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Performing Migrancy and Mobility in Africa

Cape of Flows

Edited by
Mark Fleishman
To my grandparents, Jack and Dora Idels and Morris and Ella Fleishman, who were forced to leave their homes in Europe and make a new home in Africa, and those who followed in their footsteps

and

To Jonathan Khumbulani Nkala who left us far too soon
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Series Editors’ Preface

The “Studies in International Performance” series was initiated in 2004 on behalf of the International Federation for Theatre Research, by Janelle Reinelt and Brian Singleton, successive Presidents of the Federation. Their aim was, and still is, to call on performance scholars to expand their disciplinary horizons to include the comparative study of performances across national, cultural, social, and political borders. This is necessary not only in order to avoid the homogenizing tendency of national paradigms in performance scholarship, but also in order to engage in creating new performance scholarship that takes account of and embraces the complexities of transnational cultural production, the new media, and the economic and social consequences of increasingly international forms of artistic expression. Comparative studies (especially when conceived across more than two terms) can value both the specifically local and the broadly conceived global forms of performance practices, histories, and social formations. Comparative aesthetics can challenge the limitations of national orthodoxies of art criticism and current artistic knowledges. In formalizing the work of the Federation’s members through rigorous and innovative scholarship this Series aims to make a significant contribution to an ever-changing project of knowledge creation.

Janelle Reinelt and Brian Singleton
International Federation for Theatre Research
Fédération Internationale pour la Recherche Théâtrale
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There are many people to acknowledge without whom this book and the theatre project it originates from would not have seen the light of day.

Jennie Reznek, with whom I have built a life in theatre and a life outside of theatre over the past 26 years. Her performances, insight and overall support remain indispensable and inspiring.

Mandla Mbothwe, who at the time of the Migration Project was a co-director of Magnet Theatre, and whose special talents produced two of the productions that made up the project.

All the performers and other artists who contributed to the four productions that made up Magnet’s Migration Project, and all the other performers in all the other productions that are discussed in the chapters.

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The wonderful photographers and designers who allowed us to use their images in the book: Mark Wessels, Eric Nathan, Craig Leo, Hannes Thiart, Hennie Coetzee, Kali van der Merwe, Richard Mason and Ashley Walters.

All the contributors who managed to survive my constant nagging to get the drafts in in the middle of a very hot summer.

Janelle Reinelt and Brian Singleton for agreeing to publish this work as one of the final volumes in their Studies in International Performance series and whose support and encouragement I value greatly. And Paula Kennedy and Peter Cary and all others at Palgrave Macmillan involved in the publication of the collection.
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Mark Fleishman is a professor in the Department of Drama at the University of Cape Town and co-artistic director of Magnet Theatre. He has written numerous articles and chapters, created and directed many performance works performed nationally and internationally, and is involved in development projects in urban townships and rural communities using theatre as a tool for social justice and transformation. His major research areas are dramaturgy, performing the archive, migration and contemporary South African theatre.

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posits breath as a point of access. As co-founder and artistic director of the Mothertongue Project women’s arts collective, Sara has experience in the field of theatre in South Africa, Singapore, India, Kenya and Indonesia as a theatre maker, performer, director and facilitator.

**Mandla Mbothwe** has been a writer, researcher, professional director, performance teacher and creative arts practitioner for the past 20 years. In this time he has created a number of award-winning theatre productions. He worked as a lecturer in the Department of Drama at the University of Cape Town for eight years. Over this time, he was also one of three directors of Magnet Theatre. He left UCT and Magnet to take up a position as the artistic director for the Steve Biko Centre (King Williamstown), an initiative of the Steve Biko Foundation, which he occupied from 2011 to 2013. He is currently the creative manager for the Artscape Theatre Centre in Cape Town.

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Introduction

Mark Fleishman

Despite the broad reach of its title and the number of different places it passes through on its way, this book focuses on the geographical location we now call Cape Town. Cape Town as a relay or nodal point in multiple circuits of exchange: the migrations of people and performances, cultural forms and practices, sounds and music, ideas and things: material goods, human goods, etc. This is a relay point that has operated differently at different times over centuries, and differently for different groups of people at the same time, as a point of attraction; an end-point, mid-point or stopping point; a point of interruption; a point of flow or through which flows occur; a crossroads; a gateway.

