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A Post-Colonial Canadian in Cairo and Kraljevo: Theatre, Interculturality and Politics in BoxWhatBox 2023

Un Canadien postcolonial au Caire et à Kraljevo :
Théâtre, interculturalité et politique dans BoxWhatBox 2023

Michael Devine

Abstract

This article describes the challenges encountered by the Canadian intercultural theatre director Michael Devine when creating original performance in Cairo (Egypt) and Kraljevo (Serbia) in 2023, using his BoxWhatBox process. In describing the precepts and process of BoxWhatBox, he addresses the tension between practical application and theory in intercultural performance.

Keywords: BoxWhatBox, intercultural theatre, Canadian theatre

Résumé

Cet article décrit les défis que Michael Devine, metteur en scène canadien de théâtre interculturel canadien, a rencontrés lors de la création d'un spectacle original au Caire (Égypte) et à Kraljevo (Serbie) en 2023, en utilisant son processus BoxWhatBox. En décrivant les préceptes et le processus de BoxWhatBox, il aborde la tension entre l'application pratique et la théorie dans la performance interculturelle.

Mots-clés : BoxWhatBox, théâtre interculturel, théâtre canadien



In 2004, for a theatre project in Finland, I was asked to give a name to the process I was developing for creating original performance material with actors. I called it BoxWhatBox, describing both a consciousness and an attitude. Most of us are conscious that compartmentalisation (“boxes”) is an essential function in ordering reality and establishing individual identity. We may be less willingly conscious that it is a factor in delineating our limitations. BoxWhatBox therefore seeks to subvert the reflexive aspect of compartmentalisation, the separating of the art of performance into discrete modules, in favour of a more holistic approach.

The attitude follows the direction of this subversion, to ask “Box? What box?”. To become conscious of the box is to acquire the possibility of transcending the box. As an intercultural theatre director and playwright, I believe that this conscious subversion of boxes is essential for 21st-century acting. We exist in a context where ancient traditions are melding into each other and where psychological realism as a stylistic *modus operandi* has become increasingly inadequate to the expanding genres of performance. In my own work over five continents, BoxWhatBox attempts to re-ignite vocabularies of expression that create a liminal space between cultures, combining cultural influences without erasing identity.

After nearly one hundred workshops in more than twenty countries, BoxWhatBox has bifurcated into two related but distinct entities. The first aspect is actor-training. BWB is primarily directed at actors who wish to develop advanced skills in the use of intercultural expressive vocabularies. The training takes actors beyond published text and so-called psychological realism, into a more fluid, shifting relationship with spectators, narrative, and the liminal space where cultures exchange symbols and signs.

The second aspect of BoxWhatBox is to create original performance text with actors, through what I call “targeted improvisation” arising from the games, exercises, and études used within the process. Often the two streams fuse, as when actors train in the morning, then work in the afternoon and evening developing performance.

I work to acquire a lay knowledge of each culture before beginning the process of putting a project together. The most indispensable knowledge comes from experiencing a culture in person, living there, experiencing the rhythms of its daily life. The objective is to integrate BoxWhatBox into a culture’s theatrical tradition, making use of issues or themes that feature in the host society. All performances take place in the language of the home culture. There is no pretense that I am an insider. I am a friendly alien, one who combines, rather than imposes, cultural narratives and ways of working. BoxWhatBox is a bridge.



Jesuit Cultural Centre, Cairo

Following productive work at three venues in Cairo and Dashour in 2021, I met the directors of programming at the Jesuit Cultural Centre, close to the chaotic central bus terminal at Ramses Square in Cairo. Founded by the French order of the Jesuit Brothers, the centre houses a wide range of activities: film and animation schools, rehearsal and studio spaces, and the School for Social Theatre, for which it's perhaps best known. Though the Jesuit Brothers are a Catholic organisation, the staff is multi-denominational and activities are open to all Cairenes regardless of background. This open mandate was a significant factor in my decision to work with El Nahda School for Social Theatre. The decision was not straightforward. As is typical in this form of work, the JCC was frank about not being able to pay me a fee for directing and creating a production, although they would supply accommodation and split the revenues from the pre-production workshop.

