

# Bodies, Breath & Borders

Twenty-five Years of Modern Times  
Stage Company from a Third Perspective

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Illustration : Mansoureh Rezaeimahabad

## An Impossible Dialogue

In *A Dialogue on Language Between a Japanese and an Inquirer*, the Inquirer, German philosopher Martin

Heidegger, covets an understanding of *Iki*, “what we experience” as the essence of “Japanese art.” Heidegger has but one fear: language for him is the “house of existence,” and since Japanese and German “are not merely different but are other in nature, and radically so... a dialogue from house to house remains nearly impossible.”

When the Japanese Professor Tezuka from the Tokyo Imperial University tries to explain *Iki* by means of *Iro* (“colour”) and *Ku* (“emptiness”), the Inquirer’s premonitions are readily confirmed. The Japanese cannot translate what the words “fully” mean, proclaiming in exasperation: “without *Iro no Ku!*”

## The Three Questions

To begin my reflections on Modern Time Stage Company’s oeuvre by way of this Heideggerian anecdote is not without a tinge of irony. Perhaps all that needs to be said about a quarter century of productions by Soheil Parsa and Peter Farbridge, the founders of Modern Times, has been already said: a multitude of reviews, articles, interviews, awards (and even the occasional exposé) that speaks for itself. It is therefore the matter of bringing together Soheil and Peter’s divergent “existences,” each born to a different “house,” which is at stake in this semi-philosophical, semi-theatrical meditation. And perhaps Soheil’s and Peter’s sustained house-to-house dialogue will speak, by way of allegory, to another sustained house-to-house dialogue within our Canadian homes, theatres, schools... politics: French-to-English!

With this purview in mind, I asked the same three interview questions of both Soheil and Peter:

1. Have you ever come across ‘the untranslatable’ in your work?
2. What is breath? What is border?
3. Can a human be truly himself?

## Can a Human be Truly Himself?

I found Modern Times’ 2010 staging of *Aurash* puzzling. *Aurash* was not my first encounter with the Modern Times approach to theatre – the first being the 2008 production of *Waiting for Godot* – but it was certainly the first truly international production of an Iranian epic that I had ever laid eyes on. The legend of Aurash speaks

I asked the Modern Times co-founders three questions. Their answers are chillingly revealing, especially when they are viewed from Soheil Parsa’s personal history and his theatrical achievements combined with Heidegger’s philosophical conceptions of existentialist theatre. In the dialogue I initiate among histories, philosophies, and theatrical productions, I will reveal an uneasy truth about the Anglophone and Francophone divide, and offer critical and metaphorical ways out of its current impasse.

of the aftermath of a sustained and bloody war between Iran and a transgressing neighbouring country. An imposed peace treaty demands that a bowman from the Iranian side fire an arrow

from atop Mount Alborz; where his arrow lands will demarcate Iran’s new borders. Of course, no one will take the shot. After all, who would want to shoulder the responsibility? His compatriots, relegated to the enemy side by the newly established border, would indeed curse the bowman forever: “It was his arrow that fell short!”

In the folkloric accounts of this myth a stableman, named Aurash, rises to the occasion. His arrow travels a thousand leagues and eventually lands on a tree by the River Amu Darya (in Central Asia). But the arrow in Aurash never lands: it “flew, day after day and night after night... on and on, from heart to heart, from tribe to tribe, and generation to generation. And ever since that time, the arrow has been in flight...” I remember walking out of the theatre dissatisfied, even feeling somewhat betrayed. Why has *Aurash* forsaken his nation and its borders? Why couldn’t Soheil’s Aurash be truly himself?

