

Viewing through cultural glasses: How the mask of expectation shapes experience when viewing international performance

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Abstract

In 2011, I presented the international Turkish/American theater collaboration *S/he* in Ithaca, NY and Istanbul, Turkey. *S/he* was an evening of two one acts, one written by a Turk, the other by an American, exploring the female body as a battleground. The American play examined issues of choice following a date rape. The Turkish play considered the value of virginity in contemporary Turkish society. Both plays were woven together and presented as one evening of theater. Audience response was mixed. Some audience members loved the plays and did not recognize that the evening was comprised of two separate texts. Others could see the difference and clearly preferred one text over the other. Comments included: “it’s about truth and lies,” “it’s about power and control,” “that’s the best evening of theater I’ve ever seen,” “both plays are trivial and ineffectual.”

I initially crafted the project to generate a conversation about women’s issues and Turkish and American culture. During the performance run, we encountered some alarming responses to the event that amplified the value of creating theater collaborations following this model. In the United States, two different American performance practitioners dismissed the evening claiming that “it wasn’t very Turkish.” One seasoned theater patron took offense at the Turkish play because “it used camp to trivialize a serious issue.” All of the Turks who saw the production in the United States expressed relief that neither play used the head scarf to convey the message. One woman said of the Turkish play, “This virginity thing has nothing to do with the head scarf. It is West/East, your generation/my generation. I think it’s still really an issue in Turkey and I’m not sure an American audience gets it.” In Istanbul, the audience expressed surprise at how similar the issues were in each play. They had been expecting the Americans to present a story that would be foreign to their idea of the female experience. When the issues in both plays turned out to be universal – something experienced by women everywhere – they were surprised and delighted. One patron observed that the primary difference was that the American woman had a loving family to whom she could turn in a time of need while the Turkish woman was all alone in her distress.

In all cases, these observations demonstrated the ways in which cultural framing and knowledge schemas influence how we witness the stories we see told on the stage. Our predilections, our backgrounds, our story-telling expectations become a lens or mask through which we experience the play. The images, the ideas, the dialogue, the relationships are all filtered through preconceived notions of what is normal for each patron. When this mask of normalcy is challenged or frustrated, we have the opportunity to encounter a new world of meaning and reframe our previous understanding of the cultural context. Anthropologist Michael Agar describes culture as “what *happens to you* when you encounter differences, become aware of something in yourself, and work to figure out why the differences appeared.” This paper will

explore the mask of expectation in the viewing experience using the evidence gathered during the commissioning and production of *S/he*. I will interrogate American and Turkish cultural contexts and the framing these backgrounds proscribe, expose the discoveries we made in the positive and negative moments of our cultural encounters, and offer suggestions for how this form of theater practice might encourage and deepen opportunities for cultural discourse.

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“Nothing is more vital to the theatre culture of the world than the working together of artists from different races and backgrounds.” *Peter Brook*¹

According to Lisa Capps and Elinor Ochs, storytelling is a central component of the human experience. Our stories provide one vehicle through which we make sense of our complicated day to day experiences. It is “through narrative we struggle to bridge our past, present, future, and even imagined lives to formulate coherent identities.”² This is particularly true in the theater for story-telling is the currency theater artists use to engage with their communities. When audience members come to the theater to witness stories, they bring with them predilections, personal histories, and individual expectations that, whether they know it or not, become mediators for their experience. The images, the ideas, the dialogue, the relationships of the story on stage are all filtered through preconceived and personal definitions of normalcy. So what happens when our story-telling narrative expands to include and negotiate the identities and demands of two cultural perspectives? By placing two frames side by side, audience members may see what they had previously taken for granted. Intercultural storytelling can expose knowledge schemas that determine, influence or prejudice how we experience a play. Anthropologist Michael Agar describes culture as “what *happens to you* when you encounter differences, become aware of something in yourself, and work to figure out why the differences appeared.”³ Agar argues that an encounter with someone from another culture provides an opportunity to see oneself with new eyes. Points of conflict are opportunities for self discovery. If we embrace and interrogate these differences we can abandon old frames of communication and adopt new points of view that provide a richer, deeper experience of ourselves within the context of global discourse. Refusing to recognize and mitigate the prejudices that inform our encounters with other cultures might put us at a disadvantage in cultural experiences large and small.⁴ Misunderstandings could stand in the way of social encounters, business transactions, or international diplomacy. How might the theater serve to help educate us about intercultural communication?

