Clou), he used *bildungsroman* to stage his own experiences and views on exile.⁷ Buziak’s staging of *Traversée* continues this tradition of making political and emancipatory theatre for children in Quebec.

Traversée—A Case Study of Emancipatory Theatre for Children

Founder of the bilingual—French and French Sign Language—Compagnie Hippolyte a mal au coeur, Estelle Savasta is both a playwright and a director. In 2005 she directed her first play, *Le Grand Cahier* by Agota Kristof, which looked at how a young person can turn into a monster. She created her second work, *Seule dans ma peau d’âne*, in 2008 for the À pas contés festival in Dijon. Nominated for the 2008 Molière Award for Theatre for Young Audiences, *Seule dans ma peau d’âne* asked, “How do you become a girl? What is growing up? How do we recover from our greatest sorrows?” (“Compagnie Hippolyte a mal au Coeur”). *Traversée*, first produced in 2011, was Savasta’s third project. Written in French and French Sign Language, it was created in conversation with children refugees and performed by adult actors for TYA audiences.

Featuring a child migrant—a little girl named Nour, whose name means “light” in Arabic—*Traversée* tells a beautiful but heartbreaking story. At the beginning of the play, Nour is a happy child. She shares a small, cozy house with her nanny Youmna, who speaks the language of the deaf and teaches Nour its secret codes (Figure 1). Their house is full of comfy and meaningful things, and is full of love, friendship, and the magic of language. The day her school closes, however, Nour’s childhood ends. Youmna tells Nour that her real mother, who lives in a happy country where girls can study and become who they really want, has sent for her. And so Nour’s journey begins. As we follow this girl—who crosses the world by car and by bus, by boat and under a truck—we also witness her character’s transformation. An innocent child sheltered by Youmna’s love, Nour grows into a lonely teenager who must rely on her own skills of survival. After many days of travelling as an unaccompanied child refugee, Nour lands in her new country. As a child who actually survived the journey, and who found



Figure 1. From left to right: Youmna (played by Hodan Youssouf) and Nour (played by Florence Blain Mbaye). Photo Credit: Patricia Voumard. Used with permission.

a country with provisions available for refugee children, she is one of the lucky ones: Nour goes to a new school and studies a new language. The day she becomes an adult, when she delivers her first baby as a midwife, Nour opens a magic box that Youmna gave her when she left home, and learns the secret of her identity. Youmna was her biological mother: she loved Nour so much that she sent her daughter away, entrusting her fate to the hands of strangers. This story of broken bonds and promises is difficult to comprehend and accept. But it must be told, as it makes the sufferings of refugees relatable and it uses migration as an allegory for coming-of-age.

To Savasta, a political play like *Traversée* must speak to both children, and their parents, and their adult companions, as it addresses those adolescents, who, from eight to ten, begin to question their place in the world. They prepare to become adults, ready to take on responsibilities for themselves and for others. “Adolescence and the years that precede it,” Savasta writes, explode with “existential questions” (“*Traversée*, Dossier le Presse”). *Traversée* engages with them too: the play resonates with self-discovery, when a child realizes that they must leave their parents’ home (“*Traversée*, Dossier le Presse”). Savasta associates Nour’s story of border-crossings with the pains of growing up. This correlation between an exilic journey and coming of age is not a new theme in the theatre of migration. Wajdi Mouawad has dedicated the majority of his plays to this phenomenon. Once a close collaborator of Mouawad’s, Savasta’s writing and directing similarly aims to carry out the former’s passion for justice and his belief in the personal investment artists must make in the world they create. In writing *Traversée*, Savasta aimed to bring awareness of the refugee crisis to the world, but she also used this dramatic universe to reflect upon her own teenage experiences. Working on this story forced Savasta to retrace personal dilemmas that she faced at Nour’s age. “The memories came back alive and clear: despite all the disillusion, all the staggering and discouraging questions, the desire to grow gradually found its strength in the claim and the will to believe that the world can be changed” (“*Traversée*, Dossier le Presse”).

