

AMERICAN THEATRE

ART'S DEMILITARIZED ZONE

For Peter Sellars and Maya Zbib, Mentorship Isn't a One-Way Exchange

By Rob Weinert-Kendt | Vol. 28, No. 8 | October 2011

IT'S CONCEIVABLE THAT PETER SELLARS AND Maya Zbib could have met in the normal course of their work. Both of them rack up significant frequent-flier miles along international-theatre-festival trade routes - he with a theatre and opera-directing career that has boomeranged him from Los Angeles to Salzburg, from Washington, D.C., to Adelaide, Australia, over the last three decades; and she for a budding post-millennial career as a theatremaker with her Beirut-based company, Zoukak, and as a touring solo artist who has appeared in London, Avignon, Istanbul, Alexandria and Barcelona.

Still, the world isn't that small, and their respective career levels and trajectories might have kept Sellars and Zbib isolated in concentric theatrical circles had they not been brought together as mentor and mentee for the 2010-11 Rolex Mentor & Protégé Arts Initiative. The program, now in its fifth year, pairs established artists in the fields of dance, film, literature, music, visual arts and theatre for a year of mutual observation and conversation.

Zbib and Sellars have thus far convened three times, on three separate continents: first in Kisangani in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to observe the work of Faustin Linyakula and his company; then in Beirut to meet and observe Zbib's six-member company in rehearsal; and in Chicago, where Sellars directed Handel's *Hercules* for Lyric Opera of Chicago in March. They will reconvene for the Rolex Arts Weekend at the New York Public Library Nov. 11-13, when Zbib presents her solo work *The Music Box* and both will be part of moderated discussions.

American Theatre met with Zbib and Sellars in Chicago, just as upheavals in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya were dominating the news. Contemporary concerns are never far from Sellars's mind - his *Hercules*, unsurprisingly, envisioned the return of the mythological hero to his jealous wife as the uncertain homecoming

of a contemporary war veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder - and now that the Arab Spring has sprung, they aren't far from Zbib's mind, either.

The conversation at Xoco, a Mexican restaurant known especially for its delicious churros, began with a question about expectations.

ROB WEINERT-KENDT: Maya, what did you know about Peter before you met him, and what did you expect?

MAYA ZBIB: I knew that he's very radical and that he's been fired from many places, and I like that. He seemed to me to be a very open and positive person, and I like that as well, because sometimes in theatre you meet those personas who are very closed or dark or mysterious, and I'm really not interested in digging in those areas. It's so beautiful that Peter is not full of himself and is down-to-earth and real and warm.

Aesthetically, do you feel like you have a lot in common? Or are there differences you're learning from?

ZBIB: There are a lot of differences, obviously. But the way he approaches his subjects is something I'm learning from. Our work is very connected to society and politics. To see how he reads classical texts, how he interprets them, the emotions he infuses the performers with, the research he does around the work he's doing - especially in *Hercules*, meeting with veterans, examining how that material is being brought onstage, enriching the performers by this emotional subtext and historical subtext - that is very interesting.

It seems that he goes outside of his own experience to reach for what he wants to say. Is that what you've done, or have you mostly made work about your own experience?

ZBIB: The solo work I've done is work that comes from me but also goes toward other people. In *The Music Box*, I did research and interviewed this group of women from different social and cultural backgrounds to take their stories about their relationships with their home. I'm always interested in going toward others. In my work with the company, we do a lot of social interventions - artistic interventions, drama therapy - in different contexts: in the Palestinian camps, in the villages in the south [of Lebanon], in the crisis situation during the war and after the war. Some of us work in prison, or with youth, or with children with multiple

disabilities. So we're really integrated into many different contexts and layers of the society; we do a lot of what you could call "community theatre."

At this moment we're interested in bridging our artistic work, the work we do in the studio together, with the work we do in the field. It felt like there's a split between what we do in those two places, and we feel like we want to make them connect more - for the artistic work to be more connected to our work in the social realm. It's the perfect time to be with Peter, because that's what he does.

