

*Balkan Dreams/Western Nightmares –
An exploration of the American Dream/Nightmare in Plays by
Romanian Women Playwrights*

DOMNICA RADULESCU¹

Abstract: This article is an exploration of the aesthetics of exile in works by three Romanian women theater artists: Aglaja Veteranyi, Saviana Stanescu and Domnica Radulescu. I focus on the closely-knit relation between the experience of exile and the theatrical aesthetics that emerges in the construction of different versions of the American dream often turned nightmare. The arc of the study stretches over the intersections between gender, ethnicity, nationality as embodied in the practice of theater from the vantage point of displacement and fractured identities.

Key Words: exile, displacement, theater aesthetics, identity, liminality, gender, women, carnival/carnavalesque

“Exile is the unhealable rift between being and a native place, between the self and its true home. Its sadness can never be surmounted. “[E]xile is tremendously secular and unbearably historical; [...] it is produced by human beings for other human beings, and [...] like death, but without death’s ultimate mercy, it has torn millions of people from traditions, family and geography”². I am such an exile myself torn by the unhealable rift of exile yet also enriched by its multiplicity of perspectives and bold explorations of unexplored territories, frontiers, margins. An immigrant/exile from a former

¹ Washington and Lee University in Virginia, US; RadulescuD@wlu.edu

² Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2002), 172.

Communist dictatorship, I am haunted by artistic representations of the uprooting of exile understood in the modern sense of abrupt and irreversible dislocation from one's native geography due to political reasons and profoundly caught in the historical moment.

I am interested in the ways in which the ontological uprooting of exile influences the aesthetic shapes of works that have emerged from this experience and determines not just what we write about but how we write about it. The theater of exile I am interested in is soaked in the sadness of loss that "can never be surmounted" yet it tries to surmount it through carnival, through the alchemic transformations of the tragic into the comic, and through polyphonic voices that speak of different and often conflicting experiences of the world. The "exilic authors" discussed in my study "employ hybrid transnational styles" both from a desire to "make their experiences comprehensible on the new markets"³ and to embody artistically the balancing act of straddling across different cultural, linguistic, geographical and psychological realities. Feminist theater of exile goes a few steps further and encompasses in its startling fragmentations and dislocations, in its reverse chronologies and carnivalized languages the female experience of foreignness and displacement. It unfolds with an array of gender specificities from being exoticized, sexually objectified, threatened or violated, to forms of marginalization from employment possibilities to dating, to economic status and freedom. These East European female playwrights explore even deeper realms of marginalization as they emerge from and attempt to artistically deal with Balkan realities or Balkan identities transplanted into American landscapes in fierce attempts to grasp that ever illusive American Dream only to see it morph into terrifying variants of an American Nightmare. The Balkans is already a place of exile and liminality, a space of strife and indefinite identities in search of a definition. In the Foreword to the Anthology of plays by East European playwrights titled *Balkan Plots*, Cheryl Robson reminds us that "the definition of the word to *balkanize* is: to divide an area into small antagonistic states" and points to "the history of political double-dealing in a troubled region within southern Europe,

³ See the article by Diana Manole mentioned in the Introduction of Jestrovic, Silvia and Yana Meerzon. *Performance, Exile and America*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 66.

surrounded by the Adriatic, Aegean and Black Seas”⁴. It is at the confluence of such Balkan liminality and spatial parceling, of exilic homelessness and postmodernist plurality that I situate myself both as a playwright and a critic of theater from these parts of the world.

The discussion of East European women’s voices in theater as forms of resistance to oppression and violence is more pertinent today than it has ever been. The opening of the Eastern borders after the fall of Communism has not necessarily had all good repercussions for the lives of women. The almost three decades since the fall of what was known as “the iron curtain” has seen, in fact, a rise in mass abuses and violence against women from these parts of the world, either as a result of new ethnic wars, or of the new and rapidly increasing social phenomenon of the trafficking of women and young girls for sex from East European countries to Western countries.⁵ While there have been improvements in the lives of women with the rise of the new democracies in Eastern European countries, of which one of the most significant has been the gaining of reproductive rights, women have also been affected negatively as a result of the ills that are often encountered in Western democracies, such as prostitution, AIDS, drugs, unemployment, and newly unleashed levels of sexism which were kept in some control under Marxist rule.⁶ The women playwrights I discuss in this essay explore such themes in innovative, shape shifting theater aesthetics that defy traditional representations of gender, raise consciousness about social inequities and the traumas of displacement that are often specific to women immigrants and refugees.

⁴ Lindor, Gina & Cheryl Robson, eds. *Balkan Plots. Plays from Central and Eastern Europe*. (London: Aurora Metro Press, 2000), 6. This collection, edited by Gina Lindor also contains the play by Matei Visniec, *The Body of a Woman as a Battlefield in the Bosnian War*.

⁵ See the study by Phil Williams, *Illegal Immigration & Commercial Sex. The New Sex Trade* (London: Frank Cass, 1999).