In a keynote address at the Osaka conference of the International Federation of Theatre Research (2011), Paul Rae introduced the notion of ‘archipelagic performance’ in which he used the geographical notion of the archipelago – a chain or cluster of islands – as a metaphor for performance in a changed/changing world context. I propose a similar metaphoric strategy that uses the geographical notion of the cape – a point or head of land projecting into a body of water – to reflect on performances that cluster around what is now the city of Cape Town that engage with questions of mobility, of flow and flux, movement and migration on the African continent.

The specific focus of the book is a body of performance work that engages with this phenomenon of movement and flow, performance work created within the city of Cape Town by artists who live in the city but are not necessarily always from or of the city, or do not feel they belong to the city or that the city belongs to them. Much of this centres on the work of Magnet Theatre, an independent theatre company born during the years of apartheid (1987) that has continued to operate through the transition period and up to the present. It was started by
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Jennie Reznek and me and it has always produced theatre work that begins with bodies in space rather than pre-written texts and is created collectively by the company; engages with South African realities that challenge us in the present; and actively seeks to foster non-racialism by bringing black and white together on stage and in the creative process. In addition, Magnet has always been involved in training and development work in urban as well as rural areas as part of a commitment to the transformation of the theatre industry in South Africa along both racial and class lines.

But the book also centres on work by other artists in Cape Town who operate in the same orbit/sphere as Magnet Theatre. It also touches on work created and/or performed outside the city in other parts of the continent or indeed the world that engages with the Cape as a real or imagined node in a complex system of migration and mobility.

As such, the work focused on could be said to form part of what has been described as the ‘mobility turn’ or ‘the new mobilities paradigm’ in social science research:

[A] ‘mobility turn’ is spreading into and transforming the social sciences, not only placing new issues on the table, but also transcending disciplinary boundaries and putting into question the fundamental ‘territorial’ and ‘sedentary’ precepts of twentieth-century social science. It seems that a new paradigm is being formed within the social sciences, the ‘new mobilities’ paradigm. (Sheller & Urry, 2006, cited in Hannam et al, 2006, pp. 1–2)

Such research is not confined to the social sciences alone but surfaces in literary and cultural studies too where issues of exile, displacement and dislocation within migrant communities are explored with increasing regularity as is a kind of emerging ‘neo-nomadism’ amongst particular sectors of the society (D’Andrea, 2006).

The suggestion of a ‘mobility turn’ has been critiqued on a number of scores. For example, Ahmed argues that the ‘idealisation of movement, or transformation of movement into a fetish, depends upon the exclusion of others who are already positioned as not free in the same way’ (Ahmed, 2004, p. 152). Skeggs suggests that ‘[m]obility and control over mobility both reflect and reinforce power. Mobility is a resource to which not everyone has an equal relationship’ (Skeggs, 2004, p. 49). Some of the contributions to the present study point to such systems of power operating within or alongside notions and practices of mobility
and migration. Another critique questions whether such mobilities are in fact really new at all or whether, as can be seen in many of the works explored here, they have existed for centuries. Perhaps they have become more complex or perhaps they have simply morphed into new forms through the advent of new technologies of communication and transport.

Whether one believes that such complex systems of flow and mobility within particular geographical regions or across and between continents and the structures of feeling that arise from them are a relatively new phenomenon that characterizes our contemporary world, or that they have been in existence in one form or another for centuries, it is clear that they exist and have influenced and continue to influence places and the people who pass through them.

Focusing on performance’s engagement with the issue brings to the fore the importance of what Mimi Sheller and John Urry refer to as the ‘recentring of the corporeal body as an affective vehicle through which we sense place and movement, and construct emotional geographies’ (2006, p. 216). Sara Ahmed reminds us that ‘the word “emotion” comes from the Latin, *emovere*, referring to “to move”, “to move out”’ and both our experience of moving and of attachment to places and other people is conditioned by emotion (2004, p. 11).

In other words studies such as the one proposed here that use performance to represent and engage with issues of mobility in embodied ways expand the already existing research focus by getting to grips with what it *feels* like to be on the move and in the spaces in-between that characterize the lives, now and for centuries before, of multiple peoples who move around and pass through places like the Cape.