Following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the clerical hierarchy in charge of the upheavals sought to bring church and state together in order to establish an Islamic Republic. The clerics assigned the task of amalgamating the ideological apparatuses of the new regime to Dr. Ahmad Fardid, a Heideggerian scholar at Tehran University. Fardid theorized the political identity of the republic by translating Heidegger’s conception of the nation-state into an Islamic context. The political and philosophical consequences of Fardid’s appropriation of Heidegger are well chronicled.<sup>2</sup> Most importantly, it gave the clerical hierarchy legal grounds to oversee modern institutions of government, such as education, while allowing them to marginalize Iranians whom they saw as obstacles to achieving the state’s Islamic destiny. Soheil Parsa, born into a family of Baha’i faith, experienced this marginalization firsthand. The promising sophomore at Tehran University’s vibrant school of theatre found himself facing a difficult dilemma: “They asked me to convert to Islam and change my name in order to be allowed to stay and do my work. And it was a very tough decision. I felt that if I accepted... I was submitting to fascism somehow... I decided it was time to leave... learn another language, pursue my dream and create theatre.”<sup>3</sup>

Peter’s response to my third question is altogether chilling, as if unconsciously reflecting on Soheil’s early

predicaments: “I am beginning to see truth in the thinking that a man is only himself in the perception of others.” But what had the authorities perceived in Soheil? He was not only exiled from his country but also into being what he was and was not at the same time. Soheil remarks in this regard, “I’m not religious myself, but I come from a Baha’i family.”<sup>4</sup> He was held responsible for a history he did not assume, left to the mercy of searching after “himself.”

## There is much that is good in the Canadian Francophone and Anglophone histories

### What is Border?

Renowned for being a thinker of space and spatiality, much has been said and written about Heidegger’s ethics of existence and its relation to the space of theatre.<sup>5</sup> The basic premise of his conception of space is deceptively simple. Space is neither emptiness nor a volume whose coordinates designate the location of a body. Rather, it takes shape amidst the interplay of bodies. A chair on the stage, with a dangling light hovering over it, give the space of “an interrogation room.” *A Dialogue on Language Between a Japanese and an Inquirer* speaks of a similar treatment of space in the Japanese Noh Theatre:

*Japanese:* You know that the Japanese stage is empty...

For instance, if a mountain landscape is to appear, the actor slowly raises his open hand and holds it quietly above his eyes at eyebrow level...

*Inquirer:* In a beholding that is itself invisible... in and through it the mountain appears.

This theatrical gesture hints at the presence of a distant body – “a mountain” – and in doing so it stretches the stage apart and divides it from itself, as if containing the mountainous body, its place, and the in-between space within the limited confines of the stage. This is how borders are born: imaginary and yet monumental, they confine disparate bodies to a spectral space of belonging-together.

In numerous interviews Soheil speaks of the influence of Japanese theatre on his style. True to his word, his works have been staged on exemplarily empty stages. The raised disks protruding from the stage in *Waiting*

for *Godot* and *Aurash*, and the background wall in *Hallaj* (2011), have been the only additional ornaments so far. Of course, chairs are almost always present in every production, vibrating the empty stage design with an uncannily confessional vibe and begging the urgent question: whence comes the urge in Soheil’s work to evoke the past? *Aurash*, *Hallaj*, and *The Conference of the Birds* (2014) – amongst many other works up to and including Ionesco’s absurdist *The Lesson* (2012) that revives the horrifying spectre of fascism – all gesture toward traumatic monuments in distant pasts. Why the obsessive-compulsive return(s) to a history that one has fled and left behind? Why the need to disinter and bring this history to the confessional space of theatre?

### What is Breath?

In its simplicity, Heidegger’s conception of space is deceptive. It cordons off individual bodies behind their relationship to the whole, and what does not fit such holistic space is out of place, destitute. Like Chekhov’s *dramatis personae* and *principle*, the “rifle hanging on the wall,”<sup>6</sup> what is destitute also plays no part in shaping the play’s fate and future.<sup>7</sup> The young Soheil, not fit for the space of the Islamic Republic, destitute of a place and fate, had to find them both within his adopted Canadian space.