⁶ In the Introduction to the edited collection titled *Women in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, Tova Yedlin lucidly articulates the tensions and contradictions that existed, in Marxist Eastern European countries, between “the Marxist Model of Sex Equality” and the “failure to promote more than a minimal restructuring of working and living arrangements within the home,” with the well-known result that the majority of women had “to undertake two jobs: one in the family and one outside the home” (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980), 15.

I choose to start this essay with the dramatic or epic poem by the Romanian writer of German expression Aglaja Veteranyi. At the height of her writing career, with several literary prizes among which the 1999 Swiss Prize for Best Book of the year for the work *Warum das Kind in der Polenta kocht* (*Why Is the Child Cooking in the Polenta?*) Aglaja Veteranyi committed suicide in the year 2002 just after submitting her last novel to a German publisher. She was also an actress, a circus performer, the creator of a theater group in Zurich and a successful poet. Like the playwright Sarah Kane before her, like the poet Sylvia Plath before Sarah Kane, she staged and prepared her death with some meticulous care, leaving behind a small but powerful body of work that is edgy as it is startling in the honest and sharply ironic documentation of displacement, abuse and grief. She was a refugee from Romania and for years, she travelled and lived with her family – all circus performers from the Bucharest National Circus – the nomadic life of circus people moving from place to place, from country to country.

I consider Veteranyi the emblematic exile writer to the point of flagrant literality, where she documents in a puzzled and fractured voice a nomadic and terror filled existence, telling, living and recreating a story of displacement and homelessness. The narrator/protagonist of the work is the young girl/Aglaja who tells her story and that of her family in an edgy bold and irreverent voice that indeed crosses borders, countries and cultural landscapes. Embedded in her story of displacement of the young girl is also the tragic story of sexual abuse of her sister by the step father, a fugitive but slightly threatening figure of the book. The story is that of an itinerant circus family crossing European countries in their *vargo* mostly supported by the mother's formidable act of hanging from her hair in the trapeze, an abusive stepfather and two girls, one of whom is the young Aglaja. The startling title *Why Is the Child Cooking in the Polenta?* is also the refrain of the book, a sentence and image that her sister is urging her to conjure up in order to transcend the terror she feels at the thought of her mother falling from the height of the circus cupola. According to the sister, imagining the pains of a child being boiled in the polenta would take her mind away from the mothers' predicament. The fractured and dreamy narrative is held together by the crystal clear and perky voice of the young girl. The discourse is like a

hopelessly foreign language: in the Romanian translation it sounds foreign, in the English translation it sounds like it should have been Romanian. Foreign words and particularly proper names are thrown in once in a while together with a metalinguistic layer of description of the languages spoken in the family of nomad circus performers. Mostly the bulk of the story is narrated in the language of stark, uncompromisingly ironic and honest poetry. “Does God speak other languages?/ Can he understand foreigners too?/ Or are there angels sitting in little glass booths and translating? AND IS THERE REALLY A CIRCUS IN HEAVEN?”⁷. To Veteranyi as for most exile writers, language is a space, a world, an entire universe of living. The dislocation caused by exile is both experienced through the loss of the native language and of the universe enclosed in it and partly recovered through the adoption of a new language. But because new, adopted and recovered, the new language is fractured and points to a fractured existence where the basic existential concepts and experiences – God, mother, life, death – are perceived and felt in the second degree – through translation.

The aesthetic of exile is made palpable through the fracturing of narrative line, syntax, perspective, the technique of “carnivalizing the sentence”⁸, yet always kept hanging by the thread of the fierce narrative voice just like the narrator’s mother hanging from her hair in the trapeze. The circus is her literal home, her education, her entire universe. It is for Aglaja the closest thing to a universal language that crosses cultures and idioms and even gets to heaven. The storytelling itself is a nomadic experience about nomadic lives and mixed ethnicities told in absurd contradictions: OUR STORY SOUNDS DIFFERENT EVERY TIME MY MOTHER TELLS IT. We’re Orthodox, we’re Jewish, we’re international!/ My grandfather owned a circus arena, he was a salesman, a captain, travelled from country to country, never left his own village and was a locomotive engineer. He was a Greek, a Romanian, a farmer, a Turk, an aristocrat, a

⁷ Veteranyi, Aglaja. *Why the Child Is Cooking in the Polenta*. Trans. Vincent Kling. Champaign, IL & London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012), 7.

⁸ Judy Little develops the theory that in many works by women writers, the parody and satire of patriarchy and gender inequity is encapsulated in the technique of embedding sexist statements or stereotypes, in reversed and comedic form within feminist comedic discourse.

Gypsy, an Orthodox believer”⁹. The Balkan fragmentation and exilic disorientation soar to unmatched heights of ironic poetry in Veteranyi’s discourse, mixing categories and superimposing contradicting realities onto one another to a delicious multiplication of identity. She reconstructs the world through playing and through the bitter carnival of her circus homeless existence and the reconstruction takes place with the means of writing. Yet the writing is itself an experience of loss and recovery, of uprooting and failed re-rootings, mostly of an existence in the second degree, as it is an existence in translation or in an adoptive/adopted language. “Before I saw my father for the last time, he made a movie in which God was one of the characters. My mother played God’s grandmother and I played the Guardian angel. [...] GOD IS SAD. HE IS PLAYING A HUNGARIAN SONG ON THE VIOLIN.” The linguistic carnival of Veteranyi’s child-like but not childish voice becomes her one and only home away from home, in a restless search for a home. Ultimately it is in the power of her voice that the young girl finds her home and refuge, a voice that she owns fully and that empowers her throughout her many traumatic journeys.

