



# Exiled Lives on the Stage: When Storytellers become the Story

Red Thread Journal 6 | Pieter Verstraete

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In his well-known *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said wrote that “[t]o see a poet in exile—as opposed to reading the poetry of exile—is to see exile’s antinomies embodied and endured with a unique intensity” (2000: 174).<sup>2</sup> In my Marie Curie project, entitled *Exiled Lives on the Stage* (supported by the European Commission), I take this to heart when I interview theatre artists and cultural workers from Turkey, who have recently left their home country, for various reasons, but often with a sense of urgency. In them, I recognize a similar intensity as Said wrote about his friends, of terminal loss but also hope. Through interviews, panel debates [and a podcast](#), I too seek to map those “territories of experience beyond those mapped by the literature of exile itself” (175).

I would like to reflect here on some of the observations I have made in recent months. I organized two panels on 29 September 2022, in Berlin’s Engelnest (with solidarity network Kopuntu) and at the Free University Berlin, and one on 25 October at London Hackney’s Arcola Theatre (with theatre production company Pan Productions). In between, I also recorded new episodes of the podcast series, *Exiled Lives* (available at all relevant platforms). My guests were Memet Ali Alabora, Mîrza Metîn and Kawa Nemir at Engelnest, and Barış Celiloğlu, Naz Yeni and Koray Can Yanaşır at the Arcola. What struck me was that they were all good storytellers in their own right; yet a characteristic of displacement born out of necessity is that the storytellers are not entirely in

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control of their own narratives. They become the story. I wish to address here a few of my insights.

Having these debates and interviews with Turkish theatre artists in different cities allows us to compare the many “antinomies” in the experience of artists on local, national and transnational levels. In the following sections, I chose to reflect briefly on the very notion of self-exile, on institutional frameworks impacting labour aspects, on the post-colonial perspective that exilic life invites to, and on some of the aesthetic practices of the “exilic performative”.

## Self-exile?

I began my research from an expanded notion of “exile” as a special though ostracized position to be in, particularly for an artist, that allows for reflection on altering value systems in different national and urban contexts, be it politically, socially or artistically. I take the term as a stepping stone for discussing issues of displacement and uprootedness that many citizens of Turkey are going through when making the decision to move from their homeland to make a new life abroad. In my discussions with artists, I often get the remark: “But I am not an exile.” They usually mean that they are not as bad off as the incoming political refugees from Syria, or now Ukraine.

In the podcast, I ask Memet Ali Alabora if he relates to the term, as he had legitimate reasons to flee from Turkey. Particularly the lynch campaign in Turkey’s conservative media and TV, which was targeting him personally as well as some cast members of his *Mi Minör* theatre production (2012) for alleged similarities with the Gezi Park uprising, but also the subsequent Gezi Park trial that concluded in April with a life sentence for Osman Kavala without possibility of parole, caused enough reason to switch Turkey for Wales. And yet, in our conversation, he does not refer to his current life situation as necessarily “in exile”. He clarifies that he already had made the decision to leave before all these events. The slander campaign in mainstream media made the

process only quicker, and naturally, more traumatic. Wales was an accidental choice but it feels now like a second home to him.



*Memet Ali Alabora, photo by © Takura Aldridge Nyamowa*

He reminds me of Turkey's long history of migration which reveals easily around every rakı table: "exile is almost engraved in our DNA", he clamours. Exile does not only affect the exiled, it affects the whole lineage too, he cautions. In the case of his own family, which includes a long line of artists based in Istanbul, he reminds us of how cities are made by the people and their anecdotes. The Alabora family migrated from Thessaloniki to Istanbul in 1910 onwards. "I left Istanbul in 2013, so the Alaboras could only survive for hundred and three years," he says with a smirk. All of this makes him relate to "exile" as rather a mindset than a condition for which he quotes Henry Pachter's words, an exiled intellectual of the Nazi regime who ended up in New York:

"Being an exile is not a matter of needing a passport; it is a state of mind. I discovered this but gradually. In the beginning I did not experience exile as a universal mode of existence" (1970: 17).<sup>3</sup>

Pachter stated this in his belief back then that his situation would be only temporary, as Hitler was seen as a transient and extra-ordinary phenomenon that, philosophically, had no right to exist. He would soon find out that his ideas would make him more isolated. Alabora explains in the panel at Engelneest further that he has no such illusions. The idea of "exile" or "feeling exiled" came rather to him from outside when someone asked him, and although he obviously was in exile when he left as he feared for his life, he sees himself not as exiled, since he is not looking forward to the day when he is going back, like Pachter. "But of course, it is multi-layered," Alabora finishes, "there are moments when you really feel like you are in exile, but generally, I am more of a person who likes to look forward."

