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# Staging Cosmopolitanism

MAURIZIO ALBAHARI

Artistic festivals featuring a diverse array of exhibits, concerts, cuisine, and dances are fortunately a well-attended feature of European public spaces. They are sponsored, under the agenda of intercultural and interreligious dialogue, by NGOs, religious organizations, corporations, counties, and cities, often through EU and UNESCO funds. The European Commission solemnly declared 2008 the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, clearly supporting such programmes. In this sense, dialogue and cosmopolitanism are increasingly becoming a focus of public policy, despite central governments' burgeoning stinginess. In the following paragraphs I analyze the performing arts – means of expression and communication – in their potential to exemplify and promote forms of cosmopolitanism and dialogue. After providing examples of cosmopolitan efforts on Italian stages, I point out some of the potential pitfalls of the practices and rhetorics of staged, engineered dialogue and cosmopolitanism. I am especially critical of the accompanying Euro-centrism and ethno-religious essentialism, while proposing a more experiential and wide-reaching cosmopolitan agenda.

## Performing cosmopolitanism

Working and rehearsing toward common goals, artists create friendships, knowledge, and contingent alliances. In this sense, artistic projects do not produce merely art and fruition, but new social relations as well. In addition, the performing arts might explicitly make of multiculturalism, peace, and social justice their own agenda, on and off stage. *Astràgali Teatro*, for example, is a theatre company founded in 1981 in Lecce, southern Italy, and supported by the Ministry of Culture as an innovative company. Featuring an extremely diverse crew, and touring around the Mediterranean, *Astràgali* is also a member of the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures. *Teatro di Nascosto*, in Tuscany, draws directly on migrant and refugee experience, and works with Amnesty International and professionally trained refugee actors. In *Maschere Nere*, a theatre company in Milan, Senegalese, and Italians synthesize respective music and lyrics and perform scripts directly tackling immigration.

A very popular example of multicultural music is *Radiodervish*, an ensemble constituted in 1997 by Nabil Salameh, a native of Palestine, and southern Italian Michele Lobaccaro. Many of the songs are multilingual – featuring Italian, Arabic, English, and French – and have been intended by the ensemble “as small laboratories where passages unveil themselves between East and West and between the symbols and myths of the Mediterranean, a border place that unites in the very moment it separates.”<sup>1</sup> *Radiodervish* has recently toured a new poetry and music show, *Amara Terra Mia* (Bitter Land of Mine). Now also on CD, it is meant to narrate the precariousness of contemporary migrant experiences in both the region of origin and destination, and puts forwards an open call to peace and interreligious understanding. In its title and substance, *Amara Terra Mia* references the 1973 song by “Mr Volare” Domenico Modugno, in which the popular singer evoked the bitterness of southern Italian emigrants. *Radiodervish*'s show debuted on 31 March 2006 in Tricase, a small southern Italian town. The spartan scenery was limited to a dozen thin light poles, tenuously evoking migrants' boats in the pitch-dark Mediterranean. Many in the audience appreciated the ensemble's frank approach and its whispered reflections on migration, pain, terror, dialogue, and cosmopolitanism in times of alleged cultural clash. The show received a five-minute standing ovation by an audience initially prone to scepticism.

*Radiodervish* also performed the night of 24 December 2007, in the public square of Bethlehem, as part of *Rassegna Negroamaro*, an annual travelling festival funded by the District of Lecce in southern Italy, which also sponsored the Italian tour of Palestinian musicians. And *Radiodervish*'s frequent Italian performances with Noa, the American-Israeli singer, are routinely reported as an eminent example of inter-

**Intercultural dialogue and cosmopolitanism are increasingly becoming a public policy focus. Art festivals, concerts, and a variety of public events explicitly promoting such agenda have been flourishing in southern European countries of recent immigration. Drawing on the Italian case, the author explores the performing arts' cosmopolitan potential, asking how hierarchies are challenged and recreated when majorities request minorities to engage in cosmopolitan dialogue, on and off stage.**

religious dialogue and peace building. Whether these performers are truly enjoying their own cosmopolitan experience is of limited interest to us. In any event, what they do and sing on stage is understood as such by institutional sponsors and by many in the audience. In particular, it demystifies in practice pundits' loud belief in conflict as the necessary point of arrival of cultural and religious diversity.

