

The Modern in Modern Times

By Ric Knowles

“Modern Times” is, perhaps, a strange name for a theatre company that, in its early years, was dedicated to staging adaptations of ancient Persian fables, and whose current mandate focuses on the blending of Middle-Eastern and western theatrical forms.¹ But the name is appropriate: central to the company’s activity is the rethinking of modernism itself. Indeed, Modern Times Stage Company can be understood to be working, in its modest way, towards the completion of what Jürgen Habermas in 1980 famously (and controversially) called “the unfinished project of modernity” – the extension of the larger humanist project of Enlightenment through the creation of a rational and democratic public sphere, one that includes the arts as well as science and morality. According to Habermas, modernism held “the extravagant expectation that the arts and sciences would not merely promote the control of the forces of nature but also the understanding of self and world, moral progress, justice in social institutions, and even human happiness” (45). Habermas is sceptical about the project’s potential success, citing “Three Conservatisms” – antimodernism, pre-modernism, and postmodernism – that work against it (53). Modern Times is more optimistic, and, circumventing many of the critiques levelled at Habermas’s gender blindness and his Eurocentric defence of the Enlightenment and its ravages, extends this extravagant expectation to all of the world’s peoples, whatever their genders, sexualities, races or ethnicities.

Modern Times occupies a somewhat anomalous space within the intercultural performance ecology of Toronto. On the one hand, the company is central to the activities of what Yvette Nolan, artistic director of Native Earth Performing Arts, calls the city’s “brown caucus” (Nolan). The company’s offices in the city’s Distillery District are one floor above those of Native Earth and Nightwood Theatre; they have co-produced with the intercultural Cahoots Theatre Projects; they share creative team and cast members



with these companies as well as with fu-GEN Asian Canadian Theatre, Carlos Bulosan (Filipino) Theatre Company, and many others; and they participate, through casting, creative team and programming decisions, in the larger project of challenging the hegemony of whiteness on the city's stages. And, like those of many of the city's intercultural companies, Modern Times's mandate includes consciously offering "culturally inclusive alternative theatre experiences" (Modern Times).

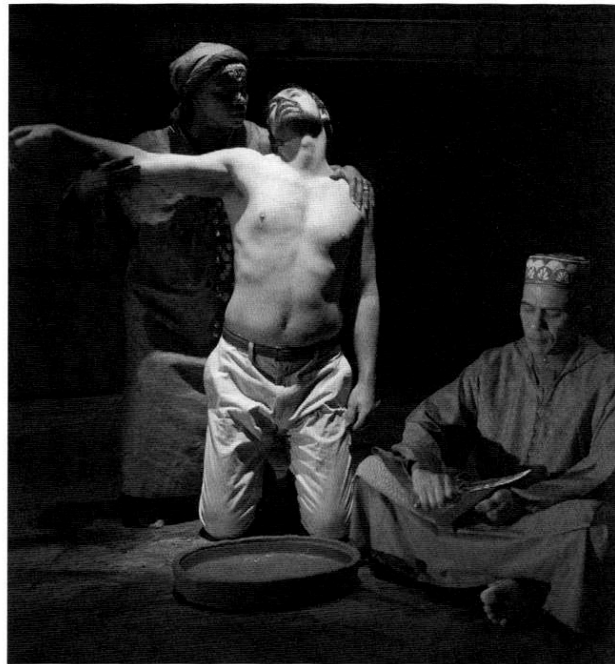
On the other hand, Modern Times overwhelmingly defines itself less according to identity politics or any interventionist political model than according to a universalist humanist and aesthetic project that, at least on the surface, aligns itself, in many ways, with the philosophical projects of western modernism. And unlike other members of the "brown caucus," who "always cast 'other' in the work" (Nolan), they practise something resembling traditional "colour-blind casting."