Alabora's situation is a particular case to say the least, more high-profile than some of the others who were implicated in the trials, like some of the cultural workers of Anadolu Kültür who also arrived in Berlin and London recently. Yet many more have left without imminent risk. Ever since the aftermath of Gezi and the increased repressive rule after the attempted coup of 2016, artists,

academics and journalists have been leaving in what we could call “a silent exodus”, to find better places to continue their artistic and political work in more free circumstances. The majority of them have this same forward-looking mindset, though some also struggle with the trauma of what they and Turkey have lost.

After the Berlin panel, a queer person came up to me to thank me, saying: “This is my story too. I realize I am actually in self-exile in my mind, and I also have different cultural backgrounds”. He tells me about his difficulties in Turkey, common to LGBTs, and how singing in choirs in Berlin has helped him tremendously. The psychological pressures come up often in my interviews, yet the reasons for leaving are very diverse. Germany shares a long history of exile with Turkey, through the Jewish exiles who arrived in Istanbul and Ankara in the 1930s, but equally, the second wave of politically persecuted intellectuals after the 1980s military coup. The difference with previous migration waves is that we are seeing a complexity today of layers of political, economic, social and psychological reasons, all interweaving to different degrees.

## **Institutional frameworks and artistic labour**

Pachter was quite cynical of the uprooting effects that exile has on the artist or the poet: only the world-famous ones made it, but more often than not “exile destroys talent, or it means the loss of the environment that nourished the talent morally, socially and physically” (17). True, I came across many artists who are struggling to enter the institutional and support frameworks to continue their artistic labour as before. I wrote a policy report on support networks, programs and institutions in Germany that artists from Turkey, particularly those based in Berlin, have used in recent years. But Germany is also quite differently organized in state support than the UK, for instance.

In Berlin, a common phrase “go to Gorki” is told to newcomers as if the Maxim Gorki Theatre, known for being a “post-migrant” centre in the last decade, can address all the problems of all migrant generations, including the Turkish ones. Their support for Turkey’s exiles has been mostly centered around the

ostracized journalist Can Dündar, Kurdish artist Zehra Doğan and author Asli Erdoğan. Barış Atay also staged his *Sadece Diktatör (Just a Dictator)* there after it got briefly banned in Istanbul in 2018. The post-migrant discourse of the last twenty years, to which artistic director Shermin Langhoff was a vocal advocate, has certainly exposed white German privilege in the cultural infrastructure, enabling artists of colour, including artists with Turkish or Kurdish backgrounds, to make art and theatre professionally at Germany's institutional centre. But migrant theatre, in Turkish or bilingual (like Tiyatrom and Theater28), has suffered and largely remains in the periphery still today. There is also a certain wariness and protectionism which complicates the solidarity between the generations. New groups like Gastkollektiv and Mîrza Metîn's German branch of Şermola Performans rely largely on their own resources in the independent theatre scene, with gigs in TAK or Oyouun.

The relevant German support systems (like Berlin Senate's *Weltoffenes Berlin*, AiE's *Fixing What's Broken*, AR, Aid A, PEN's *Writers in Exile*, the Allianz Kulturstiftung, or the IFA and Goethe Institute's joint Martin Roth Initiative) are not nearly sufficient. Most often they are awarded on the basis of quality output rather than process (though there is improvement in the latest initiatives by the Fonds Darstellende Künste). And funding is often not addressing the very needs of social and professional integration, like learning German. The very stratified organization of German state support also often creates the idea that artists have to claim their exilic identity in order to be valued in a system that ticks boxes, a form of self-orientalization of artistic labour which the post-migrant scene had already critiqued but still lingers on in a deeply racially embedded and unequally organized society.