Destitution is a pesky beggar. Twenty-five years after having co-founded Modern Times with Peter, a fellow student from the same theatre program that first welcomed him in Canada, Soheil stages a deeply personal confession in response to my first question: “Being a product of two cultures, and feeling outside the circle of both, has been a major source of my insecurity and self-doubt... Peter every now and then gets fed up and mystified by my self-doubt in spite of my numerous artistic achievements.” Perhaps *Modern Times’ Aurash* is the theatrical embodiment of this unresolvable tension. The Japanese Noh play, the traditional Iranian theatre of Ta’zieh, Brook’s theatre, Grotowski’s theatre, and every other theatrical style that colours Soheil’s empty stage no longer purely resembles itself in its Modern Times evocations. Likewise, *Aurash* does not gesture toward Mount Alborz in order to erect an Iranian cultural history within the Canadian space. Rather, labouring on unsteady feet he swirls around the protruding disk that centres the empty stage, as if climbing the mountain itself. In his canvas of styles from past and present, Soheil seeks the same laborious reconciliation of cultures to which he *does* and *does not* belong.

*Aurash* is an adaptation of a namesake play by Iranian master playwright and director Bahram Beyza’i. Beyza’i himself considers *Aurash* a critical response to nations and states that resort to reified conceptions of a shared history in order to give full place and play to the hegemonic space of a shared fate<sup>8</sup>, be it Islamic or Canadian. *Aurash’s* fateless rifle<sup>9</sup> is a destitute spirit that gives rise to

dialogues across the borders of “hearts,” “tribes,” “generations,” and “times.” In the guise of an arduous self-doubt, it not only renders these spaces of belonging together indistinct and fluid but also sows them together like a worldly breath, re-writing history as its own redemption.

Ironically, Professor Tezuka’s desperate response – “without *Iro* [colour] no *Ku* [emptiness]” – already contained within itself a critique of Heidegger’s conception of space. Ultimately, what Heidegger fails to see in “empty” space is the same common air that permeates it – what respires and conjoins disparate bodies together, giving to each its life and “colour.” Likewise, what swirls round and round in the form of a mountain is neither Aurash nor Alborz, but the embodiment of Soheil’s and Peter’s doubts. Like a flow of breath that permeates boundaries of bodies to mix them into a primal intimacy, Soheil’s and Peter’s monumental doubts breach the so-called “impossibility” of a house-to-house dialogue production after production. Unsurprisingly, Peter’s response to my second question is chilling once more: “When I look at Soheil’s use of breath in his productions, I see something ancient, like a language humans first spoke.”

### The Untranslatable

Every time the proverbial Canadian stumbles upon the tired, dichotomous Anglophone/Francophone debate, it must be the old maid’s warning to the professor in *The Lesson* that rings in his or her ears: “philology leads to calamity!” There is much to be learned from the variegating space of contemporary Canadian culture, of which *Modern Times* is but an example. And there is nothing more romantic than reaffirming “a past” for the sake of extending it as “the future.” Like a zombie that refuses to resuscitate or die, the past may live on but only at the expense of the future.

There is much that is good in the Canadian Francophone and Anglophone histories, just as there are a myriad of real political and philosophical considerations at stake every time either refuses to let go of its spectral borders. Those who are truly aware of this mutual greatness, however – an awareness which can only manifest as a doubt – already know that each is, more than anything else, a by-product of the other, that a human can never be truly him or herself, and that the exhaled breath that reaffirms suffering and lets go of it in one gesture must be inhaled once more to revive and redeem life and colour. TDC

1. Heidegger, M. (1971). *On the Way to Language*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
2. Please refer to: Mir-sepassi, A. (2010). *Political Islam, Iran, and the Enlightenment: Philosophies of Hope and Despair*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
3. Simonsen, B. (2009, January 25). Interview with Soheil Parsa. Retrieved from: <<http://www.rehearsalmatters.org/interview/soheil-parsa>>
4. Ibid.
5. Please refer to: Morash, C., & Richards, S. (2014). *Mapping Irish Theatre: Theories of Space and Place*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
6. Bill, V. (1987). *Chekhov: The Silent Voice of Freedom*. New York, NY: Philosophical Library.
7. The wandering Jews of the Third Reich, and Heidegger’s controversial if brief affair with National Socialism, could perhaps be viewed from the same theatrical perspective.
8. Please refer to: Amiri, N. (2009). *BahramBeyza’i: Battle Against Ignorance*. Tehran, Iran: Saales.
9. Pun intended.

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