A description of the facilities is a useful corrective for those who associate the words "Cultural Centre" with gleaming new buildings and auditoria. The JCC building on El Mahrany Street has no windows, like many buildings in Cairo. Through ingenious interior design the building stays cool even in hot weather, but it is always dusty. The building is old, there is no lift, and the rooms are not purpose-designed. Everything about it gives a sense of daily improvisation to circumstances and context. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the theatre at the JCC, which was reduced to a charred frame by arsonists last year.¹ Groups at the JCC were not discouraged from using the space, fashioning tarps and corrugated metal as a roof cover and employing the space as a multi-purpose black box rather than a traditional auditorium.

My experience of Cairene life is that it involves a constant ebb and flow, with few fixed certainties. Traffic lights are rare, and driving is a form of calculated and reactive aggression, especially on neighbourhood streets, where signage is routinely ignored by streams of small trucks, minibuses, cyclists bearing pallets piled with bread on their heads, and, of course, pedestrians, who walk on the streets to avoid stepping up-and-down off sidewalks that are often 60cm high – where there are sidewalks at all.

One cultural adjustment a theatre director makes is to understand that politics are seldom openly discussed. Under President (and former General) Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Egypt is an autocratic state, with high levels of surveillance and a government keen on punishing dissent. For an institution dedicated to social justice, and a Western theatre director, this has obvious implications.² A second cultural adjustment is normative.

1) One can infer that multi-denominational enterprises founded by non-majoritarian religions are thus somewhat controversial under the current Egyptian regime.

2) Some of these implications are minimal, involving self-censorship in all forms of communication, while others, more significant, involve the choice of narrative and perspective in performance.



In UK and North American theatre, lateness or absence is cause for suspension or termination. In a city of more than 22 million, beset by traffic gridlock and a functioning but limited metro system, getting somewhere on time is a challenge at any time of the day. Also, without being too generalist or ethnocentric, my experience working in southern cultures is that clock time is viewed more as a concept than a hard fact. These realities alter, in a material way, the working theatre methodology of a northerner.

The workshop began in late April 2023, comprising seven sessions over two weeks for a total of thirty-two hours of training. Numbers fluctuated between sixteen and twenty participants. From this description alone, the intensity of the process is evident. BoxWhatBox work is also extremely physical, through its use of games and exercises, and its focus on the expressive capacities of the body.

BoxWhatBox participants are distinct in background and experience from one another, and from one workshop to another. BWB is deliberately structured to respond to this. One example is that in more traditional cultures the working dynamics between men and women, and the mere presence of gender-fluid individuals, must be treated with sensitivity. This does not mean that such mores cannot be subtly challenged. Rather than being a rigid, fixed system, BoxWhatBox evaluates the range of participants diagnostically in its initial phase, called Neutralisation and Demechanisation. The games and exercises are tailored to the individuals.

Neutralisation and Demechanisation

Neutralisation is the concept of controlling physical and emotional subjectivities. These subjectivities may be called habits, of mind or of body. We cannot eliminate such habits, nor, in many cases, should we, for many habits are key to our survival or identity. But the performer must be able to identify subjectivities, and control them, so that they are able to create a character objectively, rather than forcing the character to be more like themselves, as is prevalent in American realism.³ These subjectivities extend to ideas of the self. Many actors are limited by their sense of what they can and cannot do. Over hundreds of years in the West, actors have been told, implicitly or explicitly, that they are lacking in intelligence, lacking in moral character, or simply (to paraphrase Plato), useless. BoxWhatBox, in identifying habits that act as limitations, seeks to extend the actor's ability beyond self-perceived borders.

3) In the more extreme forms of psychological realism (e.g. the "Method"), actors are encouraged use their personal subjectivities in characterisation, rather than amplifying their imaginations (as Stanislavsky advised) to extend beyond themselves.



Demechanisation is a term borrowed from Theatre of the Oppressed creator Augusto Boal.⁴ In Demechanisation the idea is to increase the body's plasticity, to "demechanise" movement and widen the actor's expressiveness. Adult bodies tend to do only three things; walk upright, lie down, and sit. In performing such movements over the course of a life, they become *mechanised*. In creating a character, an actor may think to develop the character's movement in only these three ways. In fact the human body in daily life is capable of movement that is non-realistic, imagistic, non-linear.