In 2011, International Culture Lab, a company based in New York City, created a Turkish/American theater collaboration called *S/he*. *S/he* was an evening of two one acts, one written by Turkish playwright Zeynep Kaçar, the other by American playwright Tammy Ryan. Both women were asked to explore the female body as a battleground. These two one acts were then woven together to form one evening of theater. Scenes were deliberately positioned to provide opportunities for thematic conversation, often trading back and forth from one play to another, but sometimes choosing to remain within one play for a given period of time in order to emphasize a narrative thread. The American play, *Lindsey's Oyster*, tells the story of a seventeen year old girl who is raped by her boyfriend and becomes pregnant. Because the rape occurred while they were on a date, this young woman struggles to understand what happened to her. Was she raped or did she ask for it? Now that she is pregnant what should she do? Her parents intervene and her mother strongly encourages her to get an abortion so that she does not “ruin her life” with a baby. Through the sage advice of a local tattoo artist, Lindsey finally learns what she really wants and makes her own decision. The Turkish play, *Last Exit Before the Bridge*, tells the story of a couple who find one another in their late 20s, fall in love, and then hope to marry. This seems a simple proposition, until their best friends become involved in the affair and begin to offer unnecessary advice. She is not a virgin and her friend encourages her to have surgery to rectify that situation. He has impotence issues so his friend shows him how to buy the appropriate drugs through the internet. All seems to be going well: He proposes, she accepts, they decide to make love and are caught in the act by his mother who has returned unexpectedly. From that point forward all bets are off. She is ruined and his mother will not let him marry her so she tries to commit suicide by leaping from a first floor window, succeeding only in breaking her limbs. He has a stroke caused by his impotence medicine and becomes paralyzed on one side of his body. Their interfering friends meet one another in the hospital, fall instantly in love, get married and live happily ever after.

The cultural issues presented in each of these plays reflect the primary concerns of the women who wrote them. Rape and abortion are two particularly hot topics in United States. Date rape continues to be a problem in high school and on college campuses and often goes unreported. To report a rape, a woman must publicly declare this private violation, face her accuser, risk alienating her social group, suffer the humiliation of having the semen in her vagina sampled for DNA testing, and then face a court room in which she must prove that what

happened to her was against her will. It is small wonder that she would rather keep her silence. This issue offers a point of commonality with Turkish culture. Women in Turkey face not only rape but, according to Dr. Karakaya Stump, “sexual harassment on the streets and buses, mass rape, the rape of minors, incest, sex trafficking, and forced prostitution.”⁵ The second major issue in the American play, abortion, continues to be one of the most contentious political issues in the United States. The landmark ruling *Roe vs. Wade* brought into law in 1973, finally gave every woman in the U.S. the right to a legal abortion. This one law has determined who sits on our supreme court, it has shaped the careers of politicians, and it continues to provide some of the most significant controversy in American politics. For women who vote the question is simple - Who has the right to control my body? In Turkey, abortion is a non-issue. A woman in Turkey can have a legal and medically safe abortion without having to justify her position on when life begins and whether or not her choices will define her as a mother.

The Turkish play examines issues of beauty, virginity, and free will in selecting a mate. Over the course of the Turkish story, the man’s mother exposes her body to a series of cosmetic reconstructions. Bit by bit she has her breast and buttocks lifted, her wrinkles removed, her hair colored, all in the hope that her son will notice her and declare that she is once again a beauty. Obsession with beauty and worries about aging support cosmetics and plastic surgery industries worldwide. In *S/he* we reflected this obsession by making a mannequin another character in the play and dismembering her over time. New York Mannequin sculptor Robert Filoso finds this a good thing. “Today, women can look at a beautiful mannequin in a store and say, ‘I want to look like her,’ and they actually can! They can go to their doctor and say, ‘Doc, I want these cheekbones.’ ‘Doc, I want these breasts.’”⁶ But some feminists disagree: “...beauty doctors made many women literally ill. Anti-wrinkle treatments exposed them to carcinogens. Acid face peels burned their skin. Silicone injections left painful deformities. ‘Cosmetic’ liposuction caused severe complications, infections, and even death.”⁷ Obsession with beauty is common to both Turkish and American culture, but obsession with virginity is not. Hymenoplasty is rare in the United States and remaining a virgin until marriage is usually reserved for the very religious in American culture. In Turkey, “the female who is concerned about her reputation should show no hint of an interest in sexuality. Chastity is still important and brides are expected to be virgins.”⁸ One of the Turkish actors in the company confirmed this point of view: “Turkish men and women are under sexual pressure of course. We are not allowed to talk about our sexual