## Between cosmopolitanism and ethno-religious labels

Artists, and migrant artists in particular, face distinctive socio-economic and legal challenges, exemplified in the routine struggle with the unforgiving machinery of travel, residence, and work permits. And yet it is obviously their ethnic, religious, and cultural membership that is in the spotlight. Noa becomes “the Jewish artist”; Nabil the “Muslim poet”; and Boban “the Gypsy trumpeter.” One of the drawbacks of the uncritical celebration of the performing arts as automatically constituting dialogue and cosmopolitanism is precisely that socio-economic conditions and legal, political, and gender issues tend to disappear under the ethno-cultural or religious label on stage.

More generally, in intercultural practices in the performing arts, as elsewhere, there is often a problem of ascribed identities, and in particular of ascribed single identities reflecting the world division in supposedly mutually exclusive nation-states, belongings, and religions. Complex, cosmopolitan life trajectories are usually reduced to one and only one cultural membership on the basis of name, place of birth, and performed music genre. In this sense, many artists face a double bind: on the one hand, they understandably need to play by the market rules of funding, diversity, roots, and multiculturalism by performing on stage their postulated identity and representing whole ethnicities, continents, and even religions – Latin America, Judaism, the Middle East, and so forth. On the other, they refuse the captivity of simple labels, and emphasize their professional and political memberships as well.

A related problem specific to the performing arts is the exoticism ascribed to both the performers and their art, often defined as “ethnic.” The ethnic categorization marks everything that seemingly does not fully belong, or belong anymore, to the mainstream of western European nation-states. Thus, the artist filling the slot of the cultural and ethnic “Other” often experiences asymmetry and inequality with her unmarked peers. Roma musicians from south-eastern Europe, in particular, are acclaimed as showcasing seemingly distant and nowadays lost vitality, passion, and melancholia. They are made to fit a superficial representation of otherness, stereotypically appealing as distant in time and space. But Roma performances – while hyperbolically stemming from weddings, dances, and religious rituals – offer a masterful cultural event quite disengaged from its original social context. They do not offer an exotic peek into Roma everyday life. In short, the artist's life offstage might very well be as anaemic, mainstream, and mundane as that of the audience and of other classically trained musicians. Life off stage might also bear pervasive discrimination, including mobs torching Roma camps.

Thus, multicultural and otherwise “diverse” festivals in Europe can strengthen the somewhat misleading impression of living in fairly inclusive societies. Simplistic emphasis on cultural and ethno-religious membership reinforces the classical liberal view of the public sphere as a genderless and classless arena of unrestricted multicultural encounter. In practice, it is worth examining whether the performance of dialogue and cosmopolitanism obliterates the death, detention, and deportation increasingly faced by many other agents of “diversity” and “cultural difference,” such as migrants and asylum seekers, and the religious and socio-economic marginalization faced by others.

Finally, the rhetoric of intercultural and interreligious dialogue as currently phrased by many governments and organizations can take place only because salient differences have been established in the first place. What lies on the southern and eastern side of the Mediterranean – what

# Everyday Cosmopolitanism



PHOTO BY MAURIZIO ALBAHARI, 2008

**Radiodervish  
at a festival in  
Melpignano,  
Italy**

is usually lumped together as “the Balkans” and “the Middle East” – is often stereotypically relegated to a condition of backwardness and archetypal violence. It is worth examining whether by inviting “other” peoples, religions, and areas of the world to participate in dialogue, Italian and EU authorities morally legitimize their position as tolerant members of western civilization exempt from self-examination. In summary, whether existing international and interreligious asymmetries of power and hierarchy are challenged or reinforced needs to be asked for each specific exchange programme, invitation to dialogue, and cosmopolitan policy agenda.

## World music? Neighbourhood music

“Intercultural dialogue” increasingly carries the unintended assumption that diversity needs to be artfully managed, convened, and sponsored. Hence, the question needs to be empirically investigated, whether socially and institutionally engineered cosmopolitan practices and discourses, including in the arts, paradoxically obliterate the unadvertised, everyday communal lives of large and small towns where migrants settle?