Saviana Stanescu is another playwright of Romanian origins living and writing in the United States since 2011 and recipient of several playwriting awards. It might be best to start the discussion of Saviana Stanescu’s theater with her own self characterization:

I am a Romanian-born playwright with Balkan roots. Back in Romania I used to write surreal and absurd plays and to create interdisciplinary performances. Here in the USA [...] I became concerned with issues of identity and immigration, content-wise, and with character development and innovative dramatic structure, form-wise. At this point I work on integrating my 12-year American experience and newly developed craft with my (b)old Balkan inventiveness and imagination, while tackling meaningful/global issues.

In the same interview quoted above Saviana Stanescu refers to her work as an immigrant writer in the United States in the following way, mentioning her fascination and interest precisely in hybrid realities and identities:

⁹ Aglaja Veteranyi, *Why the child...*, 53.

In my American plays I explore topics of displacement and reinvention, of cultural clashes and power dynamics between countries, groups and individuals. I am interested in that *in-between* space where migrants dwell, living in the “hyphen” between two cultures or communities. That hyphenated/hybrid identity fascinates me. I’m always ready to analyze and dramatize ways in which the American Dream turns into a nightmare for many people while remaining an idealized Paradise for others.

Diana Manole has aptly noted that “Saviana Stanescu attempts to change the stereotypical view of immigrating to twenty first century United States and, implicitly, of America and the American way of life”¹⁰. Stanescu’s theater offers a superb illustration of the aesthetics of exile and a feminist one at that. The characters, voices, images and dramatic actions of her plays emerge from that liminal zone of the hyphen in between cultures, countries, ethnicities and languages and give voice to empowered female characters and their stories of displacement, loss and at times recovery. The interplay of dream sequences and naturalistic scenes, the mixing of chronologies as they flow out of the characters’ conscience and subconscious realities with no regard for historical time and the juxtaposition of Romanian and American landscapes and actualities create a sense of simultaneity of fractured lives. In her award-winning play *Waxing West*, the experience of immigration of the protagonist, Daniela, a cosmetologist who comes to New York in order to marry an American computer engineer with kinky sexual habits, emerges in truncated clips that move between the before and the after of her American experience and are woven with nightmarish sequences of the former Romanian dictators Elena and Nicolae Ceausescu. They have become vampires “sucking capitalist blood in a socialist, democratic way”.¹¹ They follow Daniela’s progress and actions everywhere and subject her to cruel tests. There is also a constant rotation of images of America as

¹⁰ In Jestrovic & Meerzon, *Performance, Exile and America*, 66-7.

¹¹ All quotes from *Waxing West* are given from the 2007 anthology called *roMANIA after 2000, Five New Romanian Plays* (New York: Martin E Segal, 2007), 180.

*chronotope*¹² – an interplay between exilic imaginaries that collapse time and space in disorderly ways – what it would be like to be there in the American dream with magic plastic cards that can buy everything, and the actual reality of Daniela's American dream in which she steals bottles of chewable Vitamins C and books from Barnes & Noble, pretends to eat her soon to be husband as a Thanksgiving Turkey and reads self-help books with no visible benefit. A similar sliding out of existence, a slipping in the space of the hyphen, the in-between cultures, countries, languages, cuisines that Veteranyi's protagonist goes through is also present in Stanescu's play in the surreal dance between Daniela's American life, her yearning to go back to Romania and the cruel tortures inflicted upon her by the Elena and Nicolae turned vampires.

Uros, a Bosnian homeless man in New York who is Daniela's only American friend is a tragic illustration of what Said has called those "immense aggregates of humanity" who "loiter as refugees and displaced persons," "undocumented people, suddenly lost, without a tellable history"¹³. Uros is obsessed with the story of Enkidu and Gilgamesh, an ancient tale of journeying and exile across the worlds of the living and the dead in search of his beloved friend. We should indeed mind Said's urging that "we must set aside Joyce and Nabokov and think instead of the unaccountable masses for whom UN agencies have been created"¹⁴. Just as for Veteranyi's circus nomad protagonist, her only home was in her words and in her voice, for Daniela, her only home and zone of comfort is in the fragile tie with one who is even more of a homeless person than she is and in the eternal story of search for love and meaning on a long lonely journey across real and imaginary landscapes, among the living and the dead. Daniela's story is her only home. "Here is the story," she claims loud and clear at the beginning of the play: "The whole

¹² The concept of chronotope was developed by Bakhtin in his article "Forms of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes towards a Historical Poetics." He defines the chronotope as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature". In *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure and Frames*, ed. Brian Richardson. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2002), 84.