Soheil Parsa and Peter Farbridge in the January 2008 development workshop for *Hallaj*.
Photo by Sue Balint

Modern Times was founded in 1989 by two graduates of York University's theatre program, Iranian Canadian Soheil Parsa (artistic director) and Anglo-Irish Canadian Peter Farbridge (artistic associate). Parsa has directed all of the company's productions to date, Farbridge has acted in most of them, and together, they have functioned as adaptors, translators, and writers in various combinations. The company's repertoire since its founding has blended adaptations of Iranian playwright Bahram Beyza'i's versions of Persian fables (*The Conquest*, 1989; *The Eighth Journey of Sinbad*, 1992; *The Death of the King*, 1994; *Aurash*, 1998); Shakespearean tragedy (*Macbeth*, 1995, 1997, 2003, 2005;

Hamlet, 1999); high-modernist European classics (Genet's *The Balcony*, 1990; Ionesco's *The Chairs*, 2001; Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, 2008); contemporary translations/tradaptations (Iranian playwright G.H. Sa'edi's *Oh Fool! Oh Fooled!* 1993; Moroccan Canadian Ahmad Ghazali's *The Sheep and the Whale*, 2007, co-produced with Cahoots Theatre Projects; Iranian playwright Abas Na'lbandian's *Stories from the Rains of Love and Death*, 2003); and new work (Soheil Parsa's *The Daughters of Sheherzad*, 2000; and Parsa and Peter Farbridge's *Hallaj*, currently in development). They have even staged adaptations of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (*August 22nd*, 1997) and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (Guillermo Verdecchia's *bloom*, 2006) and are now in the early planning stages for a production of Verdecchia's adaptation of Brecht's *A Man's a Man*.



Debbie Nicholls, Andy Velasquez and Oporajito Bhattacharjee in the Modern Times / Cahoots Theatre Projects 2007 co-production of Ahmad Ghazali's *The Sheep and the Whale*.
Photo by Guy Bertrand

The company has also been involved in a wide range of transnational collaborative projects, currently including *The Dialogues Project: Theatre Beyond Borders*, a series of works developed in collaboration with theatre artists in areas of the world affected by war (in 2009, a collaboration with Bosnian artist Husein Orucević and Bosnian youth, war veterans and representatives of other communities); and *HamletZar* (a collaboration initiated by Danish company Goosun Art-ilery exploring *Hamlet* in the context of the ancient Zar ritual from southern Iran, to be launched in June 2009 at Eugenio Barba's Odin Teatret). Finally, the company engages in what it calls "social creations": "theatre that reaches into the community

with socially-minded theatre projects and workshops," including a youth theatre unit and various acting workshops (Modern Times).

This is no ordinary intercultural company (if such a thing exists). The company's mandate has evolved over the years, but it has consistently involved internationalism, inclusive humanism and formal experimentation. Its mission statement currently reads as follows:

The company sees in contemporary society a need to identify common values and responds to this by creating theatre work of international focus. In a multilingual and complex world, Modern Times provides disarming and accessible theatre for people in search of new meanings, simple joys and a sense of interdependence.

Artistically and organizationally, Modern Times is committed to

- Being a mutually respectful, culturally inclusive collaboration dedicated to humanist principles;
- Producing provocative, emotional and visceral theatre productions that embrace a global view and transcend narrow ideologies and cultural expectations;
- Searching for new and original forms of creation and expression; and,
- Exploring and taking inspiration from the uniqueness, commonality and differences of the human experience. (Modern Times)

When he actually stages the modernist classics to which his work is so frequently compared, Parsa does so with difference as well as deference.

As a mission statement, this differs little from the intercultural projects of artists such as Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine and Eugenio Barba, except, perhaps, for its focus on "uniqueness" and "differences" within the human experience, which Modern Times's European models are happy to erase in search of a common, undifferentiated humanity. But there is no critique here of the appropriative practices of universalist humanism or western modernism. Indeed, Soheil Parsa would be delighted to be positioned within the tradition of the great European modernists whose work he admires and from whom he has learned, particularly in his early training – ironically, at the University of Tehran, before he fled to Canada in the wake of the 1979 Islamic revolution and the devastation of his family. (He later, equally ironically, studied and put into practice Persian performance forms at Toronto's York University).

