The Drama(turgy) of Non-Belonging: Jeroen Coppens in Dialogue with Motus on Sharing Identity in Panorama

Jeroen Coppens* and **Motus****

This article presents a dialogue with the founders of the Motus theatre collective, Daniela Nicolò and Enrico Casagrande. It discusses the performance Panorama (2017), in regard to the recurring themes of identity and exclusion, (post-)nationalism and (non-)belonging in the work of Motus, and explores how these themes relate to the issue of verbal expression and multilinguality in Panorama. The interview gives insight into how Motus's multilayered dramaturgies of logos, image, sound and language can be a viable alternative to oppositional thinking, and how art can play an activist and catalyst role in today's diverse society.
Keywords: Motus**,** Nicolò, Casagrande, Alexis, Nella Tempesta, La MaMa, borders, migration, language, identity

The Italian theatre collective Motus is well known for theatre performances that challenge artificial borders and fixed prejudices. Motus was founded in Italy, in 1991, by Daniela Nicolò and Enrico Casagrande. While studying sociology and the history of economics at the University of Urbino, in Italy, they started experimenting at the university theatre with theatrical forms to communicate with their audiences, much like the American experimental theatre company The Living Theatre.

Enrico Casagrande and Daniela Nicolò. Photo: youtube

As directors, dramaturgs and writers, Nicolò and Casagrande put Motus on the map as a theatre collective which, with their international theatre performances, transcends borders, historical moments and disciplines, while confronting contemporary themes and conflicts. Their works include *MDLSX*, *Nella Tempesta*, and *Alexis: A Greek Tragedy*. Most recently, Motus challenged the tenacious prejudices that surround the theme of international migration in their performance entitled *Panorama* (2017). Rather than tackling migration in a politically biased manner, Motus looks at migration as part of human nature and of the natural order itself.

Video 1

Alexis: A Greek Tragedy. Devised and directed by Enrico Casagrande and Daniela Nicolò, with Silvia Calderoni, Vladimir Aleksic, Benno Steinegger, Alexandra Sarantopoulou, Michalis Traitsis and Giorgina Pilozzi. Dramaturgy: Daniela Nicolò. Video editing: Enrico Casagrande

Earlier, the theatre collective had already engaged with the issue of migration in a similar way with *Nella Tempesta* (2014), a contemporary remake of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest.* Here, Motus tackles issues of identity and migration, featuring a sinking migrants' boat twenty miles off the shore of Lampedusa, the island that became well-known for the overcrowded refugee shelters in 2009 and that saw an enormous surge in refugee arrivals during the 2011 violence in Libya and Tunisia. Combining personal testimonies of migration with *The Tempest's* central themes of gaining power and control over others, the performance raises interesting ethical questions about nationalism, geographic boundaries and fear of migration. This is highlighted even more by the fact that *Nella Tempesta* uses blankets, brought by the audience, as a symbol for shelter and protection. After the performance, the blankets are donated to local charities.

Video 2

Watch Video At: https://youtu.be/WpwCsLUagBo

Nella Tempesta. Devised and directed by Enrico Casagrande and Daniela Nicolò
(2014)

Motus's artistic work is characterized by a significant interest both in exploring post-nationalistic and nomadic fluid identities that defy traditional definitions and preconceptions, and in the ethical consequences of these concepts. In *Panorama*, Motus collaborates with performers that belong to the Great Jones Repertory Company at the legendary La MaMa theatrein New York City's East Village, founded by Ellen Stewart. The performers have a "superdiverse" background, as many of them have moved from other states and countries and chose New York as their home.

Drawing from interviews and testimonies of the performers, *Panorama* presents its audience with their experiences of inclusion and exclusion, with processes of (non-)belonging in which nomadism and migration are a sign of humanity's need to be in constant motion. This interview with Nicolò and Casagrande explores how Motus's dramaturgy of non-belonging can be a viable alternative to oppositional thinking, and how art can play an activist and catalyst role in today's superdiverse society.

Motus has already worked with the adaptation of classical texts and with the semi-biographical—presenting something as biographical that actually is not. Why did Motus make the shift toward individual and collective biographies?

Daniela Nicolò: The stories of the actors have always been important in our way of working. For example, in *Alexis*, we ask a lot from the actors, and, specifically, their points of view, specific moments of their lives connected to Antigone. We always work the actors into the performance and into the process. In this way, the autobiographical has always been a part of the performances of Motus.

In 2016, when La MaMa first asked us to work with the Great Jones Repertory Company, we decided first to get to know them better and organise a workshop. We started to discover their incredibly different backgrounds. Also, the context of working in the United States was important. This was so even before the Presidential elections, but the question of inclusion has always been a difficult issue there. That is why we decided that it might be a good idea to start only from biographies, even if we don't want to create a real story-telling show.

Enrico Casagrande: The point of view that we chose was not to speak about something general or biographical, but to look at small events in people's lives, trying to reconstruct and rebuild a story by means of small moments and memories. We started with things that were so specific and small, but that can become universal.

