

David Joseph

DECEPTIVE THREADS: STAGING A MIGRANT ARCHIVE

Abstract

David Joseph's solo show, *Deceptive Threads*, dramatizes the story of his two grandfathers by drawing on archival material that exposed the hidden history of these two men, and ultimately his wider family. The recipient of the 2015 Moise A. Khayrallah Center art prize, Joseph's play skillfully unravels the many threads that constitute the playwright's complex Lebanese and Australian identity. In the following piece, Joseph explains his motivations for writing this solo play, his attempts to recover his Lebanese identity through it, and the significance of particular theatrical techniques and props used for this recovery. Also included is the full script of *Deceptive Threads*, as well as a link to a recording of his performance.



My initial inspiration for creating this play, *Deceptive Threads*, came from ancestor worship shrines that I had seen while touring through Asia. I wanted to do something similar, to honor my own ancestors, but within a theatrical context, as this was where my expertise as an artist lay. At first I was focused on rhythm, ritual, and myth as vehicles for the performance. However, as I delved deeper into my grandfathers' stories and uncovered secrets hidden in their archives, I realized that there was a larger story to be told, one situated at the nexus between the personal and the political, the micro and macro narratives that are interwoven through history.

I used archives not only from family collections but also from state and national archives, as these turned out to be key to unlocking family secrets hidden within our nation's past. Applications for naturalization, letters between my family and government authorities, as well as formerly secret documents from the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) were the archives I delved into and drew inspiration from. I became acutely aware of the fact that my family's very personal narratives hidden within the archives revealed underlying characteristics of our national history, and remained relevant to our history of systemic racism towards immigrants,

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including our contemporary treatment of asylum seekers. In this regard, the personal was very much political and the personal history of my family remains very much relevant to our national present. This is why my search into my family's hidden narratives was, as Don Watson has commented in relation to Australian Scottish migrants' attempts to reconnect to their past, "an attempt to find a deeper contemporary meaning in the past."¹ The very archives I used also possessed a visual aesthetic that immediately appealed to me and led to the idea of using them as projections within my play.

The title of the play, *Deceptive Threads*, operates on two levels. It refers to my Lebanese family's link to the rag trade, while also relying on the significance of the term "thread" to illuminate the connections between the past and present that may not be clearly visible at first. Threads became a major motif in the play and acted as a metaphor for the tangled weave of history that, through us, links the lives of our ancestors with that of our descendants. In the particular case of my grandfathers, the element of deception that is alluded to in the title comes from the ambiguities in their identities, which is explained in more detail below.

MY GRANDFATHERS

My maternal grandfather, Fred Ommundson, was a police officer who became a successful singer on the Tivoli theatre circuit in the late 1940s. The "Tiv," as it was affectionately known, was Australia's premier theatrical touring circuit, with theatres in all of the major capital cities. Prior to television, which caused its demise, the Tivoli was the most popular form of entertainment. After several years in the theatre business, Fred was invited by Colonel Spry, the newly appointed head of Australia's peak intelligence agency ASIO, to become an agent in the Australian secret service. Colonel Spry recruited ex-servicemen and police officers in the hope of raising the standard of ASIO which was under pressure to "lift its game" by the British and American intelligence agencies, MI6 and the CIA. England and the United States saw Australia as a weak link in the Cold War effort to combat communism.

Under the alias "Mr. Jenkins," Fred was personally involved in the Petrov Affair, which to this day remains Australia's most infamous spy case. Later, as a member of C branch, which was the immigration arm of ASIO, Fred vetted "unwanted" aliens under the banner of the White Australia Policy.² Stationed in Rome, he frequently slipped

behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War to connect with his agents.

Elias Joseph (Elias Yusuf Daniel), my paternal grandfather, was a late-nineteenth-century Lebanese immigrant who, in a climate of hostile racism, lied about his birthplace in order to gain Australian naturalization. His official documents state he was born on Naxos Island in the Greek Archipelago and not in his real birthplace of Kfarsghab in Mount Lebanon. This caused decades of mystery and confusion within the family as the lines between official and unofficial narratives were blurred. Furthermore, as was commonly the case, on his arrival in 1898 immigration officials changed his surname, leaving his official identity once again irreversibly altered. Like many Syrians, as they were then known, Elias was a hawker, a peddler who traveled the vastness of this unknown land selling wares from a suitcase. Elias eventually fathered twelve children, ran a very successful fruit shop, and had a street named after him in Toowoomba, Queensland.