Translating experiences of child migrants (the common term within the European context of the 2015 refugee crisis) for young audiences in Canada presented a special challenge for Buziak. An Ottawa-based theatre director of Polish origin, Buziak is intimately familiar with the pangs of displacement, and she exhibits an interest in the themes of “multiculturalism, inclusion and migration” (Savard).⁸ An immigrant herself, Buziak reads *Traversée* as an intersection of several political topics, including migration and feminism. This intersection makes it even more important for her to share Savasta’s story with Canadians. As Buziak states,

Young people live in the same world as adults and face the same reality. It is important to approach this reality together with them in such a way as to offer a different point of view on what they hear on the news or read on the internet. I want to convey the sense of hope, [to show them] that together we can be stronger, despite (or thanks to) our linguistic, cultural and other differences. In *Traversée*, Youmna says it very well: “Sometimes to be one you have to be many.” (qtd. in Douillard and Volle 6)

To bring this feeling of difference and sense of internal divide closer to her Canadian audiences, Buziak relies on several tactics of making emancipatory theatre for children. She begins with the hypothesis that by speaking to children in cognitively and emotionally relatable language and images, theatre can help them access the stories of displacement through personal experiences, even if these experiences are not as devastating as those of the refugee children.

Rather than directly touching upon the issues related to forced migration, *Traversée* relies on a tight narrative that takes the form of candid and touching testimony. By remaining very close to the child’s consciousness, [...] the play intentionally disregards social or political considerations. Instead, it follows the thread of the little girl’s emotions, omitting however to make it age specific or mark the transformations that can result from such an epic journey. (Gagné Dion)

In other words, to tell the story of Nour’s travels as an unaccompanied minor, *Traversée* uses images of her physical journey to foreground her agony in leaving home and thus of her childhood. This fear to lose one’s home and one’s parents, to be left alone at life’s crossroads—both literally and figuratively—is shared by many preteen children, refugees or not. To cope with this reality, children often rely on their imagination. Child migrants are not much different. In *Traversée*, Nour never speaks of what she must endure; she keeps that to herself. In her dreams and fantasies, however, she often talks to Youmna, who takes the shape of a tree, a bird, or the wind.

On stage, Buziak translates Nour’s loneliness into a minimalist design. Echoing Rancière’s demand for complex theatre aesthetics to make its spectators politically aware and emancipated, Buziak grants special significance to the set, props, and costumes. She also bestows political symbolism onto human hair. To keep Nour safe, Youmna cuts her hair. Boys, Youmna believes, have it easier on the road. To Buziak, however, this gesture of the mother cutting her daughter’s hair without the girl’s consent acquires a dual and complicated meaning. On one hand, cutting a girl’s hair can help her on her journey and so serves as a gesture of motherly protection. On the other hand, it can turn into an act of violence and intrusion. “By cutting

her daughter's hair, Youmna radically changes Nour's identity. By the time Nour will have her hair grown back, she will be a grown up woman" (Buziak, Class lecture). In the production, cutting Nour's hair becomes a turning point in the action. Not only does it speak to the fragility and precariousness of the child's identity and psyche, it also evokes images of rupture, imprisonment, and death. "Hair is a vector of memory," Buziak explains. "Often it defines our identity" (qtd. in Douillard and Volle 7).

To translate the symbolism of human hair and its significance for the development of the play into relatable stage images, Buziak collaborated with Khadija Baker, a multidisciplinary artist of Kurdish-Syrian descent residing in Montreal. Baker uses human hair to create art installations about war and exile, so she converted the dramatic gesture of cutting a girl's hair—a sign of love *and* violence—into a number of abstract stage images that were also projected onto a screen. These images allowed Buziak to transform the grim reality of the play into visual metaphors relevant to Quebec's young audiences. "Thinking of Khadija Baker's work was obvious to me," the director explains. "Sometimes [Baker's] installations are very concrete—a bird that flies away, a tree that takes root. Other times, they are more abstract. Khadija's visual world allows the viewer to interpret the images in their own way, from their own imagination" (qtd. in Douillard and Volle 7). Working within the realms of relatable visual metaphors presented just one of the production's leading tactics of emancipatory theatre for children.

Creating complex theatre narratives to engage children and their parents constituted one other tactic of staging migration and making the emancipatory theatre for children in *Traversée*. Although the company promotes this work as suitable for children from nine to fourteen years of age, *Traversée* should be seen, according to Buziak, by a mixed audience of children and adults.