¹³ Saviana Stanescu, *Waxing West ...*, 201-02.

¹⁴ Saviana Stanescu, *Waxing West ...*, 139.

story. Nothing but the story. My story. Yes. Everything that happened ... [...] Tell the story, the story... My story. My story"¹⁵. In the abyss of that hyphen between worlds, continents, languages, histories, her personal story singles her out of the large "aggregates" "without a tellable history" and gives her a space, precarious as that may be, in the book of immigrant stories, in the journeys of perpetual return. Beneath the dark humor and carnivalesque reversals, underneath the scrambling of dream sequences with reality and the macabre "Balkan" humor, there is a profound, wrenching sadness that oozes throughout Stanescu's play and that dictates the dislocated form to match a dislocated self. The "eternal return" takes places in the nightmares with Elena and Nicolae Ceausescu as cruel vampires who abuse and mock Daniela, in the dream/nightmare "Good-bye, America (Another end)," in the conversations with her dead father and in the actual desire and attempt to go back to Romania.

The refrain of the return which precedes, in the structure of the play, the initial leaving from Romania with "five suitcases" in the scene "Goodbye Romania (An end)," which in turn precedes the scene of the attempted return with only three suitcases in a scene titled "9/11. Flash Back, Flash Forward," gives the latter part of the play a melancholy sentimentality despite itself, the hopeless circularity of nostalgia: "I'm thinking of going back./Back./To Romania. Back home." Or "I should go back Charlie [...] I do horrible things here, Charlie, I'm a thief"¹⁶. And then another departure, another good-bye, a new uprooting is layered on the story of an already uprooted individual: "Bye-bye, New York, that's all (violin music goes louder)"¹⁷. In the scene of the first attempt at return to Romania, Uros the homeless war survivor who wants to go to Iraq to find his soul dies on a bench in the subway after Daniela has used Charlie's credit card to buy plane tickets for herself and him, one to Romania, one to Iraq. Reality is as much a nightmare as are nightmares, and the lines between the two are blurred in the same structural confusion as the reversal of beginning and end. At the conclusion of the play the words "end/beginning" are written on a screen. Nostalgia is a failed

¹⁵ Saviana Stanescu, *Waxing West ...*, 242.

¹⁶ Saviana Stanescu, *Waxing West ...*, 218.

¹⁷ Saviana Stanescu, *Waxing West ...*, 240.

return, the suffering caused by a desire to return. In Daniela's case the return is a failed return, and the settling in the American Dream is a failed settling. If the initial departure was somewhat hopeful, with five suitcases, the attempted return is shameful and pathetic, with only three suitcases and violin music.



Fig. 1: Saviana Stanescu, *Aliens with Extraordinary Skills*: Women's Project Production; October 2008; directed by Tea Alagić. Gian Murray Gianino (INS officer, left), Natalia Payne (center), and Shirine Babb (INS officer, right). "Dreamscape," or nightmarish scene, in which Nadia is being tormented with threats of deportation and cruel questioning by INS officers (photograph: Carol Rosegg).

In *Aliens with Extraordinary Skills* Nadia, a professional clown from Moldova who earns money by twisting rubber balloons into animals follows the American Dream of working as a clown at McDonalds and moves to New

York where she shares an apartment with the Dominican Lupita. In her chase for jobs, money, happiness, love she ends up being gang raped all while being followed and interrogated by INS officers and being threatened with deportation. The circus and clowning elements, much like in Veteranyi's dramatic poem of the circus family crackle with dark humor and are heavy with layers of sadness, desperation, "nostalgia for the future," yet they become, like for Veteranyi's protagonist, a portable home where Nadia can find solace, refuge, and occasionally money (Figs. 1 & 2 *Aliens*).

The aesthetics of carnival combined with the mixing of naturalistic and dream scenes titled "Dreamscapes" in *Aliens with Extraordinary Skills* and dream scenes of Elena and Nicolae Ceausescu as vampires in *Waxing West* reflect both the elusive nature of the American Dream and the disjointed nature of the immigrant existence always caught in a dangerous, sad and sometimes funny acrobatics of survival, mastery of fear, the ghosts of a past they often cannot escape and utopian plunges into an uncertain future. "You gotta talk to yourself," the Dominican Lupita advises the Moldovan Nadia: "Stuff like I'm gonna make it. I will ... such and such, whatever you dream to be"¹⁸. The interactions between the immigrants in this play, balanced between ironic bantering and matter of fact affection or support of one another that alternate with the terrifying interactions with the INS officers who taunt Nadia with the menace of constant deportation in the "Dreamscape" seem to echo the words of the Slovan-American author Louis Adamic, himself an immigrant and passionate advocate of the diversity of America: "The American Dream is a lovely thing but to keep it alive, to keep it from turning into a nightmare, every once in a while we've got to wake up."¹⁹ For the characters in Stanescu's plays the tensions between the nightmare that their own reality is turning into in the chase after the dream and brief moments of waking up create a constant aesthetic vortex of comedy and tragedy, tears and laughter, sadness and hopefulness exacerbated of course in *Aliens with Extraordinary Skills* by the very literality of the circus in Nadia's

¹⁸ In Saviana Stanescu, *The New York Plays* (New York: No Passport Press, 2010), 312.