PETER SELLARS: Let me just say, I want to ban the term "outreach" forever, because it's the dumbest thing on earth. It just shows how backward theatre is, that most theatres think of working in the community as outreach rather than as their core mission. Your core mission is healing your community, and the show is the outreach. My problem with most theatre is, because they have that backwards, the show reflects nothing at all but the theatre. It's not a reflection of quality time spent with a range of people; it's just about quality time spent with other actors.

What's powerful in Maya's company is exactly what they're doing in the villages in the south, where the Israelis have swept in repeatedly in waves and destroyed everything. The kids can't go out and play because the fields are filled with unexploded cluster bombs manufactured in the U.S., and the schools don't work, so Maya's company goes and does youth programs in those villages. So that informs your production of Hamletmachine. In the village of Na. . .Na. . .

ZBIB: Nabatieh.

SELLARS: . . .they do the bloody ritual [Ashura] that commemorates the martyrdom of Husayn ibn AH every year. Young men smash their heads open with swords and bleed in the streets and pound their breasts and chant. That her company is doing youth programs in that city is going to bring a whole set of images and power to what Hamletmachine is talking about. I never thought I wanted to see another Hamletmachine in my life, but I got to Beirut and I saw Hamletmachine for the first time. Heiner Müller's words and images suddenly meant a whole new set of things in a land where the most noble thing was to die - where over the streets were huge black banners with gold lettering saying, "My greatest joy will be to die."

Maya, was Ashura as important to your work as Peter says, or is it just a given?

ZBIB: It's just part of the society, part of the culture. This is an activity that happens once a year; I've attended it twice. There are people who do that, and there are other people who do other things. It's a very mixed society. Now, one of our projects now is about death; we're calling it The Death Project. It's a big thing in Lebanon, death; there is the cult of the martyr.

SELLARS: The difference is the place culture occupies in America verses the place it occupies in Lebanon.

What is the difference?

ZBIB: In Lebanon, art is not a profession. It's like a hobby. You say you do theatre, and people say, "Nice, what's your job, though?" Or your family says, Oh, you're still doing that? Oh, that's cute - you're really serious about it." My aunt is like, "You'll change" - like it's a bad habit, like you smoke.

Is there much in the way of state funding for theatre?

ZBI B: There are three funds in the Arab world for theatre; they're very small and for very few people. Mostly, you apply for \$3,000, \$4,000. It's ridiculous, because with this funding you cannot apply for fees.

SELLARS: In state funding, no grants can be allocated for salaries in the Arab world. On the other hand, Beirut is a cultured, cultivated urban environment. You feel like when you go to Beirut, it's the first time you've ever been in a city. I think it's the most urbane civilization I've ever encountered in my life. These are the people who invented the city - the people who said, "People should dwell in cities, not in villages, in tents," and created cities. Beirut is such a cosmopolitan place.

In America we want to create this diplomatic crisis every minute - it's always the end of the world as we know it. But the world has ended so often in Beirut that it's just not news anymore; it's hardly worth a giant reaction. Yes, the Israelis are coming in; yes, that part of the city has been bombed. Okay, and? The street vendors are still making those delicious pastries and the cafés are still open and it's all going. That's the power of culture, not just as an artifact or a theatre or a painting, but as what holds people together and what moves through and survives across the ruins - this unbelievably urbane life force that is Lebanon.

The flip side of it is that it's really hard to get people's attention, and to get people to actually focus and treat something as a moment.

Maya, is your work now going to be about the recent upheaval in the Arab world?

ZBIB: I don't think so, not at the moment.

SELLARS: For me, theatre is not about: In order to be empowering, we do a show about empowerment. It's the existence of a theatre - the very existence of a group of six extraordinary, very different artists determined to collaborate every single day as equals, and sustain a democratic structure that is their own company, in a world where there are no models - that is extremely powerful. They'll do work about what they do work about; it will be liberating because it will be liberating, not because they're making a project about liberation.