**Why Cape Town?**

Cape Town is located at the foot of the African continent lodged between two oceans, the Indian stretching to Asia on the one side and the Atlantic stretching to the Americas on the other. But if one were to travel northwards, hugging the coast of the continent, one would either arrive in Europe or at the Red Sea and the so-called Middle East. This positioning at the intersection of many of the Earth’s major shipping lanes has resulted in a powerful mixing of cultures and peoples and given rise to complex issues of inclusion and exclusion, belonging and not-belonging, ownership and non-ownership over centuries. Furthermore, its location places it as the gateway to a continent waiting
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to be discovered, and plundered, by those seeking fame and fortune and more recently, in an ironic reversal, as the final point on a line that stretches from the interior of the continent down south towards the sea, for those fleeing war and economic hardship.

This geographical location has made Cape Town an important node in a network of flows, circuits of movement and exchange across successive and sometimes parallel or overlapping time bands or epochal moments. These flows suggest that the Cape has always been associated with a sense of ‘passing through’ that, even when it has resulted in ongoing inhabitation or forms of settlement, suggests not permanence or belonging so much as a sense of unfixedness, of shifting and uncertain connections with place.

The Cape as a projection from the land into the ocean is not quite of either sphere. It does not really belong to the continent nor can it, being clearly land, really be part of the ocean. So it sits with one foot on the continent and one foot beyond in a much more fluid space, shifting and forming itself around successive and intersecting inhabitations. This fluidity about the Cape makes it seem somewhat unreal, a kind of mirage in the middle of the sea that operates according to its own rules of time and space and that seems to occupy different worlds simultaneously. In this respect the Cape is a more ‘open-ended’ and ‘plastic’ space, ‘folded and animate [...] everything framed in perpetual movement’ than it is static and enclosing. Furthermore, it is a space that ‘aris[es] out of multiple encounters which, though structured, do not have to add up: as myriad adjustments and improvisations are made, so new lines of flight can emerge’ (Thrift, 2004, p. 592).

The original inhabitants of this place at the foot of the African continent, the Gorachoqua and the Goringhaiqua, clans of the Khoikhoi or Khoekoen peoples, were nomadic herders who were not sedentary but moved their camps seasonally between the coast and the interior.

The lifestyle of traditional pastoral societies in Africa is defined by their need to find pasture and water for their livestock. Being constantly on the move orders the social relationships between groups and within the group. (Boonzaier & Smith, 1996, p. 36)

This creates what Elphick has described as a people in a state of ‘endemic flux’ (1985, p. 68). In other words movement rather than a sense of being fixed or moored to a plot of land characterizes such peoples not only in terms of their seasonal migrations but also in terms of their sense of being in the world, their ways of being social and their sense
of ownership of the land they occupy (in the sense of move around on/in). This brought the Khoikhoi into conflict with the San hunter-gatherers they encountered further up the coast and in the interior, who did not recognize their ownership rights over the cattle and sheep they herded but saw these as fair game for hunting; or the Europeans who began to pass by and then disembark from around about the fifteenth century and who did not recognize their ownership rights over the land.

The first Europeans who rounded the Cape were the Portuguese who were more intent on noting and mapping while passing than on making landfall. In fact it seems that the Portuguese were somewhat in awe of the Cape, seeing it as a monstrous incarnation, a ‘wild and stormy’ place exemplified by the ‘fearsome monster’ Adamastor in the poem *The Lusiads* by Camoens: ‘I am that mighty hidden Cape [...] the Cape of Storms’ (Worden et al., 2004, pp. 12–13). The Dutch, in the form of the Dutch East India Company, set their sights on the Cape a little later – in the seventeenth century – and were not at first intent on settling or creating a colony but rather on creating a refreshment or refuelling station between Europe and Asia:

> The ‘Instructions for the officers of an expedition fitted out for the Cape of Good Hope to found a fort and garden there’, given in 1651 to [Jan] Van Riebeeck by the VOC directors in Amsterdam, were unambiguous about the kind of settlement they planned for Table Bay. They envisaged a dual role for the station: as a defensive post against both ‘the natives, who are a very rough lot’ and potential European rivals as well as a source of fresh food for passing vessels. (Worden et al., 2004, p. 17)

Coetzee suggests that: ‘The migratory patterns and moveable housing structures of the Khoikhoi confirmed the Dutch view’ that the land was *res nullius* – a thing without an owner – and therefore that they were within their rights to occupy it (1994, p. 43). Van Riebeeck’s journal indicates that the indigenous peoples, who he refers to as the Saldanhrs, ‘are not to be found here the whole year, and it seems that we have to seek them out since they do not come to us, being a very lazy people’ (cited in Coetzee, 1994, p. 42).

