

## RODNEY SHARKEY

### Perpetual Transit in the TRNC: A Director's Notes on Staging Fateh Azzam's *Baggage*

On 14 March 2005 Raziye Nevzat, a student of Nicholas Pagan in his M.A. class on Middle-Eastern theatre at Eastern Mediterranean University in North Cyprus, wrote to Palestinian playwright Fateh Azzam with a query about his play *Baggage*, featured in *An Anthology of Short Arabic Plays* which the students were studying.<sup>1</sup> They began an e-mail correspondence in which Nevzat suggested that she would love to see *Baggage* staged and Azzam expressed great enthusiasm, stating that to his knowledge only an excerpt from it had been previously performed. Shortly afterwards, Nevzat informed Pagan of the correspondence and the latter gave me a copy of the play and asked me if I would consider staging it.

#### The Play

The play is a monologue for one person, interspersed with dialogue involving the central character and recorded voices representing airport flight announcements, characters from his past (which reflect the character's interior monologue with himself), and customs and

immigration officials. In an airport waiting-lounge, this lone traveller is torn between a flight to the future and a flight home. The flight home is ostensibly a flight back to the *status quo* he is seeking to escape. Further, the motif of “home” is synonymous with his refugee experiences as a child and young adult. Simultaneously it represents both an interminable space and a curious absence of defined place. Conversely, the flight to the future represents the possibility of a new start. Early in the play during a robust interrogation by disembodied voices, ostensibly representative of Customs Officials but metaphorically representative of Israeli authorities, the traveller recounts his life experiences as a young boy during an attack on his village, his subsequent displacement and refugee experiences, and the collapse of a love affair as a result of his inability, or unwillingness, to leave his troubled past behind him. Throughout his narrative we listen as he acquires baggage from various sources—an old neighbour, his father, his ex-lover—and sympathise with his inability to break free from his past. The play concludes with permission granted to board the flight to the future, but with no baggage allowance. The traveller, desperate to board the flight, nonetheless refuses to leave his baggage behind. The curtain falls on a man torn between letting go of his past in order to start again, and standing by his experiences in order not to forget.

When I read the play I liked it immediately. There are some weak aspects, chief among them a re-imagined passage of tender but nonetheless awkward reminiscence between the central character and his ex-lover; but the central metaphor examining psychological baggage is remarkably fresh, functional and surprisingly without overtones of cliché. Certain other factors also prompted me to direct it. As a play it would work well for the local audience who, like the traveller, live on the margins as a result of their

own experience of armed conflict when Cyprus was divided in 1974. At approximately forty-five minutes it is also of a suitable length to keep an audience that is unfamiliar with the theatre focused and attentive. For me, then, the core issues revolved around the actor who would play the central role and my ability to direct him. Apart from the bags, everything else would have to be absolutely skeletal, given that no money would be available for the production. Yet, in my mind even at that early stage, bare seemed the best way to complement the traveller's isolation.

In the meantime Pagan had contacted Azzam who informed him that in his role as director of Forced Migration and Refugee Studies at the American University in Cairo, the only time when he could attend was the last week in April, as he would be busy either side of these dates with lectures, exams and the annual International Refugee Crisis conference in Damascus. Performances were then designated to begin on 26 April for four nights, leaving us just short of a month in preparation time. Azzam would attend on the opening night and give a lecture afterwards followed by a Question and Answer session.

### **The Production**

Auditions are advertised on the university mail-server and through posters on campus. Ideally I would like to cast a Palestinian in the role but none turn up for audition. A Palestinian student of mine informs me that most of the Palestinian community believes that a play about their plight will not make any real difference so they won't be coming. Similarly, there is a noticeable absence of Turkish Cypriot candidates for the central male role. Here I see immediate parallels between both communities insofar as neither culture

has sufficient prior examples of art making any practical difference to their situation. Yet it is also true to say that neither community has sufficient exposure to the cultural impact of theatre to understand how it can energise, and indeed critique, the self-image. Being familiar with the Abbey Theatre riots, and the transformative effect they had on Irish politics, I plug on looking for a suitable actor.