In BoxWhatBox, the importance of play, working from Huizinga and his successors, is paramount.⁵ Watch children play games, and one is amazed by the plasticity of their bodies, the unconscious moulding of their physical expression to the emotion of the moment. This plasticity is crucial for the actor, and it is best developed through play. This plasticity is further developed through exercises and then applied in études.

Rhythm training

The second phase of BoxWhatBox is Rhythm training. Percussion, vocalisation and movement are employed in groups, pairs, or solo, to shifting cadences. All artistic expression is musical, so actors are obliged to learn how to manipulate their body and voice as a musical instrument. All of us possess an Operating Rhythm, a tempo we are most comfortable using, in speech or in movement. We shift to different tempi when required, as characters do. These shifting tempi create the symphony of our world, which is recreated on stage in performance. This symphony may be broken down into three base rhythms: the rhythm of the individual player, the combined rhythm of several players (a scene), and the rhythm of the play (its narrative arc).

Rhythm work is where the concept of the four expressive vocabularies is introduced. It features as a co-focus in rhythm exercises and is the primary focus of the études in Non-Linear Creation, the third of the BoxWhatBox phases. The four expressive vocabularies are Verbal, Non-Verbal, Gestural, and Postural. The use of these vocabularies is suggested by, though not explicitly outlined, by the performance text. This is where the actor can be at their most creative and surprising. The vocabularies may even be the end goal of the research in an étude ("what sounds does my character make when they want to speak but cannot?").

4) Boal, Augusto. *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. Translated by Adrian Jackson. London: Routledge, 2002. Second Edition. Ch. 2 "The Structure of the Actor's Work", 29–47.

5) Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971.



Non-Linear Creation

The third phase of BWB training is Non-Linear Creation. In NLC every étude has a goal, or target. This may be achieved in twenty seconds or twenty minutes. The actor is given three pieces of initial information: the character, the situation, and the objective. This is theatrical research, not improvisation for entertainment. BoxWhatBox actors begin Non-Linear Creation only after training in Neutralisation, Demechanisation, Rhythm, and the Four Expressive Vocabularies.

In Cairo, the workshop training generated high levels of engagement and enthusiasm. However the transition from workshop to rehearsal proved problematic. The actors had graduated from NAS, the Cultural Centre's theatre training school. Their training skewed heavily to forms of clown and the more didactic style of Applied Theatre, and had little basis in psychological authenticity. Directing actors who have no basis in creating dimensional characters is very difficult, if one aims to avoid caricature. BoxWhatBox characterisation must be dimensional and authentic (though not necessarily realistic). A spectator engages through direct relationality and not in the abstract.

Over my first week in Cairo I had substantially revised the narrative and structure of *FLEAS*, in response to feedback from one of the NAS Artistic Directors and in diagnosing the abilities of the actors in the workshop. In *FLEAS* a family of fleas fights for to establish a home in the face of challenges such as a mysterious series of violent tremors that happens without warning. In an alternate world, we view young people fighting over neutral territory (playground, schoolyard). One of them owns a dog, who periodically and enthusiastically scratches itself. This is the source of the tremors felt by the fleas.

Rehearsal proceeded slowly. Other factors intervened. The founder of the Jesuit Cultural Centre, Brother William, died and several days of an already truncated rehearsal period were lost, as the Cultural Centre closed for mourning. In the end we agreed to perform a work-in-progress of *FLEAS*, with an audience discussion afterward.

Though I adapted *FLEAS*' style to the abilities of the actors, we lacked the time to complete the creative process. I overestimated the speed at which the actors could work. The actors were enthusiastic to a person, committed and passionate, full of potential. These Cairene actors, Christian and Muslim, inspired me with their daily acts of resilience and resourcefulness.



A.N.F.I. Festival, Kraljevo, Serbia: Original production with Grupa Group

The Serbia project was distinct from Egypt, in objectives and context. In Cairo I was working with a new set of professional colleagues, navigating daily life in a secular Muslim culture in a megacity. In Serbia I was a featured guest artist at a festival I've been a part of several times, working closely with the festival's founder, Vladan Slavković. I am at home in Kraljevo, having worked on four previous projects in and around the central Serbian city. A degree of familiarity, and a knowledge of what was available to me as an artist, is useful for a director. In practical terms it means starting from north of zero.