Video 3

Watch Video At: https://youtu.be/hoB8qZ9ecIw

Motus's *Panorama*; video clip

They become universal in the sense that the show propagates a non-reductive view on individual and collective identity; the fact that we all "inhabit" different and plural identities. In Panorama, you chose to connect this issue of fluid identities with the dramaturgy of a casting show. In the first scene, the audience sees video footage of the performers, all answering different questions typical in a casting context. Why did you connect the issue of identity with the performative context of an audition?

Daniela Nicolò: In the beginning, our idea was just to collect text material and to get to know the performers better. The first step of the creation process was to formulate a lot of questions, maybe 40 to 45. We decided to do an interview with all members of La

MaMa, in which they had to answer these questions about themselves. Of course, they knew that it wasn't a real audition. But, afterwards, when we looked at the interviews again, we were struck by the way in which they stood in front of the camera and spoke of themselves; how they presented themselves.

In New York, surviving as an actor is difficult, so actors have to do a lot of auditions, week in and week out. They have to find a way to present themselves, to sell themselves. Oftentimes, actors from different backgrounds and countries have to go along with stereotypes. For example: the Chinese guy always has to play roles with a Chinese accent, although his mother tongue is English. In the movie system, there are targeted castings for African Americans, Asian people, and so on, and they are always cast for the same sort of characters. In this way, identities and stereotypes are perpetuated. For us, this was an interesting thing to invert: using this movie casting dimension, which is full of stereotypes and preconceived identities, and do something else with it.

Interestingly, the casting videos that are used in the first scene are re-used moments later in a live context, albeit "distorted." The personal stories from the casting videos are re-told and re-answered by other performers onstage. In this sense, personal identity is deconstructed and the performance shows how identity is performed. In auditions, you have to present yourself in the best way possible, in a chameleon-like way. Would you say identity is always only performative; always merely a representation of oneself?

Daniela Nicolò: Absolutely. But it is also interesting to try to create a shared identity. We combined different actors with different identities, so that they don't perform their own identity in the performance. This was also a very good exercise for the group. They know each other quite well, but they told us that they didn't know each other in that way. The idea of playing each other was interesting for them. But it was also interesting at a broader level, because it is an attempt to create a collective biography that is made from small events out of the daily lives of all of its members. In this way, we realised how much the theatre can be a place to share identity, a place of inclusion.

Maura Nguyen Donohue in *Panorama*. Directed by Motus. April 2018. Vooruit, Ghent. Photo: Theo Cote

In this sense, the performance is about belonging and about community more than it is about individuals. The performance deals with processes of inclusion and exclusion and of privilege and discrimination in a direct way. These are also very controversial issues in contemporary Western society, both in Europe and in America. Is Panorama an active answer to conservative forces that dominate the public discussions on identity and migration?

Enrico Casagrande: It was very important for us to travel across the United States before the show. We had a beautiful journey from San Diego to Texas along the Mexican border. There are some small villages there that are cut in two parts, one part Mexican, one part American. This was impressive, because we don't believe that you have to create walls in this world. For our society, thinking about walls and the concept of visible borders (instead of invisible ones) also creates a question of how you trust yourself, in a way. The question of being safe. Safe from what? Safe from whom?

Everybody has to have the right to travel, to move around. But this issue is nowadays dominated by fear of the Other. Politicians work a lot with this fear nowadays. But it doesn't make sense that there are good people versus bad people, oftentimes divided along racial lines or skin colour. In *Panorama*, we collect such a diverse group in terms of age, race and background to show that binary divisions are not adequate for tackling these issues. It is important to understand that our society is full of different people and to be fine with that.

Daniela Nicolò: We also work a lot with the idea of the desire to move. Our actors have all moved. Some migrated from other countries, others moved to New York leaving their home behind. This desire to move is something that has to be collective. That is why it is incredible that there are a lot of people in the world who are not allowed to do so.

In the beginning of the creation period, we spent a long time in the United States. Before the premiere of the show, we had a tryout of the show in Italy, immediately after the victory of the separatist populist party Lega Nord in the Italian elections, in March 2018. There, I saw the performance with other eyes. A lot of people perceive the show as a manifesto on how rich the possibility can be to share cultural experiences, different religions and backgrounds with others, all without being perceived as a danger. This is an important issue for every community.

Would you say theatre has a role to play in imagining new ways of sharing and coming together?

Daniela Nicolò: Yes, at least for us. Every time we start a new project, it is because we want to explore and share something with the audience. Most of the times, these are political questions. At this moment, for us, the issue of inclusion is the central issue our society has to deal with. After the Italian elections, that became something new for which we have to fight in Italy, because the mentality of the people is changing in response to the kind of fear that is tapped into and used by populist parties.