lives or about sex but we have to discover everything. Men have to prove themselves and women must act like virgins.”⁹

These two plays contain similarities in the issues they examine and differences in ideas they prioritize. Although both playwrights share a common gender, the specific frames within which they created these stories have determined the content and style of the dramatic structures. Ryan wrote her play as emotional realism, a style familiar to American audiences. Some American theater patrons found Ryan’s story pat and sentimental, predictable, TV Movie of the week. Others were drawn to realistic journal of the central character. The Turkish audience in Istanbul expressed surprise and pleasure to have been taken on an emotional journey and enjoyed the sentimentalism of Ryan’s story. Kaçar’s love story was a comedic farce, deliberately ironic and fantastical. The American response to her play was mixed. Some audience members preferred her comedy to Ryan’s emotional drama. Others dismissed Kaçar’s feminism as “circa 1970.” One American was offended by Kaçar’s play: “The Turkish part was camp and it took a serious issue and trivialized it by making it camp.” Turkish audiences had difficulty distinguishing one play from the other claiming, “I didn’t see many American things in it.” Because the project was billed as an international collaboration and the audience knew that both Turkish and American culture would be represented in the production, many audience members came to the theater with specific expectations. Some Americans were attracted to the idea of seeing Turkish culture on the stage and went away disappointed that the story “wasn’t very Turkish.” One academic proclaimed the project a failure because “you were putting together an American play and a Turkish play and there was nothing very Turkish about the Turkish play.” The play was “very Turkish,” of course, as it was written by a Turk about contemporary Turkish issues. It failed only in its ability to match cultural stereotype and the personal expectations these audience members brought to the theater with them. By contrast, the Turks who came to see the production in the U.S. were relieved not to see the head scarf as a central issue in the story. Sociologist Nilüfer Göle commented that “the son was very Turkish. Virginity before marriage is very Turkish.”¹⁰ She was surprised by how much the plays seemed to have in common. A Turkish graduate student added, “This virginity thing has nothing to do with the head scarf. It is West/East, your generation/my generation. I think it’s still really an issue in Turkey and I’m not sure an American audience gets it.”¹¹ When presenting the plays in Istanbul, audience members were surprised that the stories seemed to address similar issues. One patron asked, “Are similar

things happening in the U.S., too? The plays are really similar.”¹² Another said: “It was talking about women’s problems as different but is that an American’s problem, too? Is this a universal problem?”¹³ And a third: “Did a Turkish playwright write this play? It seems like a Turk wrote it.”¹⁴

Some of these differences in response become clear when we examine predominant values and behaviors from within each cultural context. American culture is horizontal by nature, dominated by individualism and loyalty to self. Americans tend to become engaged in activities that contribute to their own self-interest and which help them maintain social and economic independence. Eastern cultures, like Turkey, are vertical cultures, motivated more by loyalty to family and social groups. The self is less important than maintaining the norms of the surrounding social context.¹⁵ The difference is striking when we examine an individualism index where the United States scores 91 on a scale of 100 and Turkey scores 37.¹⁶ This helps explain each playwright’s agenda. Ryan’s story follows the decision making process of a single character, and how she forges her independence from family and society to determine her own mind. Kaçar indicts the society in which her young couple lives, particularly the family (his mother), and the ways in which these groups interfere with basic happiness. High and low context levels also influence how we read and receive cultural information. “People who have extensive information networks among family, friends, colleagues and clients and who are involved in close relationship are high context (HC).”¹⁷ Turkey is a high context culture. The culture in the United States is low context. Low context cultures require extensive background information in order to understand what is being communicated. In Turkey, some audience members believed that the play was functioning within understood high context social norms, which may be why they assumed that both plays were Turkish. In the U.S., Americans expected to be told why virginity was an important “Turkish” issue and when that information failed to materialize, they dismissed the narrative idea using a paradigm they could identify: “1970’s feminism.”