¹⁹ Quoted by R. Lawrence Samuel, *The American Dream: A Cultural History* (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 2012) 30.

line of work as “professional clown.” Despite the airy happy ending in Stanescu’s *Aliens with Extraordinary Skills*, the last staging direction of the play is that “INS1 and INS2 enter wearing scary-clown masks.” The party is never over in this aesthetic of the open-ended work dealing with themes of exile and rupture just as for the immigrant chasing for the American Dream and torn between “nostalgias for the future” and a constant re-imagining of the past, any beginning is also an end and no end is final, often triggering with it other happy or miserable beginnings/endings.

In my own plays, my heroines move in disjointed leaps through histories, expanses of space and chronologies, and have patchy identities. Generally, the construction of my plays reflects the same disrupted relation between my characters’ selves and the perception of time and space, often with multiple endings or reversals between endings and beginnings not unlike Saviana Stanescu’s plays. For instance, the plot of my play *The Town with Very Nice People*²⁰ is driven by the heroine Roxana, an immigrant from Romania who has settled in a small Southern Town where she has been the subject of various forms of discrimination and marginalization at the hands of the towns’ people. The tableaux move between scenes of the town and the towns’ people talking about the heroine Roxana in the present, scenes of Roxana in the past and scenes in a utopian future in which she reconstructs the bigoted town into a place of vibrant diversity called the Town of Multicolor. The heroine moves between the dystopian world of the small Southern Town and the utopian universes of real or imagined cities and places across the world driven by the hunger for diverse and multicultural worlds and always searching for a home. In the creation of my play the mangled chronologies and fractured narratives imposed themselves with an imperative and urgent force. It seemed to me the only way in which to deal aesthetically, with the heroine’s broken sense of self and belonging, with her experience of straddling across cultures, cities, geographies and languages and trying to develop some sense of unity out of the chaos caused by

²⁰ Chosen as runner up for the Jane Chambers Playwriting Award of the Association of Theater in Higher Education, June 2013, (Manuscript, 2014).

displacement and the alienation of exile. The different endings, some of which consist of the heroine's death after which she comes back to life in the next tableau, illustrate in an almost hyper real manner the idea of starting over as an immigrant again and again and again in search of an ever elusive and never to be grasped American Dream. Breaking the suspension of disbelief by having the characters refer directly to the play and its multiple endings and even begging for an ending arose equally from my own resistance to closure and embracing of multilayered cultural identities which I keep reinventing as I go along the tenuous paths of my own search for a home or rather, for homes.

In my first play *Naturalized Woman*²¹, the protagonist Nina, a Romanian immigrant who is going through a grueling naturalization interview in the immigration offices in Chicago in the eighties, is confronted on stage by her double – an actual character – who embodies her alter-ego. Between the two of them, one carries the memories of home and of the adventure of the escape from Romania while the other is implanted in the unfolding of the naturalizing interview and its urgency. This too is a play which turns the dystopian universes of American immigration offices, practices and policies into an utopian world of equality and openness where refugees are not only welcome but celebrated. Such utopian theatrical worlds demand unconventional non-linear and non-Aristotelian aesthetic. In *Naturalized Woman* I not only proclaim the death of Aristotle in the play's dialogue itself, but my heroines invoke the ghost of Mrs. Aristotle in order to find an ending to the play in a mockery of the classical concepts of *deus-ex-machina*, reversal of fortune, *peripeteia* or even the famous *catharsis*. Seen from the perspective of the female experience, the reality of immigration and naturalization imposes new and irreverent aesthetics which keep unfolding and morphing under our very eyes just as the exile experience imposes a constant recreation of the self, and overlaps genres, chronologies and spaces. This is how the conversation with Mrs. Aristotle about the ending of the play goes:

²¹ Manuscript, 2012. The play *Naturalized Woman* was presented as a staged reading at Nora's Playhouse in New York City in 2010 and as a full production at Thespis Theater off, off Broadway in 2012, directed by Kimberly Jew.

Nina: Is this Mrs. Aristotle? I would like to speak to Mrs. Aristotle please.

Mrs. Aristotle: You want to speak to *me*?

Nina: Yes, I am very sure. Mrs. Aristotle, I am here in the United States of America with a group of friends and we are in this play about a woman who is a refugee from Romania and just got naturalized after all sorts of obstacles and now we want to find a memorable way of ending the play. How should we do it?

Mrs. Aristotle: Well my husband would end it in *catharsis* of course, or with a *deus ex machina* device coming after the *peripeteia*, the reversal of fortune of the noble hero. Who is your noble hero?

Nina: We have no noble heroes here, Mrs. Aristotle. This is a different kind of play, it's a modern women's play.

Mrs. Aristotle: Oh Zeus almighty I've never heard of anything like that. But you know, I've never left my house, ever! Where is this United States? Is it where old Troy was?

Nina: No, it's a whole new continent. Why don't you come down here with us to celebrate and then we can talk more about how to end this play.