The challenges, though different, remained numerous. A nine-day development and rehearsal period took place during the festival, when most of my cast were performing duties or attending as spectators. Slavković, my scenographer, was busy administrating the festival. The performance venue remained elusive. We'd intended to play along the shore of the Ibar River, but floods had left the plains around the river uninhabitable. The time of performance kept shifting. Finally, there was the youth of the actors. Three came from a satellite company in Novi Pazar while the rest were drawn from Grupa Group, Slavković's theatre troupe. My career has been split neatly between directing professionals and training young actors. Here there was an unexpected confluence. I'd been promised a professional cast, augmented by Grupa members as a Chorus. Now I had a single professional, Sara Gajović, with whom I'd worked previously, and eleven young actors. Distinct from my approach in Cairo, I decided to direct the actors to the script, rather than altering the script to the actors. The demands on young actors would be substantial, involving a fusion of classical and non-realistic performance.

Some context is useful. Serbia is poorly understood in the West, alternating on American television with China and Russia as world-order threatening villains vanquished by intrepid Western agents.⁶ The Serbian (and Balkan) mentality is marked by a passionate attachment to ethnic identity, a zero-sum attitude towards land, and enduring memories of past perceived injustices which often act a kind of national mythology.⁷ Few in Serbia pretend that art is apolitical. The directors of state theatres are political appointments. The current Serbian President, Aleksandar Vučić, promotes himself as a proto-Tito, balancing Serbia halfway between the EU and Russia, but is in practice an autocrat and ethnic nationalist.⁸ Yet Serbia is not

6) Anyone who seeks to understand Serbs or what is called the "Balkan mentality" should read Misha Glenny's *The Fall of Yugoslavia or The Balkans*.

7) One must be careful here to note that any description of a national mentality, by definition, is general and prone to numerous exceptions.

8) A recent influx of Russians both pro- and anti-Putin, and an ongoing cyber-influencing campaign by



a surveillance state in the Egyptian mold, and democratic discourse remains robust and vigorous. There is consistent friction between pro-EU and pro-Russian Serbs.

The play I chose to create for the festival's closing performance was an adaptation of *Hecuba*, taken from Euripides. The wife of Priam, King of Troy, deliberates her fate with the other Trojan women who are the victims of the Greeks' victory. Hecuba refuses to act the victim, even as her children die around her: Hector, Paris, Polyxena, Polydorus. She plots her revenge, leveraging Agamemnon's desire for her daughter Cassandra in order to snare Polymestor, King of Thrace, a former ally who had promised to shield her son Polydorus and instead killed him. Hecuba's memory is as enduring as a Balkan grievance, and as all-consuming.

Slavković and I agreed there should be analogical references to the invasion of Ukraine. Serbs are divided on Putin's "special military operation", and Russian attempts at misinformation have achieved some traction in Serbian society. Political resonance in theatre must always be performed with care. Theatre's function is to ask questions, to provoke debate, to illuminate and enlighten, not to wag fingers. Hagiography and Demonisation are equivalent theatrical sins.

With just nine days to work, I was determined that expediency would not prevail. Each rehearsal began with work on Neutralisation and Demechanisation. While observing the actors at play, I cast the show.⁹ The actors rehearsed in Serbian while I worked from a dual English/Serbian version. The title was *Ghosts Are Dancing*, from an image I'd dreamed of ghosts dancing on a battlefield. I was no longer sure I'd get my battlefield, due to the floods, but at least I had my ghosts.

The primary risks for actors in performance involve performing in an unfamiliar style, and achieving depth of emotional commitment. Actors in the West, perhaps strangely, tend to the risk-averse, and reaching a truly primal level of emotional expression may actually be discouraged as unsophisticated. In the Balkans and Middle East, the opposite is often true. Actors can be emotional to the point of excess and to the detriment of a play's narrative. The challenge for the director is to encourage narrative discipline while allowing for maximal emotional expression. In Kraljevo my young actors were able to achieve a level of emotional authenticity that is, frankly, unimaginable in my students in Canada – who are in no way different than young actors throughout the West. The advantage of BoxWhatBox becomes clear here. The structure was established and resilient. There was a performance script in which the actors framed their work, and a playwright present to observe and make changes. Actors felt supported, and encouraged, to make bold choices.