A tall, slim, Eritrean named Hany Berhan is by far the best of the auditions. I give him a passage to read in which the pre-recorded voice of a customs official questions the traveller aggressively. I read the official's lines and he performs wonderfully, clearly and with immediate recognition of context. On each further reading I raise my voice and level of verbal aggression, and he mirrors me instinctively. Additionally, I choose the female announcers and the lover, all of whose voices we will record and playback during performance in order to accentuate the traveller's alienation from others, and also, as Azzam intended, to allow the interrogation scenes to function metaphorically. There is a great diversity of accents available ranging from local Cypriot (fluent English speakers, heavily accented) and "London Cypriot" (born and raised in England, native speaker, cockney accent), to Jordanian (fluent English speaker, mid-Atlantic accent) and Sudanese (Fluent English speaker, received-English pronunciation). As a result of the university's multi-culturalism, I am fortunate enough to have the background sounds of an international airport.

When we begin rehearsals Hany is enthusiastic about the play. He tells me that he can identify with the traveller because as a small boy during the war for independence in Eritrea he was ferried at night from truck to truck—trucks which were frequently searched for refugees—as his uncle sought to get him and his sister to safety in Djibouti.

He speculates that if they had been discovered they may well have been killed. He now lives with his mother in Dubai, but his memories of the war are vivid and he believes that they will help him in the part. I encourage him to tap directly into these memories for the next three weeks and to try to relive all of the feelings he had. I give him a brief breakdown of method acting techniques and suggest that trying to become the character by recalling personal feelings that might mirror the character's experiences is the best approach. I tell him the story of Daniel Day-Lewis "being" Christy Brown night and day for the duration of filming *My Left Foot*. I also push for a context in which he can make further identifications by asking him what he will do when he graduates, and he's not sure. He's studying engineering and hopes for a job in the field but he doesn't know where that job is to be found, whether his mother will be still in Dubai, whether he will be good enough to graduate in the first place. I, in turn, focus on this "in-between-ness," the lack of certainty, and contrast his position with the majority of the local Cypriot community who grow, study, build, marry, raise and die on the island, without ever contemplating leaving. I suggest that he imagine that his life takes place in an airport with "no direction home" for the next four weeks.

In turn, he asks me something about my own experiences. What has happened to me that I can bring to directing this play? I explain to him about the political situation in Ireland and how conflict is endemic in the stories that define the country. I tell him that although the Republic of Ireland is relatively peaceful, I once experienced a bomb, in Dublin in 1974; a bomb that blew my father clean through the front door which, luckily, was glass. I tell him about what I saw in the street outside. I also tell him that as a keen traveller I have been in many airports in the western hemisphere so I know the "waiting

for” feeling of the airport only too well. Further, and perhaps most importantly, I grew up in a small twenty-roomed hotel so my living space was a site of perpetual arrival, departure and transit, people coming and going with luggage, constantly. I added that to me, as a ten year-old boy, the people on their holidays never seemed to be as happy as they should be, always worried about connections, or flights, or tours, or tickets. I stress to him that this anxiousness is a part of the great dilemma that torments the traveller, and that, at root, you do not have to be a Palestinian or an Israeli, or even have experienced armed conflict in your life, to understand the great yearning at the core of this play. He’s relieved to hear this because as an African playing a Palestinian, he’s not sure that people will take it seriously. I tell him that reality has nothing to do with it. It’s about “make-believe” and making people believe. And with a smile he asks me why, if reality has nothing to do with it, I asked him to quarry his own feelings and bring them to the part? I suggest that we’ve talked enough and now its time to act! I can only hope he’s this sharp in performance.