After Mrs. Aristotle joins them in the present time in America, the play ends with each of the women giving birth to a new self and to a new world, a utopian world in which under the magic wand of Aretha Franklin, who joins the women at the end of the play, the very concept of refugee is being reinvented: "From now on, Refugee is going to be a good word, a word that makes you think of roaming happily across a poppy field in the summer. Refugee will mean free and gutsy, brave enough to start all over. It will be the sequel to the Natural Woman song, and it will go like this: You Make Me Feel like a Refugee Woman."

In *The Town with Very Nice People*, the heroine and her story make constant leaps through space and time, as the play starts in the future, moves back to the past, then to the present and ends in an utopian future. There is not only no unity of time, space and action but these unities are deliberately broken and even mocked as the play has four different endings, each in a different space that range from the French Riviera, where the heroine invents a modern paradise of glamor and joyousness, to an American city where the heroine has fled leaving her small Southern Town and reunites with her woman lover, to the heroine's funeral in the small Southern Town at the end

of which she jumps up and resurrects from her coffin and finally to the utopian recreation of the small Southern Town into the Town of Multicolor where each corner becomes a riveting space of diversity and imagination at work. The play ends not with an ending but with a beginning in which the Tourist Guide who for years had given the historic tour of the town speaking only of its confederate history, now has changed his tune to the description of a postmodern futuristic town to which everyone with a creative mind and open heart can immigrate: “Yes, sure you can immigrate, find asylum, and settle in our town, the immigration process is really easy. All you have to do is choose a corner or make a corner of your own and that gives you a share of the town, a portion of ownership. It’s Marxist capitalism softened with performance art.” Both *Naturalized Woman* and *The Town with Very Nice People* use dark humor and an actual festival atmosphere in which the margins are brought to the center, refugees save the day, immigration is the new cool, quilted identities and life stories are at the forefront and are also literal storefronts in the town’s new urban configuration.

The heroines of my latest play *Exile Is My Home*, Lina and Mina, are intergalactic nomads in search of a place to belong, carrying a portable home on their backs, being their own and each other’s homes and exploring different planets to compare with their native planet Earth. They explode and mock all notion of belonging yet are torn with yearning to be able to do just that. The plot unfolds in a perpetual present and moves across unrecognizable spaces while memories of countries, songs, a particular house, a pond, a tree, haunt and devour them with longing. On one planet they literally devour and eat the landscapes in an attempt to quench their yearning for a home and in a desperate hope that their nomadic existence and the imaginary spaces they create will suffice. Famished for a home and a place to settle one of the heroines in the play cries out: “I’m hungry. I’m hungry for home, I’m hungry for dirt, for earth dirt, birth dirt, native dirt. All this exile stuff is crap. I’m going to eat everything. I’ll eat everybody. I’ll eat you all until I have a home. I’ll be everything then, like a big fat pregnant Goddess of the universe.” My heroines take me to the darkest places of history and illustrate extraordinary capacities of survival and resistance in a violent world too often hostile to women and their power. The play traces the eerie journey of Lina and Mina, two female lovers who cross the galaxies and travel from planet to planet in

search of home, peace, memory, a place to belong, after having survived wars and unimaginable acts of violence. Mina and Lina visit planets devastated by wars that had started from inane reasons, terrifying snow covered lands where bodies and souls are brutally separated and hearts frozen in the moment of yearning for lost homes and families, they recover a lost son, land on a planet where the inhabitants soothe their yearnings for home through role playing and gorging on edible landscapes and finally return to planet America, a dystopian landscape haunted by fascist immigration officers and cannibalistic haters. The heroines, tied to each other for life by a fierce bond of love and friendship, save the day and recover their lost memory as they save the life of their lost son, and rid planet America of its grotesque haters. My heroines are survivors who find meaning after trauma and reinvent a comforting version of home while reinventing themselves on the move. They are travelers whose journeys are heroic as they are obstacle ridden and they initiate new trajectories for the creation of a world based on love, imagination, collaboration and humor.

Inspired by modern wars, the realities of immigration, displacements and traumatic experiences *Exile Is My Home*²² focuses on the female experience of these political realities, most often initiated and carried out by compulsively patriarchal societies. It dramatizes the passage from modern patriarchal dystopias to imagined female and feminist utopias. The eerie and fantastical style of the play is an attempt at evoking the inconsolable sadness of exile and homelessness all while confirming its enormous potential for adventure, cultural and geographic richness and ultimate freedom:

MINA: I was born in exile. Where were you born?

LINA: I was born on the way to the market.

MINA: Oh, that makes sense then, that's why we get along. Why we sort of get along. In any case, it's better than with the others who were born somewhere precise. Good for us that we were born in the air.

²² *Exile Is My Home* and *The Virgins of Seville*, in *Dos Obras Dramaticas de Domnica Radulescu*. Bilingual edition with Spanish Translation by Catalina Iliescu Gheorghiu. (Valencia, Spain: University of Castellon Press, 2017) 201-202). *Exile Is My Home* received Honorable Mention at the Jane Chambers Playwriting Competition in 2014 and was produced for a full run at The Theater for the New City off, off Broadway, in 2016.