In the UK, there are little or no support programs for individual displaced artists like we have in Germany. Support is mostly tied already to the institutions through the Arts Council, which makes artistic labour largely dependent on collaboration with institutions like the Arcola Theatre in Dalston Hackney or community-based donor and sponsorship. Someone like Alabora gathered support from Arts Council Wales for his theatre productions with the self-established Be Aware Productions, founded in 2015 by his ex-wife Pınar Öğün

who is also in self-exile. Though Alabora, as he explains during the panel at Engelnest, did not want to make theatre about their stories due to the trauma, as he also refuses to make use of his self-exilic status, their situation did inform some of the work with Be Aware Productions, like the feminist theatre play, *Enough is Enough* (2017), or Nâzım Hikmet's *Human Landscapes from My Country* (2020).

In London, multiculturalism has advanced with a longer history of colonialism as much as its capitalist modes of artistic labour and cultural industry. I met many theatre artists from Turkey, including Kurds, who arrived in recent years and are self-organizing theatre initiatives with the help of community centres, like Day-Mer or Halkevi of the Alevi communities. In the panel at the Arcola, it became clear that although co-founded by Turkish Mehmet Ergen in 2000 in the part of East London that is a hub of Turkish and Kurdish migrants, the Arcola Theatre largely lacks the resources or the concept to support newcomers despite funding. Arcola defines itself as a British Off West End theatre that stages high-quality productions. Its participative *Ala Turka* program has helped artists, Turks and Kurds alike, in the margins of its activity.

Theatre professionals from Turkey like actress and director Barış Celiloğlu occasionally also got a stage at the Arcola for her own theatre company, Theatre East N Bull, which she founded 16 years ago and which staged among others Ariel Dorfman's *Death And The Maiden* (*Ölüm ve Kız*, 2017). Her name is today on the Young Vic Creators Program and many other independent theatres in the London Off-scene, despite her precarious status. Her theatre is not a community initiative, like *Ala Turka*, but an international theatre company that produces bilingual and multi-lingual productions. It has received in the past its own funding from the Arts Council as a professional theatre company, further supported by private businesses as sponsors. Its latest production, *LOCKEDOWN LOCKED IN* (2021), was a digital theatre project during the Covid19-lockdown that addressed pressing issues of femicide. It brought seventy women artists together from nine countries in at least eight languages to create a production on domestic violence, as numbers of murdered women are

escalating dramatically, in Turkey but also elsewhere. The project has received quite a few international awards, including Turkey's Theatre Audience Awards.