The rehearsals are intense, three times a week for three weeks. The physical dimension is the most difficult to establish as his instinct always prompts him towards realistic physical movement. We begin the rehearsals by focusing on the movement in the play’s opening five minutes, in which there is no speech as the traveller enters and enacts a series of reactions to the airport announcements. In these moments, the movement with the bags is vital and will define much of the traveller’s unspoken history and psychological state for the duration of the play. We work on an entrance from stage right, moving straight across the stage towards stage left, with the traveller virtually obscured by the baggage. Hany intelligently represents this burdened movement as a struggle, but

in his grappling with the weight of the bags there is no rhythm. It lacks theatricality and lends the traveller no dignity. Reluctant to show him what to do, I go through warm up stretches with him again, and I ask him to consider how the slow stretch movements could be transported into the act of dragging the bags. Yet when we resume it's still too fraught and runs contrary to the metaphorical dimension of the "baggage" wherein we slowly learn that the past is a great burden. As it stands Hany's traveller would be too worried about impending cardiac arrest to be overly concerned about the past, present or future. We try some alternative configurations with the bags all of which flounder, and so we take a break. I suggest that we want weary movement here; almost exhaustion, but determined weariness, not struggle; the struggle comes later, with the memories. I explain to him that we have to focus on rhythm and I expound on how everybody has it; how it is nature itself. I explain to him that he has to try to hypnotise people with his body so that he can manipulate them. I then demonstrate how walking is a process of stopping yourself from falling down, and how this takes rhythm. As I begin a slow walking movement to demonstrate, I suddenly stop short. Out of the blue, I realise that he's wrestling with normal bags, but I want him to pull Samuel Beckett's bags! I recall a performance of *Act Without Words II* that I once saw in Paris, where the repetition of packing and unpacking the bags was both deeply frustrating and utterly mesmerising, simultaneously. I get the DVD and play him the Gate Theatre's production of *Krapp's Last Tape* with John Hurt as the ageing recluse. I replay Hurt's slow, methodical peeling of the banana at the beginning and Hany starts to nod in understanding. Then we watch the opening five minutes of *Film* as Buster Keaton tries unsuccessfully to evict cat and dog from his tiny garret (as he opens the door to deposit one animal outside, the other

returns). Hany is now laughing. From here we try the opening scene again, and it starts to work. He adopts a repetitious cycle of leaning forward, heaving himself upright as the case comes behind him, and back slowly into the forward lean again. He has taken the information about walking averting falling down quite literally, and accentuates the bending of the knees with wonderful timing. In an instant the empty space of the dim lecture theatre is immediately rounded out to its extremities by the traveller's rhythmic advance.

With Beckett now in mind, and the action between arriving centre stage and the traveller beginning his monologue taking four to five minutes, I start to recognise the potential for utilising that strange Beckett repetition which both annoys and amuses the audience. Logically I think that this is probably a big mistake, as this play is not a comedy, or even a tragicomedy, and the idea of playing the opening for laughs—given the nature of the subject matter—is highly problematic. And yet, instinctively, it feels right for now. I reassure myself by remembering that I have poured out twenty-two years of my life in academia. I specialise in post-structuralist hermeneutics and can talk Barthes, Benjamin, Baudrillard and Brecht all day long, but when it comes to directing for the stage, I leave all that aside and follow instinct, and intuition. The script dictates that Hany must sit on his suitcase, read a newspaper, ignore various announcements while immersed in reading, and then react only to the (surreal) call for a flight to the future, at which point he has to gather himself together at speed to get to the gate. He is then abruptly stopped in his tracks by the announcement of a flight home, wherewith the dialectic struggle between home and away that drives the play is established. Hany sits on the case and we try a variety of routines. We identify the future as stage right and settle

for projecting one of the bags, held underarm, into the future as a result of the traveller standing excitedly once he hears the flight call. Almost immediately however, the other bags refuse to allow themselves to be gathered up, marooning him in the present. Further, at each attempt to hoist and hold a bag on a shoulder blade, the corresponding bag on the alternate shoulder slides down the adjoining arm. For a cycle of four repetitions he loses one shoulder bag as each respective shoulder is relaxed to accept the weight of the other shoulder's incoming baggage. The result is pure Beckett *and* Chaplin. Although Beckett never tired of citing Chaplin as a key theatrical influence, it was not until directing a scene for comic effect with Beckett in mind, that I could see the influence of Chaplin with such clarity.