LINA: Nowhere.

MINA: Out there.

LINA: In the air.

MINA: If it wasn't so damn inconvenient to spend one's life on the road I would say living in constant exile is the best home there is.

[...]

LINA: I remember a pond. A blue pond with a red flower in the middle. I was very little and I had a mother and a father. They were not house carrying people like we are and they had a regular house with a foundation in the ground and all. And a small potato garden in the front. My mother had always said I was born by the side of the road. After she gave birth to me she put me in her bag and carried me around for a while until she met my father and he built her a house with a foundation and a potato garden and a blue pond with a red flower in the middle.

MINA: That's a nice story LINA, I never knew that about you and your family. My mother dropped me on the way to the market in another country, as she was going to buy fruit. She crawled in the desert with me in her fruit bag right after she had given birth. She wanted to say I was born in the country of Lugubria, so when she came into the town and went to the authorities to say she was asking for asylum from bad people in her country and produced me out of her bag of fruit from the market together with guava and oranges, and said "I just gave birth to this," everybody was stunned and said I was a country citizen right away. My mother was so happy that she died on the spot²³.

[...]

MINA: Now I know everything. There was a war.

LINA: There was a war and we barely escaped.

MINA: Like a miracle.

LINA: I wish I had never remembered.

MINA: I wish we were still in the garden.

LINA: It was a happy time. What came after ...

MINA: Don't talk about it, now we need to forget again.

LINA: Start over as they say ...

MINA: Yes, start over ... Who says that?

MINA: Are we already dead LINA?

LINA: I don't know, maybe not. We'll just have to wait and see.²⁴

²³ Domnica Radulescu, *Exile Is My Home*, 32, 34.

²⁴ Domnica Radulescu, *Dos Obras...*, 86.

My play *The Virgins of Seville* treats the immigrant experience of Romanians and other east Europeans to Western Europe, in particular Spain. It also uses the dramatic style of the tragicomic, leaps into the carnivalesque and the use of theater within theater as a game of mirrors and reflections of reflections, a *mise en abîme* which parallels the concentric identities, cultural reverberations and hyphenated existences of migrants and displaced people. Unapologetically here too I primarily take the point of view of female refugees and immigrants, desperate mothers looking for lost sons, migrant workers and sex workers in the margins of society, women of all walks of life searching for a home, questioning and reinventing the notion of home as in the following scene:

VIRGIN OF THE CAVES: Where is home?

VIRGIN OF AFRICA: Good question, where is home? My home is in a willow tree by the Danube River. I'm not from Africa, I just say so because it sounds cool and people turn their heads. I'm just a Polish Gypsy Romanian homeless prostitute.

VIRGIN OF THE CAVES: I bring men to my caves and tell them it's their home. They believe me and they want to stay because it's dark and warm and colorful inside. Now I live in a cave in the barrio of Santa Cruz. I send jeans and leather jackets to my people at home. Home is where the caves are.

VIRGIN OF ANTIGUA: I miss my mother, I miss my daughter, I miss my dog, I miss my apple tree, I miss my stove in Romania. I became the Virgin of Antigua because it sounded cool and exotic. Everybody wants exotic here, exotic sells. If you're not exotic enough, you die.

MARCOS: I am Marcos the American. Everybody wants to go to America, and here I am leaving America to look for roots, sheep, gold, silk, poppy fields, breaking my mother's heart, sleeping with the Virgins, doing bad things and being a good thief.

SUZON: I am truly exotic. I don't mind it when people call me exotic. I am the Jewish sister of Punka, the Romanian Bulgarian Gypsy mafia man that everybody is so scared of. He's not so bad. He's a good brother. Mafia is not so bad after all, once you get to know them.

RAMONA: Home is in a little log cabin in the Appalachian Mountains. Home is in a cave at the bottom of the ocean. Home is in a stone house at the foot of the Carpathians. I go back and forth, back and forth, I'm always on the run, always crossing the Atlantic one way or another.²⁵

²⁵ Domnica Radulescu, *Dos Obras...*, 162.

BALKAN DREAMS/WESTERN NIGHTMARES – AN EXPLORATION OF THE AMERICAN
DREAM/NIGHTMARE IN PLAYS BY ROMANIAN WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS

I was inspired to write this play on a visit to Sevilla, Spain where I was stunned by the multitude of the kinds of holy Virgins that populated the history of the city and gave it so many of its street names. It seemed I was moving on a stage or a movie set with mothers of the world searching for their children. The district of Triana is until today home to many Roma people, some middle class, others still wearing the traditional dress and living at the margins of poverty. Stanzas from Gypsy flamenco songs are to be found on tiles and mosaics in the Triana neighborhood, black letters on glossy deep yellow and red ceramic tiles, verses of irrepressible desire, of wrenching desperation and reckless abandon. In Sevilla, I found myself at the intersections between the authentic flamenco art and its desired preservation as a multilayered performative art and its many sanitized or utterly exoticized forms for tourists who want a taste of that Spanish soul, an exotic experience without any real desire of understanding the full and meandering history of the genre which is organically connected to the history of the Roma people in Spain and elsewhere in the world, and is equally a history of surviving poverty, oppression, violence.



