Exodus, a Museum of Between: Directing an Original Staging of Object Journalism, Oral Testimony and Early Italian Opera

Gabriel Harrell

University of Massachusetts Amherst

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EXODUS, A MUSEUM OF BETWEEN:

DIRECTING AN ORIGINAL STAGING OF OBJECT JOURNALISM,

ORAL TESTIMONY AND EARLY ITALIAN OPERA

A Thesis Presented

by

Gabriel Rochelle Harrell
Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

September 2020

Department of Theater
EXODUS, A MUSEUM OF BETWEEN:

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GABRIEL ROCHELLE HARRELL

Approved as to style and content by:

Harley Erdman, Chair
Gilbert McCauley, Member

Megan Lewis, Member

Jake Meginsky, Member

Harley Erdman, Department Head
Department of Theater

DEDICATION

TO VISHNU AND TATI AND WILDER
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a huge debt to my colleagues Vishnupad Barve, Tatiana Godfrey and Chenda Cope who shepherded me through the turbulent times surrounding the birth of this piece. I’d like to thank my partner, Sophie Wood, for her patience and insight throughout this often frustrating and rewarding undertaking. Sincere thanks to Harley Erdman, for steering me through the writing process and to Gilbert McCauley, Megan Lewis, Jake Meginsky and Shona Macdonald for their guidance. I am deeply grateful for the inspiring team of collaborators who had agreed to work on the project, with very little, or no hope of compensation, chiefly the efforts of Emma Brierley, Callum LaFrance, Danny MacNamera, Clarissa Soma Cordeiro, and Shea Witzberger. I would also like to acknowledge the seven years of support that Russel Braen and Alane Hartley of Park Hill Orchards, Easthampton have shown towards my work. The misfortune that the current pandemic terminated this project before it could be performed in their new barn, as the capstone to my MFA career, is certainly mild in comparison to the immense amount of suffering being experienced at present in the world. This artistic miscarriage saddens me profoundly though, and I hope that Exodus might one day find its way to an audience. I am deeply thankful to my parents, Ross and Rochelle and to my brother Noah, though not nearly to the extent that I should be. I’d also like to express my gratitude to all of the people who loaned this project an artifact from their lives or who agreed to be interviewed, especially to Peter Schumann for the use of his interview and encouragement.
ABSTRACT

EXODUS, A MUSEUM OF BETWEEN:

DIRECTING AN ORIGINAL STAGING OF OBJECT JOURNALISM,

ORAL TESTIMONY AND EARLY ITALIAN OPERA

SEPTEMBER 2020

GABRIEL ROCHELLE HARRELL, B.A., BARD COLLEGE

M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Harley Erdman

This written thesis documents how I, accompanied by a team of talented colleagues, conceived of, planned, and began the process of staging Exodus, a museum of between. I begin with an introduction to the theory and influences that shaped the work in its earliest stages. I go on to discuss the major themes of the work, chiefly an excavation of the idea of belonging, and posit a model of theater making modeled on a kaleidoscope, a model that aims to serve as a device through which to see one of our oldest stories with new eyes. I discuss the three lenses through which Exodus will examine the topic of belonging: a museum exhibition comprised of artifacts of mass migration, the first-hand oral testimony of those whose lives have been immediately effected by events of mass migration and a
staging of Monteverdi’s opera *L’Orfeo* I also discuss the role that chance procedure would have played in establishing the tempo and narrative. I then reflect on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic that derailed the production of *Exodus* and suggest alterations to the project that I would make in the event that production should be recommenced in a post-pandemic future. While it is difficult to include much assessment of a project that was still in its early stages when aborted, I finish with a critique of the work that had been accomplished and offer a few thoughts on how I view the work now, in light of the work done and global developments.
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CHAPTER 1

A COLLAPSING BRIDGE

Ran Ortner, the Brooklyn-based painter acclaimed for his use of leaded paint to better capture the luminous, disorienting immensity of his seascapes, likens the act of painting to that of a fisherman navigating their craft to watery realms far from the sight of those of us bound to shore. In this distant, uncharted place the fisherman casts their net and, if they are lucky, pulls something (something perhaps beautiful, perhaps monstrous, perhaps beautifully monstrous) from fathoms unknowable into the sharp focus of the human retina. The fisherman then returns to port with their catch for those of us unable or unwilling to risk the journey or suffer the unpredictable, often punishing work ourselves (Conrad 7).

The Brazilian poet and novelist Paulo Coelho understands writing as a bridge: a bridge from the understood to the unknown, from the visible to the invisible. (Tippett 2016). The poet writes the bridge into existence, a bridge that once built, remains forever, inviting us to what lies beyond.

I take it as a given that context is a reality within which both of the previous metaphors for art making operate. That a deep-sea treasure once exotic or terrifying becomes the Wednesday special in the seafood department accounts for some of our shifting attitudes toward the art of yesterday. One could therefore argue that, even when speaking about the plastic arts, whose forms are fixed, that shifting context effectively alters the art object itself. The literary bridge Coelho speaks of may no longer transport us to realms unknown, but the bridge remains. The once exotic fish looks into eternity from its mount on the wall of the seafood franchise.
We are devotees, as patrons of a particular bridge, are a part of this shifting context. The poem or film that transported us to realms unimaginable in our twenties doesn’t hold our midlife heft. Likewise the work that proved inaccessible to our past self yields entry to our present self.