As the rehearsals progress, I learn quickly that Hany is that rare breed of amateur actor with potentially limitless ability. The emotional hook in the play is when the traveller recounts his memory of an attack on his village, and Azzam's writing at these moments is excellent. While the traveller is being interrogated about his baggage, a question about his carpet-bag triggers a long flashback and he is immediately catapulted back to the attack, *in medias res*, from where he must flee all over again with his mother and Abu Ahmet, their neighbour. The moment when the traveller realises that Ahmet—who must be imagined as lying face down in the dirt—is dying from a bullet wound, produces a stricken silence as the traveller attempts to free his hand from the desperate man's grasp. Hany proves that he can easily negotiate the emotional arc between an adult's triggered memory in the relative calm of the airport, the chaos of mortar and bullet experienced by a child, and the intense stillness and poignancy of Ahmet refusing to let go of the youth's hand until he takes the carpet-bag. I throw up a few questions

about physical movement in the piece, such as how a mother would respond to the need to evacuate a child, and how a child would respond to being unable to flee from the grip of a dying man. Within thirty minutes, Hany is miming the act of running while holding the hands of taller people and reflexing across the stage in horror while his hand appears nailed to the floor. Watching with interested visitors who have attended the rehearsal, the play begins to unfurl its potential before us.

As to the accompanying voices, there is a problem once we record them and rehearse against the playback. It is jagged and lacks life and the cues for Hany are too intermittent to get a rhythm going in the call-and-response structure. As a talented amateur he needs people to play against and here his inexperience comes to the fore as I can feel him trying to remember the mood of each original announcement when he should be reacting to the playback, which itself is uneven and flat. Azzam's intention in designating recorded voices was doubtlessly to isolate the traveller from human contact and portray his experience in the airport as one of routine humiliation, but at this amateur level we lose far too much energy and so the use of recorded voices is jettisoned. The female cast are delighted as now they will be performing live off-stage, but I'm further troubled. Already I've introduced a note of comedy I'm fairly sure was not intended, and now I'm altering the fundamental structure of the play. Moreover, the first time the writer will see it is in public performance.

For our final dress rehearsals we move into the venue, an old Nestorian church in the town of Famagusta, which seeps atmosphere from the walls. I position the women either side of the stage, mid-auditorium, and back of the auditorium, behind curtains. The effect of their collective voices coming out of the darkness succeeds in focusing all

attention on the traveller, as the audience scrutinises him for a response. I've drafted in sound and lighting "engineers" to run the airport, school-yard, and battle sound-effects, and the three stage lights available. Mehmet is a London Cypriot and Rustam is from Almaty but lives in Georgia. I inherited Rustam from two graduate students I knew at the university two years ago. While they were near-fluent English speakers, Rustam has little or none, but he visits my office regularly and manages to communicate a tale of exclusion and reprisal as an unwanted Kazakhstani in T'bilisi. Given the nomadic nature of almost all the cast he must play a part. During a rehearsal break I overhear Mehmet telling Hany about being "a bloody Turk" in London, and "a bloody cockney" in Cyprus. He says he identifies with the traveller, neither here nor there, always in-between. Natasha from Jordan tells a similar story. She raises Arab suspicion at home because her father is American. Suzannah, who will play the ex-lover with such intensity that Azzam will later admit to being moved, cannot even begin to answer the simple conversational question "where are you from?" Born of a Sudanese father and Russian mother, she has lived in England, Sudan, Russia, Dubai, Doha and now Cyprus. She carries a Russian passport as the lesser of two restrictions, but when customs officials see the Russian passport and her dark skin they usually take her aside for interrogation. She translates all of the lighting instructions to Rustam in Russian, and I sense a significant bond growing between all of them.