My grandfathers' hidden identities embody the broad and conflicted fields of what it means to be Australian; Fred the spy, upholding the hegemony of a white Australia, and Elias the immigrant, forced to lie about his true identity to become Australian. Intriguingly, both men embody Bhabha's notion of the borderline identity, where "lives (are) lived interstitially."³ Elias, in an obvious manner, was caught in the uncomfortable diasporic space between old and new worlds; and Fred assumed a covert identity that compelled him to work behind the masks of everyday existence and above the laws of state. In this sense, both men existed in between spaces to manufacture a mythical, homogenous, white Australian identity.

WHITE AUSTRALIA, BOAT PEOPLE, AND AUSTRALIAN IDENTITY

The historical research into my grandfathers' identities resonated with a questioning of my own identity as an Australian citizen, particularly in relation to current government policy on asylum seekers. Since 2001 the Australian government has implemented a regime of offshore processing whereby asylum seekers arriving by boat, pejoratively labeled "boat people," are held indefinitely at either Nauru or Manus Island in Papua New Guinea, while their claims for refugee status are determined.⁴ The conditions under which asylum seekers are held have been admonished as inhumane by the United Nations Human Rights Council, with constant reports of sexual, mental, and physical

abuse, as well as grossly inadequate health care, and are in flagrant disregard of our obligations under international treaties, of which we are signatories.⁵ Who was I, to be part of a nation that incarcerated innocent people in need of our help? What was it that made us so? My grandfathers' hidden histories revealed some fundamental truths about our national identity, namely that our racism towards immigrants followed a continuous historical course, from one grandfather to another and on to their grandson. The personal and the political were parallel realities, both with secrets and lies that needed disclosure.

The myth of a "white Australia" lies deep within the national DNA, in the brutal lie of colonial conquest and *terra nullius*.⁶ The "yellow peril" and "objectionable Syrian" scaremongering of the past lives on in contemporary Australia's far right-wing political party, One Nation, in its anti-Asian and Islamophobic slogans, and, more frighteningly, in the bipartisan support by the country's two major parties of our cruel regime of offshore detention of asylum seekers.⁷

Deceptive Threads is a theatrical attempt to disclose the truth behind our national shame in regard to systemic racism and punitive immigration policies. But like all good theatre, it also shares the very human stories that drive history, allowing the audience into the forgotten personal lives of the past so that they may better understand the present.

THEATRICAL TECHNIQUES IN *DECEPTIVE THREADS*

Deceptive Threads is situated within a contemporary theatrical landscape that is rich with hybridity and pluralism. Being myself an actor, a musician, a physical performer, and a workshop leader, my play naturally reflects hybridity through its integration of multivalent forms. By this, I mean that I have created here what is known as "a theater of totality" which combines the power of pre-verbal communication (music, imagery, gesture, and symbol) with the text, thus immersing and embedding the audience in a complex field of experience—emotional, intellectual, physical, and mythical.

In addition, I also wanted to explore new technical practices. The innovative technologies of projection-mapping offered exciting possibilities. I realized that the archives that I had found during my research were powerful not only for their literal significance, reflecting a moment in time in the life of the subject and of the nation, but were also powerful as aesthetic objects. In other words, the archives were

both form *and* content. This is why I decided to use projection-mapping techniques to project a combination of archives and historical images. They are at the visual core of *Deceptive Threads*, providing, through artistic interpretation, a filmic and metaphoric quality to the work. Nevertheless, at its core the show is still very much driven by storytelling.

Another element that is central to this play is my use of music. I am a professional musician, so it goes without saying that music would play a major role in the production. As a drummer, rhythm is fundamental to my life and work, and I cannot create without it being an active element in each piece. Across methodological, pedagogical, dramaturgical, and creative processes rhythm offers me a meta-language with which to communicate.