The girl [Nour] grows during the play; she becomes an adult in the third part. Children tend to identify with her from the beginning, whereas adults begin to do so much later, during the course of the play. But if adults start thinking that this production is addressed to them only, they might be afraid to share it with children. The truth is, however, this play can be seen and understood differently by different audiences, the meaning will change depending on their personal experiences. (qtd. in Savard)

Featuring a mother who decides to send her daughter away to seek safety and a better life, the play interrogates the character's moral judgment and probes her inner strength. By sending Nour away, Youmna performs a double sacrifice: she deprives Nour of immediate familial care and she gives up her own dreams and happiness. The production asks how can we—as parents and educators—explain this mother's actions to our own children? Can we remain neutral? Can we blame Youmna for having high hopes for her daughter's future? These questions have no simple answers, and they encourage children and adults to dialogue with each other. These questions make young spectators grow emotionally attached to the play's characters and invite them to critically examine the reality from which these questions stem.

Creating empathy, therefore, serves as a third tactic in making emancipatory theatre for children. This is particularly true for staging stories of migration, as theatre performances can reinforce the value of a single human life, refugee or not, and it can reveal complex dilemmas anybody (not just refugees) can face in the midst of social, political, and economic disasters.

In *Traversée*, Nour is a victim of circumstances. Left alone to the mercy of strangers, losing her identity and language, Nour confronts a destiny that is not of her own choosing. After a series of dramatic encounters, losses, and disappointments, Nour finds hope. By fulfilling her professional dream (i.e., becoming a midwife) and by learning the true identity of her mother, Nour discovers her own self. The transformation that Nour goes through invites young spectators to question their own place in society and their emotional attachments to it. But empathy cannot be imposed: it can only be taught and practised. Daniel Goleman defines three types of social empathy—cognitive, emotional, and compassionate—that can make us emotionally responsive and intelligent human beings.⁹ Theatre has the unique power to teach its audiences how to develop all three types of empathy. Political theatre for children uses compassionate empathy because it can reach beyond sharing other peoples’ feelings. It can mobilize us to take action and so it can make theatre emancipatory. Moreover, compassionate empathy can help political theatre move beyond its educational objectives, as formulated in Brecht’s theory and in his “learning-play.”

Buziak’s *Traversée* speaks of death, violence, injustice, and displacement in a language that invites emotional attachment and concern. But it never speaks of horror in literal terms. Instead *Traversée* aspires to appeal to the vividness of its young audiences’ imaginations. Buziak uses visual clues, such as changes in costume and hair style, to indicate inner transformations in her characters. A childlike dress and shoes are used to mark Nour as a happy girl at the beginning of her journey, whereas a baggy coat of a brownish colour is used to show Nour as she travels alone. Later, Nour wears more sophisticated clothing, such as a pair of light trousers and a blouse, similar to a nurse’s uniform (Figure 2).

The acting style Buziak employs is a bit distant or rather reserved, edging on the techniques of storytelling. It invites audience reflection rather than straightforward identification with the characters. The performers avoid illustrative intonations or gestures that are often used in TYA productions with adults playing children—think of some TVO programs for children such as *Bookaneers*, when adult actors wear exaggerated makeup and bright costumes, often



Figure 2. From left to right: Nour (played by Florence Blain Mbaye) and Youmna (played by Hodan Youssouf). Photo Credit: Patricia Voumard. Used with permission.

resembling clown attire, screaming at their audiences and using big laughs to imitate through this kind of over-the-top acting the ways they imagine children act and talk. Florence Blain Mbaye, who played Nour in the Ottawa production, used her adult voice, both when she spoke the lines of the young girl and when she translated the LSQ dialogue by Hodan Youssouf for the hearing audiences. She relies on facial expressions and some indexical signs in her movements and gestures to indicate that Nour is not an adult. She leaves lots of space for children and their parents to imagine what it was like for Nour to travel alone across continents.