However, as we run through a final dress rehearsal, the re-imagined love affair towards the conclusion of the play is flat. In our favour, the church's old pulpit is perfectly placed to allow the traveller to ascend to the metaphoric heights the love affair takes him. From here he can see beyond the refugee camps to people leading normal lives

but he is drawn back down to earth by the sight of Abu Ahmet's carpet bag lying unprotected and unwanted on the stage. The first part of the lovers' dialogue has great energy but the last third of it seems repetitive and unnecessary. I decide that the scene is too long and so start to cut lines towards its conclusion. This puts all participants on edge as the close of the recollected lovers' dialogue segues back into the airport and to the present moment, at which point all announcements, sounds and lights come back into immediate effect. The nervous energy this creates raises the action out of its torpor, and I immediately end the rehearsal. The cast protest; they are on edge, unsure if they have it down to their comfort. Consciously, I'm sure the lovers' dialogue is too long but perhaps unconsciously am I changing the script at the last minute to banish any possibility of complacency? Either way I tell them we're finished and tomorrow we're in the spotlight. They ask me will it be O.K.? I am reminded of Geoffrey Rush in *Shakespeare in Love*: "It'll be fine. It just will, it's a mystery." I go home to short bouts of fitful sleep.

On opening night there is a full house and Fateh Azzam is in attendance. The little raggle-taggle bunch are nervous, but confident, and when the lights go down they are MAGNIFICENT. The audience, unfamiliar with the codes of theatre, is stiff at first, nervous and unsure about how to react. But the cast collectively sense the public's insecurity and react to this by leading them into the performance with calm authority. Such moments are nirvana for the amateur director. Reticent or unwieldy audiences can often feel foreboding for first-time performers and the result is usually a respectful but flat stand-off. Tonight the *Baggage* cast is so full of confidence that they seem almost to jostle the audience to attention from three sides of the theatre, as first the announcements and then Hany's opening mimes draw them right into the moment. The early knock-about

comedy relaxes the audience and then, when they are enjoying themselves, the attack on the village metaphorically knocks them sideways. The play's hook thus embedded, Hany goes from strength to strength as we follow him from refugee camp to refugee camp, from militia training ground to his discovery of the wonders of books, to his partly heroic, partly tragic, inability to jettison his political convictions for a comfortable love-life with an understanding admirer. Finally, as the lovers' retrospective dialogue fades, dimmed house-lights return to their full glare and the airport sounds resume their noisy machinations, a rush of audience energy mirrors this noisy enlightenment. They had been so absorbed in the story that they were clearly surprised by the simulated juggling between past and present, and the result is that the customs officials' decision regarding Hany's right to travel to the future is undertaken against a backdrop of silent and anxious anticipation. Then the enraptured audience responds with barely concealed triumph to the news that he can fly to the future and with palpable shock that it comes with the caveat of no baggage allowance. As the stage lights fade on a character torn by a decision that cuts straight to the very roots of his being, the audience remains transfixed. House-lights fade to black and we all sit in total silence. I let soundlessness linger and feel my heart beat slowing in its welcome calm. I am beginning to relax in the knowledge that our show, unlike the traveller, has made it safely home. This moment of silent suspended animation has been produced by the voices of disenfranchised kids from around the world—metaphorically coming out of the dark—and I want it to linger as a testament. Yet it is suddenly shattered by the thunder of five hundred hands signalling that there have been grateful witnesses who will not be silenced, temporarily at least.

After sustained and spontaneous applause, Fateh Azzam takes centre stage for the Question and Answer session. An African-American ethnographer, and colleague, begins to ask him the first question of the night, but then breaks down. Although he's not able to articulate it, everybody knows that the sight of this young African man torn between past and future has touched him deeply. In that moment the incongruity of casting an African as a Palestinian is blown away. A Palestinian student tries to explain how she carries the bag her grandmother gave her, but this is all she manages to say before tears take over. A Cypriot girl who never knew her father, killed in the 1974 war, manages to say "thank you, thank you" between her sobs and then a pleasant and "well-heeled" student from Turkey whom I know as an archetypal Polly-Anna from my lectures, stands up and bursts into tears. Clearly, she wants some baggage! Oh what a hit we have!

During the Q&A, Azzam speaks eloquently about baggage in the Middle East and how each community must try to understand the baggage of the other. A warm and informed debate ensues between Azzam, three Israeli teachers, a Tunisian and an Algerian. The student audience listens intently to a debate about something that I know for a fact they previously had little or no interest in. Azzam tells both Hany and Suzannah that they have made him extremely proud, and, thankfully, he congratulates me and assures me that he has no problems with the various changes that were made. I am enormously relieved, and can finally enjoy the applause.