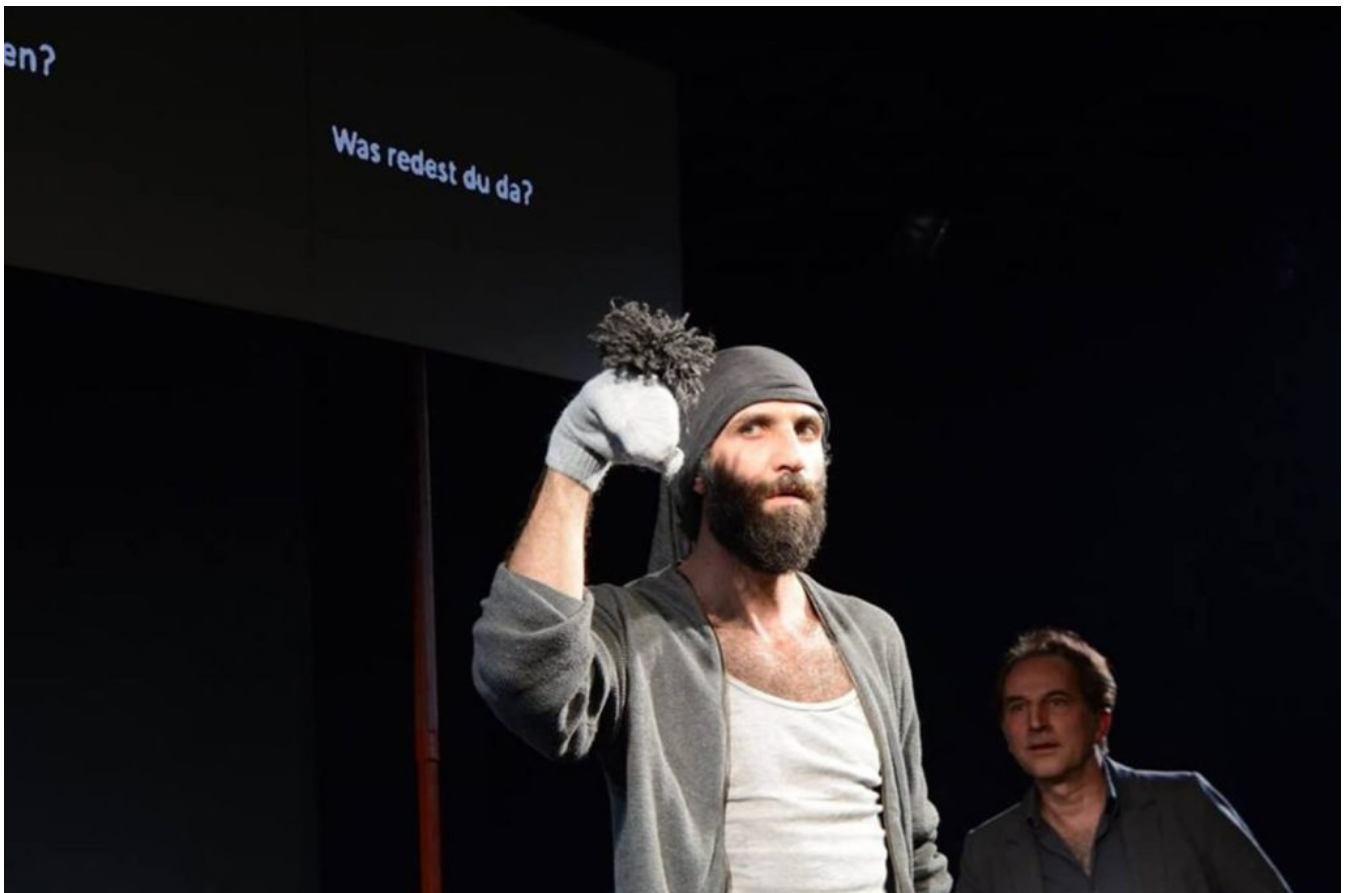
Nonetheless, the pandemic has depleted resources in the cultural sector, including the Arcola: its *Ala Turka's* guest director Dr Naz Yeni (Anglia Ruskin University) created her own independent theatre ensemble from it, Seyyar Kumpanya, which welcomes newly arrivers and produces performances in the Turkish language, like *Migrant Shakespeare* (2021-23) streamed digitally and on stage as well as *The Trial* (2021-22) and *Kazablanka* (2023) both on stage. Unfortunately, theatre groups like Seyyar Kumpanya function on a shared profit basis, which in reality could replicate a self-exploitative system. In this case trained actors are in it for their own enjoyment, commitment, and self-care, but not for pay unlike the participants who are community actors.

Most of the actors there are or were self-employed under the Ankara Agreement (aka the European Community Association Agreement, which has now ended due to Brexit). This made their move to the UK easier with the prospect of permanent residence (Indefinite Leave to Remain) in time, but it keeps them also financially precarious. Many survive through odd jobs very different from the services they are offering through the agreement, which makes them prone to exploitative labour situations. Those who are more lucky to get stable employment in cultural institutions are dependent on visa sponsorship. As an effect of the pandemic, there are more vacancies particularly for technical, supportive staff and in the service sector. Yet as a general rule, which does not only concern the UK, the economic need to leave Turkey could often lead to a dependency to an employer, where labour rights and equal pay do not come into question.



## A post-colonial perspective

So far, my reflections have spoken from a (white) Turkish perspective, yet a deeper look into the reality of exilic living situations and opportunities uncovers a duplication of the historical and social unequal relation between Turks and Kurds in the host country or city. Kurdish artists are more likely to have experienced imminent risk in Turkey which makes them decide to leave. In some cases, the new context also bears a new perspective, for both Kurdish and Turkish artists. In this respect, it was noteworthy to organize two panels in Berlin that hosted Memet Ali Alabora next to Kurdish theatre artists Mîrza Metîn and Kawa Nemir who have been significant in the development and emancipation of theatre in Kurmanji. Such a panel would probably not have been even imaginable in Turkey.