I attended a run of this production at the Centre national des arts with my daughter, who at the time was ten years old. An experienced theatregoer, who I brought to see her first play at the age of three, Eugenie is highly sensitive to the use of humour, irony, and poetry on stage. She is also quite political in her life views: the theme of migration is very close to her own experience because she is a child of immigrant parents and studies at a diverse school. In our post-production talk, I asked Eugenie which moments were the most memorable for her. She spoke at length about the Nour's transformation and how unimaginable, in fact, her journey was. She also mentioned that the political message, which *Traversée* wanted to convey, came through clearly, mostly because the artists seemed to be truly emotionally attached to their characters. The fragmented nature of the story added to the play's suspense, whereas switching languages—from spoken French to sign language—served as a device of inclusion, she said, and provided more space for her own imagination. Switching languages allowed her to freely imagine those places that Nour had to visit and events that happened to her. Eugenie also appreciated what she called the “plot holes” of *Traversée*: instead of spoon-feeding details of the story, it omitted them. This technique further encouraged Eugenie's emotional engagement with the play. What she liked most was the juxtaposition between words and images, storytelling and projections on stage. These unexpected connections helped expand the space of fiction beyond the limitations of a small proscenium stage. As a result of these techniques, Eugenie felt sympathy for the child, although she thought it was both exciting and terrifying to leave one's home. My daughter was also very sad for Nour's mother, who had to stay behind and probably died alone in her own home.

As is clear from this description, Eugenie was quite touched by this minimalist production. Three years later, when I was writing this piece, I asked her whether she remembered it at all. She told me that it was Nour's journey and the intricate language of gestures and words that stayed with her.

It is hard to know how other children reacted to this work. What I recollect is that, like my own daughter, many young spectators were watching *Traversée* very quietly, carefully listening to its dialogue and paying attention to the abstract and evocative images created by this subdued production (Figure 3). I am convinced that Eugenie's reflection three years later demonstrates that *Traversée*'s theatrical multilingualism of both spoken and signed languages served as its most distinctive element.

A work of fiction and poetry, *Traversée* uses spoken French and sign language to transform Nour's story of migration into a theatrical metaphor of miscommunication and loneliness as it can be experienced by migrants and displaced people, and by people who are deaf or hard of hearing. In the published version of the play, “Youmna is deaf and she expresses herself in a sign language. [...] Sometimes Nour speaks alone; sometimes Nour and Youmna speak together, each in her own language, a device that forms two parallel narratives; sometimes Youmna addresses



Figure 3. Nour (played by Florence Blain Mbaye). Photo Credit: Patricia Voumard. Used with permission.

Nour, she signs for her, while Nour says the words. However, the text is written in such a way that one can use it only as Nour's own script. In this case, the play should be considered as a monologue" (Savasta, *Traversée* 7–8).

In France, the actors used spoken French and *le langage des signes françaises*. For Buziak's staging in Montreal, the company retranslated Youmna's lines into *le langage des signes Québécois* (LSQ) to bring the story closer to Québécois audiences and to remind us that the culture of deaf people "is not a culture of disability, but a culture of diversity. Theatre by and for deaf people carries strong claims for social recognition. It is marked by richness and complexity; and it fights for inclusion and thus it forces its makers to seek new forms of artistic expression" ("Le théâtre" 13). LSQ became this production's political tool and metaphor. In *Traversée*, the use of LSQ, without special surtitles or audio translation, conveyed the characters' vulnerability, but also imposed the effect of Brecht's distancing. It placed *Traversée's* hearing audiences into a precarious and uncomfortable position. Their audio and visual encounter with LSQ approximated the experience of migrants who are forced to communicate in a second language¹⁰ and whose comprehension and self-expression are constantly challenged and undermined.

Reflecting on how this multi-dimensional and metaphorical work came to life, Buziak underlines the practical, conceptual, and artistic necessity and significance of translating Youmna's lines into LSQ (Buziak, class lecture). Because LSQ, as any other sign language, is a separate and self-enclosed system of communication in which written images and words do not necessarily coincide or relate to the images created through gestures, the company used a professional translator to bring Savasta's text closer to the hearing-impaired spectators of Quebec. Hodan Youssouf, a deaf actor, would learn her lines in LSQ, watching a special video recording; whereas Florence Blain Mbaye, a hearing actor, would learn these

expressions to converse with Hodan on stage as an actor and as a character. As Buziak explains,