In the dressing room later, the cast are rightly ecstatic. I tell them not to be disappointed if tomorrow night's performance is flat (as second nights invariably are) and tell them to make sure that they work towards trying to maintain a forward momentum. In the spur of the moment all agree that this is the greatest night of their lives and push me

to confirm that this is also true for me. Side-stepping the question I tell them that the elation produced by successful performance is as pure a high as they will ever experience and that, as with all things, this will be followed by a low: that when the play has finished its short run and there is no curtain call next week they will feel bereft and empty, but that this too will pass. In the end they will have a memory of achieving something important and memorable, of being a part of something intimately social; of being a part of society in a meaningful sense because they have altered it positively, if only for a moment. I also tell them that the best way to offset the disappointment of the conclusion of a show's run is to turn the moments into a vocation and to immerse themselves in the theatrical world. Hany, for one, says that he would like to become an actor but is concerned that it is far less secure a career than engineering. So I tell him that his dilemma mirrors the traveller. He has the ability to do either option well but must be wary of getting caught, immobile, between the two. In one of those poignant theatre moments they all agree that their next production will have exactly the same cast and crew and try to make me promise that I will direct it. I say "we'll see" in the knowledge that it's next to impossible, but with that sense of pleasurable melancholy generated by feeling the bond between them that our little show has wrought. Tonight, at least, there is no baggage.

As a postscript, the shoulder bag routine at first split the audience down the middle. While many grumbled in frustration at the traveller's inability to get his bags in order, others giggled and laughed with delight. Here attitudes to life articulated themselves in apposite sounds. However, when Hany in a moment of inspired improvisation punctuated the swinging bag routine with a full stop, by thrusting both

arms into the air so that the bags sat obediently on either shoulder, he received a spontaneous and uproarious round of applause. In that moment, Chaplin, Beckett and a Palestinian playwright and civil rights activist were frozen in perfectly intertextual, comic accord. It was an instant of sympathetic magic that I will never forget, because it felt like something: something old and brand new, something true.

## Appendix

Cast and Crew of *Baggage*, Old Nestorian Church, Famagusta, Cyprus,  
26-29 April 2005.

**Fateh Azzam** (author) was born in Beirut, his parents having fled Palestine in April 1948. He began work in theatre in Maine as a mime, before moving to Boston in 1980 to work as an actor and choreographer. In 1985 he moved to Ramallah and was administrative director of the Nuzha – El Hakawati theatre in East Jerusalem. Thereafter he became director of Al Haq, a Palestinian human rights organisation based in Ramallah, and has subsequently been involved in many Palestinian, Arab and international human rights organizations. His play, *Ansar* (1991) toured the UK, Canada, and America. *Baggage* was written in 2003. He is currently the director of Forced Migration and Refugee Studies at the American University in Cairo

**Nicholas Pagan** (producer) was born in London and has lived in Paris, Florida, and Alabama. He now lives in Famagusta. He has written extensively on the theatre for many theatre journals. He is the author of *Dreamwork* which was staged in Florida.

**Hany N. Berhan**, (actor) is Eritrean. He lived in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia and Dubai and now lives in Famagusta.

**Suzannah Mirghani**, (actor) is Russian and Sudanese. She was born in Omdurman and has lived in Rostov, London, Dubai and Qatar. She now lives in Famagusta.

**Natasha Qandour** (actor) is Jordanian and now lives in Famagusta.

**Figen Unler** (actor) is Cypriot. She was born in London and now lives in Girne.

**Emel Akpınar** (actor) is Cypriot. She was born in London and now lives in Famagusta.

**Mehmet Zorba** (sound engineer) is Cypriot. He was born in Essex, and now lives in Famagusta..

**Rustam Makhmudov** (lighting technician) was born in Almaty, Kazakhstan, lived in Georgia, and now lives in Famagusta.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Fateh Azzam, *Baggage* in Salma Khadra Jayyusi, ed., *Short Arabic Plays: An Anthology* (Northampton, Massachusetts: Interlink Books, 2003), 65-81.