Fig. 3: *Exile Is My Home. A Sci-fi Immigrant Fairy-Tale*, April28--May 22, 20016,
Theater for the New City, New York City. Directed by Andreas Robertz.
With: Nikury Rodriguez, Naomi de la Puente, Mario Golden, Vivienne Jurado,
A. B. Lugo, Mirandy Rodriguez, David van Leesten.
Music by: Alexander Tanson

The Flamenco songs written on colorful mosaics in the street spoke of passionate and tragic loves, of living in the margins of society, of deep yearnings and of the travails of life in exile, of crossroads and water crossings: “ventanas de la muralla/ventanas que dan al mar/por donde yo veo venir/los barcos de la caballa.” Very much like the thousands of today’s refugees washed ashore, crossing perilous seas, reaching the shores of Greece, Italy, Spain, Turkey, pushed from country to country, from refugee camp to refugee camp, from one hellish state of homelessness to another, to put it in Edward Said’s words “immense aggregates of humanity who loiter as refugees and displaced persons without a tellable story”.

What I understood about the complicated and often jumbled puzzles of the theater works I am fascinated with or that I create myself has largely been through the processing of my own journey across margins and chasms across geographies and cultures and through creating art from these existential acrobatics. Feminist theater and performance by immigrant playwrights have the great potential of traveling across such chasms and transforming dystopian worlds where discrimination, injustice, indifference and bad immigration laws are the norm into multicolored utopian universes of diversity and inclusion. Maybe in the absence of stable homes, in the exhausting searches for home, the *story* itself is the only reliable home and form of belonging fluid as it may be. The flamenco poets and artists knew it that wherever they may land or arrive, one thing nobody could take from them is the story, the song that sings and dances the story. Home is in the story. Survival is in the story, as Shaherezade proves it night after sweltering night with her one thousand and one stories unraveled to postpone and, in the end, reverse her own death. Home is in the well-crafted story, survival is in the spinning of the golden thread of the story

References

- BAKHTIN, Mikhail. “Forms of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes towards a Historical Poetics.” In *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure and Frames*, ed. Brian Richardson. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2002.

BALKAN DREAMS/WESTERN NIGHTMARES – AN EXPLORATION OF THE AMERICAN
DREAM/NIGHTMARE IN PLAYS BY ROMANIAN WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS

- JESTROVIC, Silvia and Yana MEERZON. *Performance, Exile and America*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009.
- LINDOR, Gina & Cheryl ROBSON, eds. *Balkan Plots. Plays from Central and Eastern Europe*. London: Aurora Metro Press, 2000.
- LITTLE, Judy. *Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark, and Feminism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983.
- “Humoring the Sentence: Women’s Dialogic Comedy.” In *American Women Humorists: critical essays*. Linda Morris, ed. New York: Garland Pub., 1994.
- RADULESCU, Domnica. *Exile Is My Home and The Virgins of Seville*, in *Dos Obras Dramaticas de Domnica Radulescu*. Bilingual edition with Spanish Translation by Catalina Iliescu Gheorghiu. Valencia, Spain: University of Castellon Press, 2017.
- Naturalized Woman*, a play. Manuscript, 2012.
- The Town with Very Nice People*, a play. Manuscript, 2014.
- SAID, Edward. *Reflections on Exile*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- SAMUEL, R. Lawrence. *The American Dream: A Cultural History*. Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 2012.
- STANESCU, Saviana. *The New York Plays*. New York: No Passport Press, 2010.
- STANESCU, Saviana & and Daniel GEROULD, eds. *ROMANIA after 2000. Five New Romanian Plays*. New York: Martin E Segal, 2007.
- VETERANYI, Aglaja. *Why the Child Is Cooking in the Polenta*. Trans. Vincent Kling. Champaign, IL & London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012.
- WILLIAMS, Phil. *Illegal Immigration & Commercial Sex. The New Sex Trade*. London: Frank Cass, 1999.
- YEDLIN, Tova, ed. *Women in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980.

DOMNICA RADULESCU is Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature at Washington and Lee University in Virginia, US. She is the author of twelve books, edited and co-edited scholarly collections on topics ranging from the tragic heroine in western literature to feminist comedy, to studies of theater of war and exile. Radulescu is the author of three critically acclaimed and internationally appreciated novels: *Country of Red Azaleas* (Twelve, Hachette 2016), *Black Sea Twilight* (Doubleday 2010 & 2011) and *Train to Trieste* (Knopf 2008 & 2009) and of several plays. *Train to Trieste* has been published in thirteen languages and is the winner of the 2009 Library of Virginia Fiction Award. Two of her plays, *The Town with Very Nice*

DOMNICA RADULESCU

People (2013) and Exile Is My Home. A Sci-fi Immigrant Fairy Tale (2014) were finalists in the Jane Chambers Playwriting competition. The latter was produced at the Theater for the New City in New York in 2016, to excellent review.