The Dutch seem to have seen it as their duty to stabilize the situation at the Cape by using force to bring the indigenous population under their sway. However, the fact that they found it so difficult to subdue the local peoples and/or bring them into relations of
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employment initiated a request from the governor, Van Riebeeck, on 25 May 1652 for:

slaves for the dirtiest and heaviest work, to take the place of the Dutchmen in fetching stone, etc., to be obtained only at a distance and with which we will be able to make whatever is necessary – some slaves from Batavia would therefore be welcome who know how to cut stone and dig up the soil. (Leibbrandt, 1900, p. 44)

The company was initially reluctant to send slaves, stating in December of the same year that they needed all slaves they could lay hands on in Batavia (the company’s settlement in what is today Jakarta) and trusting ‘that the natives will be sufficiently inclined for service to do all kinds of work instead of slaves’ (Leibbrandt, 1898–9, p. 84). However, by 1655 the company had conceded that slaves at the Cape were necessary ‘for there are no servants to be had for hire’ and authorized journeys to Angola and Madagascar to seek slaves (1898–9, p. 222). This initiated a period of intense traffic in slaves down the east coast of the African continent, from the island of Madagascar, and notably between parts of Asia, particularly what are today India, Malaysia and Indonesia, and the Cape. This was a forced migration that was to continue through to the middle of the 19th century and that initiated the complex mix of cultures that characterizes Cape Town today.

But the migrations were not only of the forced variety. Once the Dutch had been supplanted by the British and a colonial town was established which over time grew into a port city, the Cape became an entry point to the continent for international investment (which it has remained to this day and particularly since 1994), and also for hordes of fortune-seekers seeking to gain from the diamond and gold-mining industries that sprung up in the interior of the country in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The arrival of the British, and the attempt to push the bounds of the colony further north away from the Cape, brought the colonists (both the trekboers of Dutch origin and the missionaries and military of British origin) into contact and conflict with the Xhosa people on the east coast. The nine Xhosa Wars, fought between Britain and the Xhosa people over a period of 100 years between 1779 and 1879, diminished the power of the Xhosa as a nation and as owners of the land and consolidated British control over increasing parts of what is today South Africa. This created links between the Xhosa and the Cape but the Xhosa had links with those who occupied the southern tip of the continent from
at least a century earlier (Ross, 1980). What is clear is that for many years Xhosa people have moved between their homelands in what is today the Eastern Cape province towards Cape Town (in the Western Cape province) in search of trading opportunities, or in search of work when the farming life began to break down either because their land was confiscated or occupied by the colonists or because the world was changing, particularly in relation to economic systems, and the need to seek a wage was forced upon them.

This has given rise to an internal migration system that continues up to today, involving large numbers of Xhosa people being constantly on the move along the N2 highway from the rural homelands to the urban townships. Children born in Cape Town are told that home is elsewhere; bodies from Cape Town are taken back to the Eastern Cape for burial; large flows of people move along the highway at Easter and Christmas in a fleet of buses and minibus taxis.

The city today

Today the city of Cape Town is a major tourist destination that attracts significant numbers of people from across the world, people who by definition are passing through. It is often said that Cape Town as a city operates more for the benefit of these tourists than for the local inhabitants. Large distances continue to separate the particularly black, working-class majority from the city centre and its amenities. Thousands of black bodies stream into the city to work each day but by and large evacuate at night leaving the city for the use of the predominantly white upper classes and the tourists who have come to town to indulge in the beauty of the surroundings and to play.

However, ironically, the tourists are not the only ones passing through in the post-colonial moment. Increasingly, Cape Town has become a destination or stopping point for continental migrants from countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, and Zimbabwe, seeking economic opportunity and a safe place to raise their children. These new arrivals form part of emerging economic, social and linguistic networks across the city, but they remain connected to their homes in the places from which they have come, initiating important and fast-growing transnational links and relationships while at the same time struggling to be accepted by the local South African population, black and white.