In *Deceptive Threads* rhythmic percussive skills were used in two scenes—the Lebanese storyteller and the filing cabinet scene. The storyteller plays the *darabuka* to enhance the story of Elias’s village. The process of integrating spoken word, characterization and percussion techniques is time consuming and requires a high level of skill across several forms. Each line of text, and often each word, must be broken up into its constitutive rhythmic parts that are then overlaid onto an existing drum part. Or, if required, the opposite process is applied, whereby the drum rhythm is restructured so that it can support the delivery of a specific piece of text. *Darabuka* playing involves individual finger patterns as opposed to other hand drum techniques that use the whole hand, thus requiring a high level of motor skills. When this is combined with text delivery, stage blocking and characterization even a short phrase can take hours of rehearsal to process.

In the second scene the process was different. Filing cabinets are not musical instruments, but in the hands of a skilled musician nearly anything can be used to create music. Through a process of exploration and discovery the widest possible range of tonal and percussive sounds were found and then rehearsed into a cohesive percussion score. Like a film score this percussion score was timed to coincide with the projection of images.

Broadly speaking the drumming techniques used in these two scenes may seem similar (they are primarily hand drum techniques), but their application varied greatly. In the first instance the *darabuka* was used as not only a cultural signifier, embedding the storyteller in a great Middle Eastern musical tradition, but served also to punctuate and embellish his narrative. In the second instance the filing cabinets

were used more as percussive sounding boards to reflect and support the powerful and confronting images projected around the stage.

LABNE IN AUSTRALIA

I would like to end by saying a word on the final scene, the one in which the main character serves *labne* to the audience. For any person of Lebanese descent, the memory of white sacks of muslin hanging in the sink will evoke strong emotions. For in these inconspicuous bags is the stuff of culture—literally, cultured milk. *Labne*, or drained yoghurt, holds a revered place in the Lebanese diet, which has produced many dishes now loved the world over. It is an essential staple, a favorite dish and incredibly healthy.

For me, it is the only living link to my Lebanese heritage and the rich culture of the Levant, which was brushed aside by my family in the race to assimilate into a white Australia. Language, customs, music, and dance were all forgotten within a generation, but food was that one bastion of culture that survived, lovingly prepared to ancient family recipes and served each day as the only connection to the homeland. *Labne*, and the white muslin sacks in which it is prepared, resonates as a symbol of loss and longing but also of survival and connection, a signifier of the threads that are often tangled and knotted, torn and mended, that tell us who we are and where we are from.

NOTES

¹ Don Watson, *Caledonia Australis: Scottish Highlanders on the Frontier of Australia* (Milsons Point: Random House, 2011), 27.

² Anne Monsour, *Not Quite White: Lebanese and the White Australia Policy 1880 to 1947* (Brisbane: Post Pressed, 2010).

³ Homi Bhabha, "Between Identities: Homi Bhabha interviewed by Paul Thompson" in *Migration and Identity*, eds. Rina Benmayor and Andor Skotnes, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 198.

⁴ Refugee Council of Australia, "Australia's Offshore Processing Regime," accessed 29 August 2016, <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/getfacts/seekingsafety/asylum/offshoreprocessing/briefing>.

⁵ Jared Owens, "UN Human Rights Review Slams Australia's Asylum Seeker Policies," *The Australian*, 12 November 2015.

⁶ *Terra nullius* translates as “land belonging to no one” or “no man’s land.” In the Australian context, the British settlers utilized this concept to settle on the land without needing to consult with indigenous populations.

⁷ “Yellow peril,” sometimes referred to as the “yellow terror,” is a phrase that was widely used in Australia in the early 1900s to suggest that East Asian immigration could overwhelm Australia and its white settlers. The concept was by no means particular to Australia, but was also common in the United States in the nineteenth century when Chinese and Japanese workers immigrated to the United States during the gold rush. In regard to the term “objectionable Syrian,” this was more specific to Australia. Early Lebanese immigrants to Australia were known as Syrians and were the object of widespread racial vilification. This phrase was quoted from a late-nineteenth-century newspaper, and it is one of several that was used to describe the Lebanese in the racist vernacular common under the White Australia Policy.