*Mîrza Metîn, photo by © Nazım Serhat Fırat*

For Mîrza Metîn the new life in Germany came to cast a post-colonial perspective retrospectively on his life in Turkey, although exile was also not on his mind when he came to Germany in 2018 for professional reasons. He came then on invitation by German theatre director Frank Heuel of Bonn's Fringe Ensemble after a project he did with them in 2017. They hosted and supported him during his IFA Artist in Residence fellowship to write a play, *Anziehungskräfte/Gravity* (2018), after which he coproduced with them other plays and founded the Kurdish-German theatre network, Nexus. It was only when he arrived in Germany that he sees his life as a double exile. The first time he was in exile was actually when he moved with his family from Kars to Istanbul at age three, when he unlearned speaking Kurdish. He sees today more clearly that not only is Eastern Turkey colonized, the nation-wide assimilation of Kurds and the underappreciation of artists from the East in centres like Istanbul have brought the culture and the language of the Kurds under existential threat.

He was reminded of this loss, and the anger inside of him, in Germany due to the white gaze he experienced from his German colleagues and the realization that his tongue is irreparably broken, despite all his efforts to break into conversations and to make friend relationships. "The root of this anger was coming from the Turkish mind that slipped into my identity", he explains to me. His life in Germany is not so much an experience of exile compared to what he had been subjected to in Turkey, which he interiorized twice over, as indeed an exile of the mind. Today, after rereading Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Albert Memmi and others, he came to the radical conclusion to cut a part of his identity that causes this exile and gradually stop talking Turkish altogether.

The double trauma that exiles commonly report, namely of losing one's country and having to enter a new one with all the bureaucratic red tape, seems not really the case for Mîrza Metîn, nor for Kawa Nemir. Being in Germany made Metîn more resilient towards his colonized past and identity, which makes him reconnect more with Kurdish dance and storytelling traditions in

order to decolonize them in what he calls, a “dramaturgy of fire”. Similarly, by moving to Amsterdam and collaborating with Theater RAST, Nemir found himself in a place where he could support the resilience of Kurdish theatre artists in (North) Kurdistan. He has supported the Metropolitan Municipal City Theatre of Diyarbakir, which was rebaptized with private and community sponsorship as Amed Şehir Tiyatrosu after the attempted coup in 2016, when so many Kurdish cultural institutions were disbanded. “Diaspora can be a source for the works being done in Kurdistan”, he reveals in the podcast I recorded after the Berlin panel. His translations in Kurmanji of *Hamlet* and *Tosca* for the stage, but also important literary works in English and Turkish, and now James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, all are efforts to fight against the disappearance of the Kurdish language and culture. The short documentary, *The Thing that Goes through Everything* (2022) by Aylin Kuryel & Fırat Yücel, of which we showed a trailer at Engelnest, testifies of Kawa’s determinations.

The post-colonial perspective also did not leave Memet Ali Alabora untouched. He explains how he feels at home as a minority in the predominantly white city of Cardiff, because it is in itself an underdog to British historical oppression. “You can consider Wales as Britain’s Kurdistan,” he exclaims. “Cardiff taught me what it meant to look from the periphery to the centre. It literally changed my perception. That’s probably the first time that I really felt how Istanbul may be seen from Diyarbakır, but also, as Cardiff is its own centre, how Diyarbakır is seen from Şırnak. There is another power balance there. Cardiff has its own bubble too. There are some of the poorest areas of Northern Europe in Wales. And this is expressed through the need to speak the Welsh language. So, I totally understand Mîrza’s choice to express himself in his own language. I wouldn’t have understood that when I lived in Turkey. Now it makes more sense to me. The struggle of the language is a political struggle, and an existential struggle.” I think this is what post-colonial writer Paul Gilroy meant when he called exile a “double consciousness” that bears potential perspective on both the home and receiving nation.<sup>4</sup> And it is perhaps this epiphany in the diaspora that could bring Turks and Kurds a little

closer, at least that seemed to be happening in our panel that night, despite people's antinomies.