Many of the chapters in this collection respond to issues of xenophobia pertinent in Cape Town and across the country as a whole and
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in particular make reference to increasing violence against the African migrant community. In May 2008 a wave of particularly aggressive and seemingly orchestrated xenophobic attacks swept across many of the country’s urban centres. On 31 May 2008, the Mail & Guardian newspaper reported a death toll of 62, with 670 injuries (Staff Reporter, 2008). The targets of the violence were largely, but not exclusively, people from other African countries and the perpetrators South African. Initiated in poor areas of Alexandra township in Johannesburg, the violence quickly spread to other cities including Pretoria and Cape Town. In Cape Town, between 20,000 and 30,000 people were displaced (Staff Reporter, 2008; CRAI, 2009; Peberdy & Jara, 2011). Based on a report by the Citizenship Rights in Africa Initiative (CRAI), among the main causal factors for the violence was the failure of the ‘new’ South African government to meet expectations of improved service delivery to economically marginalized South Africans, creating widespread frustration and a tendency to guard against perceived encroachment. Competition in the informal business sector and sensational media depictions of migrants coming in ‘waves’ and ‘hordes’, reinforcing prejudice with references to ‘job stealers’ and ‘aliens’ (CRAI, 2009, p. 6), were also mentioned as causal factors.

The Magnet Theatre Migration Project

The inspiration for this book can trace its genesis back to the Migration Project initiated by Magnet Theatre in 2006. Magnet Theatre has served as a de facto research unit for my work as a researcher based in the drama department at the University of Cape Town. As such, while it produces professional productions to be performed on local and international stages, the work is always research-based and is usually part of a structured, multi-year, thematic project with a number of diverse outputs: productions, journal articles, pedagogical materials, interactive workshops, recorded interviews with participants and conference presentations.

The Migration Project ran from 2006 to 2010 and included four newly devised productions with their origins in Cape Town: two directed by me and two by Mandla Mbothwe (at the time a co-director of the company). The scripts of these productions were published in 2011 (Reznek et al, 2012), but the intention was always to accompany the playscripts with more academically focused articles on the subject of migration and performance and in particular in relation to Cape Town as a city – hence this book.

While the migration theme was the particular focus in the period mentioned above, it has always been present in Magnet’s work, even
if sometimes unintentionally. So besides the productions that make up the Migration Project (dealt with in more detail in some of the chapters that follow in this collection), other productions such as *Onnest’bo* (2002), dealing with forced removals from District Six and performed itinerantly around Cape Town and other parts of the country, and *Cargo* (2007), dealing with the archive of slavery at the Cape, highlight the persistent and central place that migration and the migratory experience occupy in both the work of the company and the city in which it is based.

While many of the chapters refer to this body of work produced by Magnet Theatre, this book project has expanded to take in the work of other theatre makers whose productions deal with the theme of migration in, or in relation to, the city of Cape Town.

**The chapters**

The chapters that follow span performance works and practitioners from Egypt and Kenya, to Mali and Zimbabwe, as well as works from Cape Town itself that engage with the historical archive and contemporary experience to explore the transcontinental mobilities and internal migrancy systems that have the Cape as a central node. In doing so, they focus on movement in at least four different but intersecting senses: first, on the ways in which movement and migration are represented as content in performance works; second, the dramaturgy of movement itself – the way in which physical movement, choreography and gesture become a central element in the performance text; third, the shifting and labile nature of identity in a post-colonial context as subjects try to make sense of their emergent experiences; and fourth, the migration and mobility of ideas and practices between practitioners from different cultural backgrounds and in different geographical places, and the movement of cultural products that arises from these migrating ideas and practices.

The contributors are a broad range of mostly African authors from various parts of the continent who represent important new voices from a region of the world that, in theatre and performance studies, has been under-represented. As such the book offers an insight into new thinking and new approaches from an emerging and important location. Many of the authors are practitioners too, and many of the contributions involve the authors engaging with work they are making or have made. As such they grapple for ways to express or make present the processes they are engaged in and the complexities of occupying a