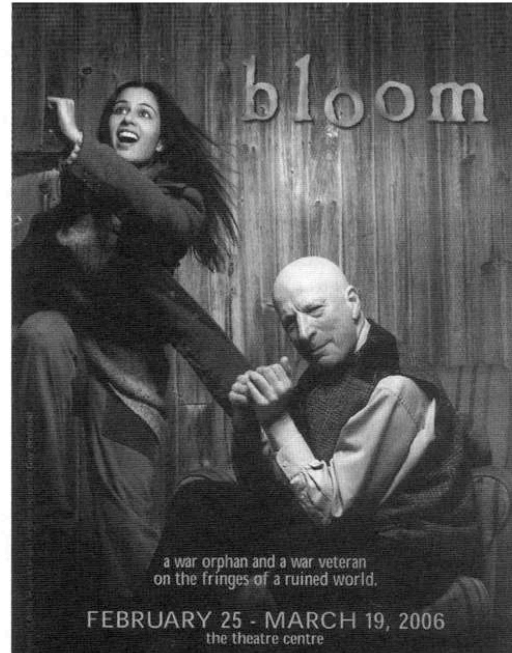
Brook, Mnouchkine, Barba and others have been rightly criticized for practising an appropriative interculturalism that leaves power in the hands of charismatic western directors, while raiding world performance cultures for touches of the exotic or for so-called "primitive" energies to revivify a decadent western tradition. Parsa, however, practises a much more genuinely inclusive and re-appropriative modernism, as exquisitely crafted as the best of his western models but informed by the performance forms of the Middle East and filtered through the lived experience of a refugee from the Islamic revolution in his native Iran. Parsa is very much aware, in his deferentially polite way, of the modernist effacement and orientalist exploitation of difference, even as he embraces the austere simplicity of high modernist imagism. And, indeed, it is minimalist modernism with which his work is most frequently compared by reviewers. Thus Mira Friedlander compares the "psycho-physical performance style" of *The Eighth Journey of Sinbad* to that of Grotowski; Jon Kaplan summons Beckett, Genet and Kafka in describing the world conjured by *Stories from the Rains of Love and Death* ("Persian Passions"); Kamal Al-Solaylee describes the same show as "a poor man's Kafka; a wannabe Beckett and more-truncated-than-usual Pinter;" and Kaplan finds *bloom*'s Gerontion "ensconced like a figure in a Beckett play" ("Poetry Not Wasted").

When he actually stages the modernist classics to which his work is so frequently compared, however, Parsa does so with difference as well as deference. *Waiting for Godot*, in 2008, was stunningly effective as a sparse, austere and brilliantly minimalist staging of this perhaps archetypally modernist play. But it was also silently subversive, mining and translating through casting the colonialist critique that Beckett hinted at in the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky (tellingly read as English and Irish respectively in the long-running Gate Theatre, Dublin production that is often claimed to have been definitive). Parsa cast the formidable and physically dominating Chinese Canadian John Ng as a white-faced, downtrodden Lucky (wearing *jika-tabi*, traditional Japanese workboots) against the anglo-Canadian Stewart Arnott as a domineering and racist Pozzo. The result, in combination with the casting of Peter Batakiev as a Bulgarian Estragon to Peter Farbridge's Irish Vladimir and, tellingly, of Asian Canadian Darrel Gamotin as the Boy, was effectively to displace modernist absolutes, destabilize universalist certainties and perhaps restore Beckett's masterpiece to its rightful place as a subtle but powerful, historically situated critique of imperialism.

But for me, the most telling of Parsa's reconsiderations of western high modernism was his production of Guillermo Verdecchia's *bloom* in 2006. *bloom* was originally planned as an adaptation of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, but, because of permission problems with the Eliot estate, the show was finally presented as having been "inspired by" Eliot's modernist epic. *bloom* is representative of much of Modern Times's work in that it is most interesting for its intercultural appropriations



John Ng played a white-faced, downtrodden Lucky to Stewart Arnott's domineering and racist Pozzo in Modern Times's 2006 production of *Waiting for Godot*.
Photo by Guy Bertrand



Anita Majumdar as "the boy" brought revitalization to Andrew Scorer's aging Gerontion in Modern Times's 2006 production of Guillermo Verdecchia's *bloom*, even as a feminized "east" was used by the high modernists to revitalize a decadent western art.
Photo by Guy Bertrand



Peter Farbridge as Vladimir and Darrel Gamotin as the Boy in Modern Times's 2008 production of *Waiting for Godot*.
Photo by Guy Bertrand

of modernism itself, its skirting of the modernist–capitalist alignment over ownership and its representing-with-a-difference the high modernist appetite for the consumption of feminized “other” cultures. Thus, the play’s unnamed “boy” is spirited into the world of the aged and war-damaged (white, European) Gerontion to bring renewal as “primitive” eastern art was used by the modernists to renew European decadence – and, crucially, the role was played (brilliantly) in the Modern Times production by Indo-Canadian actor/dancer Anita Majumdar. Ultimately, the play productively misrepresents Eliot’s own work as only one among the fragments that an unsettled “we” shore against our ruins in the savage, post-apocalyptic world in which it is set (cf. Eliot line 430).