All our conversations [were] conducted through an interpreter, so there [was] always a slight lag. We developed work and communication tools as we went along, without taking anything for granted. As I made every decision, I tried to put myself in the shoes of an audience member hearing this story for the first time, but also of an audience member *seeing* rather than hearing it. As well, as with any translation, certain images in one language [were not] the same in the other. It took a fair bit of trial and error before we arrived at a satisfactory translation of the French script into Quebec Sign Language. (“From Somebody”)

Accordingly, in this bilingual (French/LSQ) and bicultural (hearing culture/hearing-impaired culture) production, the actors were to learn special body- and movement-based cues for speaking and holding back. Their meta-gestures—the gestures that do not belong to their characters or do not signify any stage or fictional actions—served as special signs of inter-actor communication. A certain look or a particular movement served as signals for the actors to speak their lines or make gestures, so their own creative process included learning when and how to look at each other, and understanding when and where the line, the action, or the sequence of gestures was over to continue moving the action forward without debasing the story’s logic. When Nour spoke in French, Youmna translated her lines into LSQ, but when Youmna spoke in LSQ codes and gestures, Nour translated these bodily expressions into the language of the theatre. She transformed Youmna’s language into a beautiful collage of movements marked by a performative style deeply rooted in its own emotive physicality.

Communicating and thinking bilingually and biculturally also affected the work of the production team—the show’s sound, lighting, and video designers were encouraged to create their own performance scores in a continuous dialogue with the actors and the director, following the fluctuating rhythms of the visual and audio narratives of the play. Using LSQ became not only a thematic but also an artistic anchor of the production. It helped *Traversée* speak across ages and communities, across continents, and often across segregated cultural groups. For hearing audiences, the onstage presence of LSQ created new theatricality. “To watch the hands of a deaf actor twirl, carried by the sublime words, is a beautiful way to open the door of the world of the deaf, and to be touched by art that respects differences” (“Le théâtre” 13). For the hearing-impaired, the use of LSQ served as a welcome opening to new experiences: it suggested inclusivity of this theatrical encounter, creating a dialogue about migration to different sensibilities.

Making Emancipatory Theatre for Children in Canada— Concluding Remarks

Staging migration in Canadian theatre is rarely simple. Although the country was built on immigration and is accepting new immigrants on a daily basis, including the 25,000 Syrian refugees it welcomed in 2016, Canada remains distant from and somewhat unaffected by the urgency of the European mass migration (“Canada Welcomes”). The country’s geographical

location and multiculturalism legislation protects its population from direct exposure to the consequences of the current refugee crisis. For theatre-makers who wish to tell the stories of migration to Canadian audiences, it becomes essential to manoeuvre this complexity. On one hand, it is important to bring the story of global migrants home; on the other, it is vital not to re-traumatize those audience members who are only too familiar with its hardships.

Savasta's *Traversée* and specifically Buziak's production navigate this artistic minefield with tact and elegance. They demonstrate these artists' level of political awareness, with both the writer and the director clearly recognizing the weight of ethical responsibility that lies on their shoulders. In audience-building activities, Buziak and her company use different educational tactics, including facilitating discussions and workshops related to the performance, as well as talkbacks with audiences, whether the play is presented in large urban centres, like Montréal arts interculturels and Centre national des arts in Ottawa, or in the smaller settings of community centres or schools. In her interviews, public appearances, and special lectures, including one she gave for my third-year undergraduate students at the University of Ottawa, Buziak is willing to talk not only about the play itself but also the research that went into the production. She discusses how the artists learned of the horrible experiences refugee children and specifically unaccompanied minors face on their journeys—and not only in Europe but also in the US, with Trump's draconian anti-immigration politics and policies that involve the separation of families and deportations.

But most importantly, when it comes to speaking of migration to children, this work of tact and elegance takes place on the stage. In its aesthetics, *Traversée* nourishes intimacy between the stage action and its viewers, and thus it encourages children to sympathize with the play's characters. It invites children to think about and discuss the play's topic, much as Brecht himself wished. Mixing storytelling devices, poetry, and visual metaphors, *Traversée* addresses both children and adults. It reflects on the rupture of migration by speaking of travelling as a mass phenomena and also as a singular encounter as experienced by an unaccompanied minor. *Traversée* avoids realistic representation of violence and demonstrates that by mixing languages of performance and using distancing, fragmentation, and multimedia, theatre can move forward the project of *emancipatory theatre for children*. This practice questions empathy as the foundation of political theatre and proposes the tone of sincerity, not excess (Zaroulia). Most importantly, it invites its target audiences to seek their own vision of the future in a Canada that has recently started questioning its own complex history of colonialism and migration, forcing the inquiries about identity and globalization centre stage.