## Theatre of nomadic selfs

For my last reflections on practice, I take my final cue from Yana Meerzon's propositions towards what she calls the "exilic performative": "I believe that the poetics of exile, the quotidian and professional art of self-fashioning and survival, is always grounded within the artist's social, economic and personal exilic conditions, it is the process of constant negotiation and translation".<sup>5</sup>

It is this negotiation and translation that is at the root of Alabora's 2020 adaptation of Nâzım Hikmet's novel, *Memleketimden İnsan Manzaraları* (1960), written by Hikmet several years after 1939 while serving a 13-year prison sentence due to his Communist beliefs. Although Alabora did not want to make a performance about himself, Turkey or his exile, this production (directed by Philip Mackenzie) marks an important step in his coming to terms with his exilic situation in Wales, as he admits: "Nâzım's poetry helped me to negotiate and translate my own perceptions of my pedigree. I started to see the pedigree because I had enough distance to it". Reason to make the production was Alabora's life-long fascination for Nâzım Hikmet's poetry, as it usually comes out at a rakı table. His friends, among others Akım Olgun who is in exile for 20 years, pushed him to do it. Through studying the lines, while being in Wales and relearning the English language, Alabora was more and more seeing the language of Hikmet from a distance, digging into his mindset and words, noticing oddities in the Turkish language. Through Hikmet's language he started then to peel off layers of exile, gradually finding an "inevitable match" with the poet in exile:

"Nâzım and I both come from a cultural elite, we were the hegemony so to speak, but also dissidents and dangerous. I do not want to overstep my bounds by comparing myself to Nâzım Hikmet. After all, he is a poet on the level of the creator-gods, and I am just among the mortals. But

his poetry could only be understood by being in exile and doing the play. ... Hikmet died in exile – I am in exile, doing a show about a man who died in exile – for people, most of whom have left their country, some of them are in self-exile, because some of them are old migrants who came for political or economic reasons, and some of them would be of the new silent exodus. What happened then in my exilic mind was that I started to search for images, like for the Haydarpaşa station with which the book starts, since the mind plays tricks with you in time. And then I wondered: how does he know, since he is writing in prison? Are people bringing him photos or does he really remember everything by heart.”

The minimalist staging – just three spotlights, a lot of theatre smoke and by the end, a chalk outline of a body on the floor – allowed for such interior reflections of the self and of inner images in the mind, while giving a sense of being in a prison cell going down in Nâzım Hikmet’s mind, “messing up our minds”.

Such play with the mind and inner dialogues on the stage also characterizes Mîrza Metîn’s recent works reflecting his inner struggles with his colonized self in the Turkish language. In his plays, he also let characters clash with each other in different languages, “lost in translation” as it were. In his *Rawestgeharaf / Zwischenhalt / Aradurak* (Stopover, 2017), a collaboration between Şermola Performans and the Fringe Ensemble, he presents three unnamed passengers, one Turkish, one Kurdish, one German, at a bench on an otherwise empty theatre stage. They seem to be waiting for a bus that, in some Beckettian way, would never arrive, while there is talk of an upcoming storm. In the opening scene, one of the characters speaks of his urge to simply go away as the best option, to find a job, to stay low until the storm calms down, and perhaps return, but maybe not. He also questions how to leave since everything he is, is *there*. Upon his suggestion to simply leave without being noticed, he then takes out a hand puppet from his pocket, and starts a dialogue. In this simple gesture of ventriloquism, externalizing the inner

voice, Metîn both creates and analyses the myth of the storm, splitting the character into a dual perspective while trying to find consolation for the coming exile.

These are only two samples of the exilic performative by Turkish and Kurdish artists in their recent diaspora, giving way of all the ambivalences, antinomies and diverse positions towards the idea of self-exile. Some artists are less lucky in finding new homes for their craft. Some may find temporary refuge in funding. Others are self-entrepreneurial, do odd jobs to do theatre after work.

I can only cautiously conclude that there is still a long way to go towards more sustainable solutions to help new arrivers to socially, linguistically and professionally integrate. A final round of workshops and debates in Berlin is scheduled for February 2023, which will conclude the project, targeting more the skills, aesthetic strategies and connecting people to help newly arriving artists to find their way in a tied system. And yet, there is hope. The poets in exile that I have spoken to are all intensively active in becoming the storytellers again of their own new lives.

**Pieter Verstraete**

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