Enrico Casagrande: In the last few years in Italy, the relationship with Europe has changed. Italy has now become part of the border with Africa. That triggers a Eurosceptical reflex, because people think that Europe doesn't help Italy on this issue. This blocks the question of living together on different levels. This border that is Italy, Greece or Spain, it is important for everyone. It is not a distant problem; it is a problem for all of us. Italy is not far away; it is here. Europe can and should instigate an evolution in how we think about this issue.

In *Panorama*, language is also an important theme. As the audience is presented with a super diverse collective of performers, it is confronted with different foreign languages onstage that are not always subtitled. Do you see language as an important factor for processes of identification, inclusion and exclusion?

Daniela Nicolò: Language is a cage, sometimes. It is always a system to categorise something that might be moving or might be in transformation. "What is home for you?" is one of the first questions we asked all cast members of *Panorama*. The answers were extremely different, some related to home countries, cities or other personal places. The question of home also relates to the question of names, with which we also deal in the performance.

Oftentimes, when Asian people move to America, they change their names. This shift is remarkable, because, as a first step in migrating, you put your original name aside and take on another name, to assimilate more with your new environment. That is why we

started with these very basic questions: Who are you? What is home for you? What is your name? These simple questions turned out to be huge.

Language is not neutral. It plays a big role in signification and identification, both individually and collectively. How do you deal with this issue with regard to the diverse background of the actors?

Enrico Casagrande: When we speak a different language, we are actually different people. It is not only a question of vocabulary or of eloquence, but also of the way thinking changes. For *Panorama*, we shifted our working language during the creation process from French to English. The temporality of these languages is so different that it has consequences for the way you speak, think and work.

Daniela Nicolò: It also changes the relation with the actors. English is not our mother tongue, so we are neither completely fluent nor completely free of dialect. That way, language became a way to be more connected to the actors. People put more effort into understanding you; this changes the way in which they talk to you. We found a common "broken English." *Panorama* also would have been completely different if we had been Americans instead of "foreigners." The perception of the Other and the relationship with the other has to be built up from scratch.

Language was not only formative in making the performance, but also in the performance itself. In some scenes, the performers deliver lengthy monologues in their mother tongue, which the audience does not always understand as there are no surtitles in these scenes. Why did you choose to perform heteroglossia in this way?

Daniela Nicolò: The different languages that are spoken in the performance are English, Chinese, Spanish and Spanish with a Latino North-American accent. It was important for us to integrate this linguistic level into the performance, because it means a lot in the process of integration and inclusion, the way in which you can and have to find your place and can communicate with one another. And this is true both within and outside the theatre.

Enrico Casagrande: For us, it was important to include the mother tongue of the performers, because it also relates to a kind of "coming home" and strangeness at the same time. Let me illustrate what I mean. When I was younger, I performed mostly in English. When my mother, who does not speak English, came to see my show, she couldn't understand what I was saying. We wanted to include this vexing experience in *Panorama* and introduce a feeling of the strangeness of language. It is hard to start a new relationship with a foreign language in a new country.

With the performance, we also want to reach an audience as diverse as the actors that are on stage. This is an important issue, as theatre audiences are traditionally and predominantly white and bourgeois. In this sense, theatre audiences are not really

representative of the diversity of the cities they live in, whether in age, nationality or religion.


Maura Nguyen Donohue and eugene the poogene in*Panorama*. Directed by Motus. April 2018. Vooruit, Ghent. Photo: Theo Cote

This is a beautiful ideal: performing the diversity of living together in terms of languages, nationalities, backgrounds and ages on the stage, until the point is reached when audiences mirror this rich heterogeneity.

Daniela Nicolò: This would be the ultimate goal. But this is not easy. In theatre, as in broader daily life, you are mostly in contact with the people that know you, or with like-minded people. As much as *Panorama* is about deconstructing fixed identities and introducing an ideal of borderlessness, it remains an open question whether this plea reaches those who are not convinced that every human should have the right to move freely. To be at home where one chooses.

Jeroen Coppens, PhD, Ghent University (Belgium), publishes on visual dramaturgy, intermediality, postdramatic theatre and the performance of images. He is a co-editor of the books *Dramaturgies in the New Millennium* (2014) and *Unfolding Spectatorship: Shifting Political, Ethical and Intermedial Positions* (2016). He also works as a freelance dramaturg.
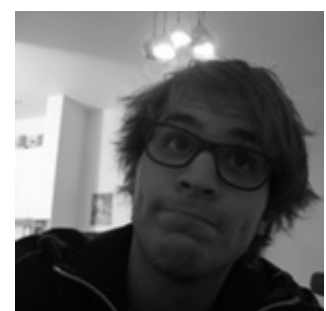
**Motus performs internationally with theatre performances that transcend borders, historical moments and disciplines, and confront contemporary themes and conflicts. Most recently, Motus performed *Panorama*, a performance piece about the fundamental right to migration. Other works include *MDLSX*, *Nella Tempesta* and *Alexis: A Greek Tragedy.*