We need to hear from this part of the world, because our information is so badly out of date. America actually has a huge part of its budget invested in the Arab world, and at the same time no information, no cultural face. What I am very moved by, and yet another reason I am honored and happy to know Maya and her company, is that now the Arab world has become the most important part of the world. The rest of the world has long since ceased to be idealistic and ceased believing in any of the things that are written on the walls of our public institutions; the Arabs are the last people on Earth who still believe in those things and want them. It's strange that America, and most of the world, has to look through the mirror of the Arab world to try and find who we thought we were, what we thought we stood for; and to watch these young people in the streets with Facebook, it sustains everything we ever thought we believed in.

ZBIB: Seeing Peter, it's interesting to see how everything comes together and it's not two separate things. It's not like, "I'm Peter, and I do theatre sometimes." It's the same whole person - the artist living his life and his art simultaneously and in a complete way. For me in Lebanon and for our company, it's a choice of life to do theatre, especially because it's a difficult choice. I've always had to juggle between so many things, between my identity in a certain society or in front of certain people. So now I'm thinking that I want to gather my limbs. It's important to do that; it helps your work, it helps your life.

SELLARS: I'm not expecting Maya to create the Lebanese revolution. Again, Georgia O'Keefe painting a flower is a revolutionary act; it's not about manning the barricades. Art has a much more subtle and longer-lasting liberating quality.

That's what's impressive about Maya and her company: They're moving step by step as they see it, without this grand plan for world revolution. That's what was so suffocating about previous models: They were so ideologically fixated that it actually limited the importance and interest of the work. What I love is them embarking, minus every possible ideology, and without capital letters, and without delusions of self-importance - that's actually gigantically gratifying, and reaffirms theatre of intimate experience, of an actual exchange, rather than as a broadcast medium.

What gathers groups of people is Facebook and the ability to digitally maintain communities. The idea that theatre has an interface with that is really powerful, and that the new technologies are moving toward intimate and actual exchange means that theatre is being reborn in very powerful, intimate ways. It's not about theatre as a profession; it's about theatre as a gathering point. With all deference to wanting people to be able to make a living and have a salary, in most of the history of theatre people were not paid. And with a lot of the theatre we really admire, people were not paid: Brazilian or Bolivian models of theatre in the '60s and 70s, or El Teatro Campesino - it was communities coming together to deal with issues.

For me, the power of theatre is the power of knowledge and moral energy held by a community. It's not in the hands of the individual author or a certain privileged elite - the process of making theatre itself is how you hold a moral energy across a group of people. I think of models I admire right now, like the LAPD [Los Angeles Poverty Department] in Los Angeles, which, after 25 years, is making its most important work. I think we're in a genuine transition, and theatre isn't what it was for my generation; it's becoming something in this new generation that is in a way more fragile but is, in another way, actually more useful, and more mobile and more practical and more to the point, moment by moment.

I spend most of my life facilitating collaborations among very strong artists and communities. For example, what we were able to do with The Children of Herakles at American Repertory Theater [of Cambridge, Mass.] in 2003 was to create a conversation. Every night we had conversations between refugees and border guards, immigration judges, people running detention centers and undocumented people - conversations that would never happen in real life but

could only happen in a demilitarized zone created by art. So for me, it's all about the space that's being created for people to actually have a conversation that's not otherwise possible. So that's how I see the job description, rather than as the author of some body of work; I'm much more interested in the quality of interaction, and in creating a space where the conversation that needs to happen could happen.

What are you each taking away from this mentorship?

ZBIB: I think it's affirming the choices I'm making. My company is bridging the social work with the creative work - that really was coming organically for us, it was something we arrived at on our own. So it's a good moment to be around Peter and see his work.

SELLARS: As an American, I'm in dialogue with creative people in the Arab world; that's very powerful for me. And that dialogue, of course, is affecting my work. So many worlds opened to me in Beirut, and that really changes my work, and offers me perspectives I wouldn't have, or updates certain images I have that were formed in a previous time - and that all needed to change and move with what's really moving now. I am the one who will come away with the deepest influence.