*Radiodervish*, *Teatro di Nascosto*, *Astràgali* and other such formations in Europe do not embody anything extraordinary or exceptional. *Radiodervish* members got acquainted as fellow college students in Bari, southern Italy. Even the now celebrated *Orchestra di Piazza Vittorio* – featuring musicians and composers from Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Hungary, India, Italy, Senegal, Tunisia, and the US – is the selected offspring of the everyday diversity of Rome neighbourhoods. It emerged around the desire to raise funds and renovate a Rome theatre venue, rescuing it from its fate as a bingo hall. This does not suggest that the Orchestra was not in need of funding, interpersonal negotiation, rehearsal space, and even intercultural dialogue within itself in order to become an ensemble, rather than a dozen individual musicians on stage. The world fusion music performed by the Orchestra becomes a metaphor of the actual ensemble, where each person, by participating into a larger dialogical project, has to negotiate facets of musicianship, behaviour, and everyday practice – from being on time for rehearsals, to learning a song in Italian, Hindi, or Arabic, to rearranging a traditional Tunisian song. And for some the ensemble even becomes a normative model of symmetrical inclusion for contemporary societies. But the Orchestra exemplifies Rome’s diverse music – unexpected harmonies, rearranged tunes emerging from its neighbourhood markets, subway stations, and cafes – as much as it is made to represent multiethnic, multicultural, and world music. If, instead, we perpetuate the understanding of diverse artists as essential representatives and ambassadors of their ethno-religious group of origin, then basic questions need to be asked about these “microphoned” ethnic representatives, civilizational spokespersons, and religious entrepreneurs. Who elected them to such positions? From where does the legitimacy of such unbearable responsibility stem?

## Venues of transformation

There is little doubt that political institutions “could gain great insight from the performing arts sector into the value of body language and visual, musical, and other non-verbal forms of expression in addition to discursive communication.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the flourishing of brochures, newsletters, and other forms of engineered efforts to foster diversity, dialogue,

and cosmopolitanism is certainly driven by good intentions, but it needs to be accompanied by experiential and less elitist opportunities – including artistic ones – for diverse social relations.

While stages are amplifiers of carefully prepared scores, choreographies, and scripted agendas, some space is left to improvisation, to the impromptu construction of signs and meanings. Audiences have therefore an active role in the creation of these meanings; they do not merely receive them. Performances are often free, delivered in public spaces such as piazzas, ports, and parks, and are a social event of bodily and emotional participation in an informal and relaxed setting. Thus, diverse performing arts do have the potential to involve in forms of cosmopolitan transnationalism not only artists and migrants, on occasion part of the public, but so-called locals as well, whom we cannot understand as stereotypically stuck and rooted in a spatially bounded culture.<sup>3</sup> While they might not always enjoy the privilege of physical mobility, nor routinely partake in culturally and religiously diverse interactions, they are participating as engaged audiences in inclusively cosmopolitan sensibilities and dynamics, to be potentially cultivated beyond the lure of the ephemeral.

At any rate, we cannot expect the performing arts and their audiences to seamlessly solve the problems of asymmetrical relations of power in our diverse societies. In fact, many artists simply refuse to embrace a primarily social-political role. And yet, we can say that the artistic need for harmony often conveys an “impulse to change things around,” to quote Eugenio Barba, the founder of innovatively multicultural *Odin Teatret* in Denmark.<sup>4</sup> But for most artists this impulse does not imply a missionary idea, or the pretentious desire to merely unmask anything or anyone without an accompanying self-analysis.

A self-scrutinizing standpoint is arguably integral to cosmopolitanism. Almost by definition, dialogic and cosmopolitan experience implies something new, rather than merely an exchange involving two individuals – as a false etymology would suggest. Cosmopolitanism, in particular, features a flow of meaning, practices, and unforeseen conflicts and understandings that were not readily available to individual participants in the first place, prior to sincere dialogic and cosmopolitan mutual engagement.<sup>5</sup> Resisting the drive to shape and restore core values, roots, and identities vis-à-vis the alleged threats of immigration, Islam, and anarchy, certain stages could be seen not as places where exceptional “performances are done,” but where unexpected meanings might emerge and transformations occur.<sup>6</sup> Venues where cynic late-capitalist obsessions with cost-effectiveness, immigration, civilizational clash, and blind loyalty to mother-fatherlands are routinely turned inside out, and de facto ridiculed in the name of critical, unpretentious, cosmopolitan citizenship.

## Notes

1. At <http://www.Radiodervish.com>.
2. Jude Bloomfield, *Crossing the Rainbow. National Differences and International Convergences in Multicultural Performing Arts in Europe*, IETM (Informal European Theatre Meeting), 2003, 9.
3. Ulf Hannerz, “Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture,” in *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*, ed. M. Featherstone (London: SAGE Publications, 1990), 237–51.
4. Eugenio Barba, *Beyond the Floating Islands* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986), 15.
5. David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, ed. L. Nichol (London: Routledge, 1996).
6. Ferdinando Taviani, “The Odin Story,” in Barba, *Beyond the Floating Islands*, 236–74.

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