Russian hackers, has brought the tension between Serbia's EU ambitions and its history as a Russian client state into sharp focus.

9) This is crucial in a short rehearsal process. It is equally useful as a casting diagnostic in processes of a longer duration. Watching actors work and respond to direction is much more useful than traditional audition readings.



During a BoxWhatBox process there are three phases in a working day. In the morning the games are planned, and the exercises and études for that day's rehearsal are set. The afternoon brings practical application, in the form of rehearsal, generally for four hours.¹⁰ In the evening post-rehearsal notes must be written and the performance text must be revised based on rehearsal observations. In between these phases the animateur liaises with designers, administers production logistics, and performs public relations duties. In Kraljevo this included a book launch for *The BoxWhatBox Book: Acting in the 21st Century*.

Conventional theatrical wisdom holds that high-level performance requires time and money. Working with an amalgam of Brook's rough theatre philosophy and Grotowski's ideas on the actor's body as a narrative tool, BoxWhatBox subverts this accepted orthodoxy. Faced with nine days to create a professional-level performance, with a cast that was largely pre-professional, with minimal scenography (principally a lot of stage blood) and a constantly shifting location – each day I walked along the river's edge, looking for a potential site – the actors had no time to vacillate. Greek drama demands magisterial scope. The playwright has no time to indulge in extra verbiage or poetic elaboration. An audience of standing spectators in what might be driving rain or blistering heat must be engaged, galvanised.

The discipline of BoxWhatBox gives actors the assurance to create quickly and decisively. Each day a goal is set, each day it is achieved. Nine days creates a degree of intensity and stress, certainly. It also creates a bond of intimacy that is integral to the success of theatre. In theatre one falls in love, commits one's soul, bids love adieu, and moves on to the next romance. Neurotypical listeners may consider this sociopathy. As a lifestyle, if one possesses the stamina, it is a recipe for revelation, for the feeling of being part of something larger than you alone, for achieving that fleeting sense of transcendence so often absent from modern life.

Performance day. The costumes arrive about an hour before I signal the actors to begin. The blood is newly constituted and applied liberally (in some cases more than liberally). We have found, at last, an ideal location, a concrete outcropping at the river's edge with a sheltered section for the audience. The performance style of BoxWhatBox is Brechtian. The audience is always directly addressed, treated as engaged, intelligent equals and unspoken members of the cast (that is, the play's world). There is little to distract from the performance of the actors. In Brechtian fashion, they commit to emotions of raw depth and then re-surface to frame those emotions in a context the audience can analyse, in terms of human dynamics rather than cathartic purgation.

In performance, the actors of *Ghosts Are Dancing* mix in and among the crowd, dive into the water, tell the story of Hecuba as a contemporary parable about the

10) I believe this is the optimal amount of time to work at full creative levels.



costs of vengeance, and the way invasion can be re-framed by revisionists as “fraternal assistance”. The actors are in constant movement, always visible. A tenet of BoxWhatBox performance is that the true magic of theatre lies in observing the transformations, rather than concealing them.

My first impulse is to remain skeptical of the tendency to find commonalities or universal platitudes. I am by nature a Romantic and a universalist, aware of the excess associated with these beliefs. But BoxWhatBox, as mentioned earlier, is a bridge. A bridge is the commonality existing between, and thus belonging to, two separate entities. Both remain independent, but boundaries are expanded through the existence of the bridge. This, in essence, is my understanding and application of theatrical interculturalism through BoxWhatBox.

MICHAEL DEVINE / is a Canadian intercultural theatre director and playwright. The creator of BoxWhatBox, an internationally recognised performance creation and actor-training system, he has created performances and trained actors in more than twenty countries on five continents. His collection of plays *Playing Outside the Lines* and *The BoxWhatBox Book: Acting for the 21st Century* have been published by FriesenPress. Classically trained as an actor in LAMDA (London, England) and at the HB Studio and the Actors’ Movement Studio in New York City, Michael Devine earned an MFA in Performance from York University and a PhD in Drama from the University of Toronto. He is currently a Full Professor in the English & Theatre Department at Acadia University, Wolfville, Nova Scotia.