

Turning Traumatic Arrivals Into Art: Exiles Form a Theater Troupe

By Rachel Donadio

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BERLIN — Kenda Hmeidan arrived here from Damascus, only in November. She left behind a country at war, and her family. The separation was painful, but her path was not what you might expect. She is an actor who came here to join the newly created Exil Ensemble.

It's a group of seven performers from Syria, the Palestinian territories and Afghanistan who can't pursue their art in their home countries and who are now in residency at the Maxim Gorki Theater, one of Germany's most innovative public stages.

As the war began, Ms. Hmeidan, 24, had watched friends escape for Europe, but she chose to stay and finish her acting degree in Syria in 2015.

"I hadn't wanted to come illegally, because I want to go back someday," she said last week, sitting in the Gorki's cafeteria.

But how do you turn your own arrival into art so soon? How do you face the trauma? And express yourself in a new language?

For Ms. Hmeidan and the Exil Ensemble, the answer is "Winterreise," or "Winter Journey," a tragicomic docudrama built around a bus tour that the actors took through Germany in the coldest weeks of January. The group's first stage production — and a powerful confluence of art, politics and diaspora — it opened at the Gorki on Saturday to strong reviews.

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"They're in the middle of a process, and a very delicate process," said Yael Ronen, the Gorki's house director, who wrote and directed "Winterreise." "The war in Syria is still happening. They have families there. The wounds are open."

Some stories that emerged in rehearsal were too raw to put onstage, so "Winterreise" became a kind of meditation on exile and arrival, built around a journey more than around a plot.



Yael Ronen directing a rehearsal of “Winterreise,” the first main-stage production of a new ensemble of actors in exile at the Gorki Theater in Berlin. Gordon Welters for The New York Times

“We try to really keep it very personal, not to turn them into the representative, or mouth, speaking in the name of refugees coming to Germany,” said Ms. Ronen, 40, who moved to Berlin from her native Israel and has won praise in Germany and Austria for monologue-driven works that draw on the lives of the performers. (Her play “The Situation,” at the Gorki, about Israelis and Arabs in Berlin, was named best play last year in the Theatertreffen competition for German-language drama.)

The Exil Ensemble actors have full-time contracts at the Gorki through the fall of 2018. Their mandate is to create two main-stage productions a year, in addition to holding workshops and studying to prepare for careers on the German stage. The Gorki is funded by the City of Berlin and has an ensemble of 18 actors. The Exil’s residency has been underwritten by 1.2 million euros (more than \$1.2 million) from the German federal government, the Berlin lottery and the private Mercator Foundation.

Munich Kammerspiele has a similar initiative, the Open Border Ensemble. The new ensembles are part of a growing cultural response in Germany to the influx of more than one million asylum seekers from the Middle East since 2015, which has caused soul-searching about national identity. That surge has also led to a rise in right-wing political parties, which argue that the country took in too many refugees.

“I would describe the climate in society as very fragile,” said Philipp Ruch, the artistic director of the Center for Political Beauty, which produces artistic “interventions” that have pointed political messages.

“The politicians say we’ve given enough refugees shelter; now it has to be stopped,” he said. In a rich country like Germany, which is still grappling with its Nazi past, “this has nothing to do with reality,” he added.

The Exil Ensemble also has a touring educational component. “Winterreise” will run at the Gorki through July, then travel in Germany and to Zurich, performing at theaters that co-produced the play. The goal is to raise awareness about immigrants, said Shermin Langhoff, the Gorki’s artistic director, who moved to Germany from Turkey as a child and who has often commissioned work that addresses questions of identity.

In Germany, the arrivals from Syria “are all categorized as boat people,” Ms. Langhoff said. “But, of course, there are also artists, intellectuals, scientists fleeing war.”

The premise of “Winterreise” is that a German man, Niels (Niels Bormann), is hosting six new arrivals in Berlin. (The seventh member of the ensemble is on maternity leave.) After they say they don’t understand him — and want to know where the relationship is going — he takes them on a bus tour of Germany. (The play’s title is inspired by Schubert’s somber, haunting song cycle of the same name, which explores rejection, alienation and loneliness.)

In Dresden, Niels wants to show them the capital of German Romanticism, but instead they find a demonstration by Pegida, an anti-immigrant movement whose name stands for Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West.

The Exil Ensemble performing its play, “Winterreise,” which uses humor to explore issues of immigration and the culture shock of arriving in a new country.
Gordon Welters for The New York Times

In the scene, Hussein, played by Hussein Al Shatheli, an actor from Damascus, and Karim, played by Karim Daoud, a parkour champion from Qalqilya, a Palestinian city in the West Bank, look out their hotel window to read the signs of demonstrators. “Fatima Merkel,” one reads, referring to Germany’s chancellor.

“I thought it’s Angela,” Karim says in Arabic.

Hussein answers, “Maybe it’s her middle name, like Barack Hussein Obama.”

The scene drew applause on opening night. (The play’s dialogue is in English, German and Arabic, translated into English and German with supertitles.)

In another scene, Mr. Shatheli, 32, who was born in Syria to parents from the Palestinian territories, explains how he arrived in Germany in early 2015. He flew to Turkey, paid a smuggler to take him to Greece, and eventually flew to Germany via Zurich after buying a fake Italian identity document.

“Traveling is something I’d like to do freely,” Mr. Shatheli said in an interview here. “Being forced to do this is not my style of traveling.”

Like Ms. Hmeidan, Mr. Shatheli is a graduate of the Academy of Performing Arts in Damascus, where he, she and Mazen Aljubbeh, another Syrian in the ensemble, all studied with Ayham Majid Agha, 36, the Exil Ensemble’s artistic director, who helped recruit them.

German theater critics have also praised how “Winterreise” tackles, with humor, the culture shock of sex. Maryam Abu Khaled, 26, is from Jenin, a Palestinian refugee camp, which has conservative social mores, and in the play, her character struggles to understand a new German boyfriend who’s in an open relationship. “There must be something for me in between an arranged marriage and an open relationship,” she says.

Beyond the laughter, there are detours into darkness — inevitable, given the history and circumstances. The group also visited the Buchenwald concentration camp. Mr. Agha said that was the hardest part of the trip. A writer and filmmaker of Chechen-Armenian origin who grew up in Syria — and who studied the Stanislavsky method in Damascus with Russian teachers — he is married to a German playwright of Russian-Jewish origin, and they have two children.

If Mr. Agha's daughter gets a German passport, "she'll be responsible for this history," he said. "If I get a German passport, it will be my history."

Christopher D. Shea contributed reporting from London.

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