Notes

- 1 In 2003, Jack Zipes revisited his 1977 theory of emancipatory theatre for children. He traced it back to Walter Benjamin's writings on political theatre for children (5–7) and identified consumerism and spectacle within today's North American culture as major obstacles that theatre needs to overcome in its desire to make children politically engaged (9–11).
- 2 Directed by Milena Buziak, *Traversée* used the LSQ translations by Marie-Hélène Hamel and Martin Asselin. Video images were created by Khadija Baker on a set designed by Laurence Boutin-Laperrière, with costumes by Manon Guiraud, and lighting by Hugo Dalphond. The original cast included Florence Blain Mbaye and Hodan Youssouf.

- 3 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from French to English are made by the author.
- 4 Speaking of the major obstacles GRIPS Theatre has encountered in making the emancipatory theatre for children, Zipes identifies society's view—or rather fear—of “children's emancipation as a prelude to working class emancipation, or revolution of one mind or another” (“GRIPS” 15).
- 5 On the history of making theatre for young audiences in Quebec, see Beauchamp, *Apprivoiser*, “La dramaturgie jeunesse,” *Le théâtre adolescent*, and “Theatre Research”; Thérioux; Côté-Delisle; and Turgeon-Charest. On the history of staging theatre for young audiences in English Canada, see Fitzsimmons Frey.
- 6 Other tactics of staging migration for and with children can be exploratory and participatory, featuring professional theatre artists and educators working with children refugees and helping them integrate into their new country. These participatory tactics often rely on Brecht's dialectics (Nicholson, 32) and include creating dialogue with the audience and staging play-provocations with the audience. They can focus on the social aspects of society's functioning and work through its ideologies (32–33). Using Brecht's alienation and commentary as acting principles and methods of dramaturgical construction, participatory TYA practices can help children “avoid what Brecht regarded as the seduction of the theatrical spectacle, [allowing] the dramatic form [to encourage] young people to enter the action without feeling self-conscious or that they had to ‘act’” (32). This article does not focus on these tactics.
- 7 Other theatrical works for children, such as the 2017 dance piece *I on the Sky*, produced by DynamO Théâtre, or *Dis Merci*, produced in 2018 by Joe Jack et John, also opt for non-verbal, movement-based, and visual-arts related devices of performance to speak about migration to their young spectators.
- 8 Milena Buziak is the artistic director of Voyageurs Immobiles, whose mandate acknowledges “the paradox of displacement and immobility” and an objective to “bring together artists mainly from culturally diverse backgrounds around contemporary projects that freely transgress the boundaries between countries and artistic disciplines”(Voyageurs Immobiles). A graduate of Concordia University and UQAM, in 2013 Buziak devised the documentary play *Grains de sable*, based on interviews with Canadian soldiers once stationed in Afghanistan. For young audiences, she directed *La femme corbeau* (2013) and Estelle Savasta's *Traversée*. Her recent production of *Le cheval de bleu* (written by Marcel Cremer) is further dedicated to Buziak's investigation of the artistic relationships between hearing and hearing-impaired performers.
- 9 Cognitive empathy refers to one's “ability to understand how a person feels and what they might be thinking.” Emotional or affective empathy speaks of one's “ability to share the feelings of another person,” whereas compassionate empathy “goes beyond simply understanding others and sharing their feelings: it actually moves us to take action, to help however we can” (Bariso 2018).
- 10 In Dennis Foon's 1981 play, *New Canadian Kid*, he explores this typical challenge that many immigrants face in a new land when confronted with their own inability to properly express themselves in their second language. Foon presents the challenge by writing gibberish as the language the Canadian kids speak, whereas he reserves normative English for the dialogue of immigrant children. Because of such a linguistic reversal, the audience follows the immigrant's language experiences, and Foon manages to present the experience of immigration from the perspective of a child newcomer.

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