Recognizing different cultural frames of reference is one thing, changing them is quite another. “New perceptions don’t make sense, since they cannot be placed in a familiar frame. Within the frame things...do not require explanation. Once a frame shifts, everything changes. We are, in a way, brought back to infantile incompetence.”¹⁸ Americans in particular “have trouble entering into another world that goes with another language, another point of view,

another way of doing things...Americans are famous for thinking they've got the best consciousness around."¹⁹ The two Turkish actors in our company confessed at the end of the project that they felt bullied by American culture. "American people like to see other cultures, they think it makes their culture rich, they want to taste different foods, religions, ideas, traditions, whatever – but when they face it, they try to change it to their taste. Whenever I said, in my culture abortion is not so important, they would say, oh, but it has to be important."²⁰ Both Turkish actors in our company agreed that this was probably a result of Orientalism, a term defined by Lakoff as "something 'we' see as infinitely foreign and different from ourselves, exotic and thus dangerous, and at the same time, secretly, as representing qualities we might desire to have, or actually have, but cannot acknowledge wanting or possessing."²¹ It is possible that those American audience members who found the Turkish play less than Turkish, were expressing a frustration over an unsatisfied desire for the exotic. Turkish culture has its own set of challenges. During our year of fund raising for the project, a number of Turkish institutions expressed concern about giving money to support the production, unsure whether or not our performance would be critical of Turkish culture. To an American, such an idea would seem odd as we value and practice the opportunity to criticize anything and everything in contemporary society. To a Turk, such criticism is serious business. Turks know that it is against the law to criticize Turkishness and that a journalist can be jailed for just such an offense.²² Whether or not the head scarf was the subject of the story served as much more than an aesthetic or a feminist issue. It was a matter of cultural identity. Kemalists believe the head scarf oppresses women. Muslims who choose to cover do so in obedience to God. As with the abortion issue in the U.S., the secular/religious divide has profound political implications, particularly when politicians from both sides are running for office. Turks find the continuing debate on abortion in the U.S. a curiosity. Americans struggle to understand why Turks do not want the head scarf to be the primary subject in a story about Turkish women.

In intercultural theater, once we have identified differing frames and the triggers that mask or prejudice our perception, we have the opportunity to move to the next step. Through interactive events before and after performances, theater artists can begin to engage the audience in conversations that identify and interrogate moments of commonality, moments of difference, and the origins of each. Theater has the potential to alter another's point of view. "Our lives can be enriched and widened by the act of putting on an alternate set of eyes."²³ This is not mere

idealism; it is an economic and political necessity as technology continues to make the world a smaller and smaller place. Futurist David Houle sees the skill of intercultural communication as critical for success in the 21st Century.

Humanity is heading toward a new global integration. We have moved through the geographical orientations of family, tribe, town, state, and country, and, due in part to our sheer numbers and our increasing electronic connectedness, we have arrived at the time of global orientation – a brand new place in our evolutionary history.²⁴

Can one learn cultural empathy? Can the theater teach us how to function more appropriately within new cultural paradigms? Intercultural theater projects demonstrate this possibility. By creating story-telling events that highlight and frame specific issues within a comparative cultural context, we open the possibility of rich conversation about how we project our prejudice onto others. Recognizing the context of behavior on both sides of a cultural encounter may pave the way for improved international diplomacy. Through the conscious, deliberate examination and interrogation of critical issues in a comparative cultural context, we can amplify differences and commonalities in ourselves and in others, and encourage and deepen opportunities for cultural discourse.

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³ Agar, Michael. *Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Conversation*. (William Morrow and Company, Inc.: New York, 1994), 20.

⁴ Everett, Daniel L. *Don't Sleep There are Snakes: Life and language in the Amazonian jungle*. (Pantheon Books: New York, 2008), 248.

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- ²² Kinzer, Stephen. *Crescent and Star*. (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York, 2001), 221.
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