But it may be that to consider the work of Modern Times in light of western high modernist classics is to engage in the same kind of appropriative activity practised by the modernists

themselves. For Parsa’s minimalist, humanist essentialism is a product as much of his relation to Persian and Iranian theatrical and cultural forms, both ancient and contemporary, as of his relation to his western forbearers. The work of Modern Times has engaged contemporary Iranian playwrights at least as much as it has western modernists, notably those from the “modern” Iran predating the Islamic revolution – including the fabulist Bahram Beya’i, the dissident G.H. Sa’edi, who opposed both the Shah and the Ayatollah Khomeini; and Abas Na’ibandian, a 1970s avant-garde artist whose works were prohibited after the revolution in 1979, who was jailed and who finally committed suicide in 1989. Even the frequently remounted and reconceptualized Modern Times production of *Macbeth* was deeply indebted, on a structural and stylistic level, to a traditional Muslim theatrical form, Ta’ziyeh-Khani, an Iranian epic drama of love and death commemorating the martyrdom of the grandson of The Prophet, was, in Parsa’s revisiting, “minimalist in the extreme,” according to Montreal reviewer Alan Hustak.

Indeed, all of Modern Times’s work has been shaped by the traditional Persian theatre that Parsa watched when he was growing up in Iran. His work builds on storytelling, movement and music (his music and sound designers tend to be present throughout his extraordinarily collaborative rehearsal processes). And much of that work’s universalism, so apparently familiar through the lens of the western modernist

tradition, is also and perhaps more deeply informed by Parsa and Farbridge's fascination with Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam. In the company's first production, Beyza'i's *The Conquest* in 1989, the central character was a silent Sufi mystic (played by Farbridge), tormented by two soldiers who tried to force him to speak. Three years later, *The Eighth Journey of Sinbad*, also by Beyza'i, was based in part on a thirteen-century Sufi poem, Farid ud-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*, an allegory about a Sufi master leading his students to enlightenment – a poem that, not incidentally, has also been adapted by Peter Brook.

Parsa and Farbridge have returned to Sufism in their current project, their own co-written tragedy, *Hallaj*, which is loosely based on the life and martyrdom of the ninth- tenth-century Sufi mystic Mansur Al-Hallaj, played by Farbridge. The powerful play, which received its first public readings in January 2009 and is scheduled to premiere in September of this year, is set in Hallaj's prison cell in Baghdad on the eve of his torture and execution. The action, punctuated by flashbacks, focuses on efforts by the authorities, his friends and his family to convince Hallaj to recant his heretical views, which challenge the religious authority of the Caliph. Throughout, Hallaj communes with Christ in his cell and studies Hinduism and Buddhism on his travels, en route to his dangerously democratic revelation that God is in himself and, by implication, in everyone. Hallaj finally welcomes his death, which is presented less as the cathartic purging of the heroic individual represented in western tragedy than as the annihilation of the self in an ultimate, ecstatic union with God, or the universe.



Peter Farbridge as the ninth-century Sufi mystic Mansur Al-Hallaj in Modern Times's January 2008 workshop of *Hallaj*.
Photo by Ric Knowles

In rehearsal, Parsa's search for "truth" and "essences" is not unlike that of his subject. He pares away at script and presentation to achieve a simplicity of form and expression of which Hallaj himself might be proud. And his democratic rehearsal hall, welcoming creative input from all, seems a far cry from the guru-like intensity of the modernist masters or the absolute authority of the western director, and it produces a commitment and ownership on the part of the entire team that is rare in the theatre and evident in the company's productions. Parsa's Modern Times, formalist and universalist as it is, represents modernism with a difference that is brought to the work by a refreshingly and genuinely integrative interculturalism.



Soheil Parsa (centre) in the January 2008 workshop for *Hallaj*, with Sean Baek (left) and Peter Farbridge.
Photo by Ric Knowles

Note

- 1 The company's name is, in fact, an acknowledgement of the influence of Charlie Chaplin on its artistic director, Soheil Parsa, who attributes his decision "to take art seriously" to a viewing, at age seventeen, of Chaplin's film *Modern Times* (Furey). Some of the material from this article is based on an interview with Soheil Parsa in Toronto's Distillery District, 6 March 2007, and on my participation in the development workshop for *Hallaj* in January 2008. I am grateful to Sue Balint, Peter Farbridge and Soheil Parsa for reading an earlier version of this article and generously giving feedback that I have incorporated with gratitude.

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