Let us borrow Coelho’s metaphor about the nature of writing, and apply it to the field of performance: theater, or performance of any sort, would seem to build a bridge that, however sturdy or impressive in its span, collapses with the performance’s end. That this ephemerality is the unique feature of the performed arts, that it is this quality that separates performance from the plastic arts or literature, has been much debated. Performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan appears to concur with the collapsing bridge argument when she posits in *Unmarked, The Politics of Performance*, that performance “becomes itself through disappearance” (Phelan 146). Others take issue with her claim: Philip Auslander argues in his *Performativity of Performance Documentation* that the performance extends into its documentation (Auslander 10), while Rebecca Schneider claims in *Performing Remains, Art And War In Times Of Theatrical Reenactment* that performance is always a “maniacally charged present...punctuated by, syncopated with, indeed charged by other moments, other times...[and questions whether] the present [is] really so temporally straightforward or pure” (Schneider 92). Christopher Bedford would seem to agree with Schneider, positing that performance creates new mythologies “and therefore is essentially viral in nature” (Bedford in Jones, and Heathfield 86), living on through the work of other artists as well as in our speech, our thoughts and our bodies. While an entire branch of theater studies seems to have been developed to argue over whether or not a performance has an end, my claim is that whether or not one believes that criticism is a part of performance, or that a performance lives on in our bodies and speech or through our memory and its influence on future work, that Phelan, Schneider and Bedford all are in
agreement about essentially one aspect of performance: that a performed experience is unique and cannot be returned to. On the surface this would appear to be their argument with each other. However, Phelan holds that the performance is gone when the curtain drops. Schneider and Bedford argue that it continues on into infinity, but both Schneider and Bedford seem to say that when one returns to the memory of a performance, that the performance would be altered by all the new experiences and performances that the individual has experienced since the last time they re-lived the original performance (which would essentially make it a different performance). In essence, by arguing that a performance extends forever and that it is constantly altered by context, their argument seems to imply that when one returns to the memory of a performance (embodied or oral), that they would be returning to a different performance than that which they had left.

Regardless of where one stands on the issue, my claim is that if the same action or performance cannot be recreated, then it doesn’t matter if the performance goes on forever or has a definite end point, the journey cannot be repeated. If one were to attempt to return to where one started, one would be embarking on a different bridge.

In trying to imagine a future in which theater is still thought to be a relevant art form, offering us something that film, virtual, or recorded performance never can, it becomes important to better understand what that something is and how it can be nurtured.

In short, if performance, usually beholden to the advancements in its constituent art forms, has anything to boast of, it is that it can’t be recreated or experienced twice. If the collapsing bridge is what sets performance apart from other art forms, it is also the very quality that we as performance-makers should be studying, cultivating and harnessing.

Why then do we, as makers of theater, routinely put such considerable resources (in a field significantly lacking in resources) into the fool’s errand of building the same bridge
night after night? One of the principal aims of the traditional western, commercial rehearsal process seems to be sculpting a performance that can be repeated as perfectly as possible from opening night to closing night. In doing so are we setting ourselves at odds with the fundamentally ephemeral nature of performance and undermining our greatest asset?

Acclaimed and polarizing theater director JoAnne Akalaitis is notorious among her directing students for insisting that they only tackle work that they don’t understand. She asserts that “the director is not a kind of god who looks [on] with a total concept in mind” (Saivetz 29), but should instead be an explorer, always in doubt. Her theater making process would necessarily become a process of discovery, dealing with a subject, which is in some way baffling or unknown to her.

Peter Schumann of The Bread and Puppet Theater shared in an interview with theater historian John Bell that he “create[s] theater in order to extract the poison [he] received as a child [a Nazi education]” (Schumann, Interview). His theater making practice aims to locate this internalized pedagogy, haul it to the surface, examine it and exorcise it from himself. In Schumann’s explanation, the unknown subject is himself; his task, excavation.

If we’re interested in using theater to excavate a topic that we don’t understand, then shouldn’t we look for a format that while allowing us the focus and detailed precision of scripted and highly rehearsed work, simultaneously offers both performer and audience as much of a fresh perspective on the subject matter as possible at each encounter? Many theater makers would counter that any theater process worth its salt is a process of discovery, that for the attentive performer, director and dramaturg, revelations on character and subject matter continue throughout the rehearsal process and into each performance. I in no way claim otherwise. My point here is that in the theater traditions
commonly taught and practiced in the U.S. and increasingly across the globe, the process of
discovery, while encouraged in the early rehearsal process, typically slows down and all but
halts as a performance becomes stage ready and technical demands ossify a production. A
stage manager, once the director has left a production, steadfastly steers errant actors back
to the agreed upon blocking and delivery, lest new choices create new meaning. Yet, if each
bridge is indeed freshly built and we are going through the trouble of building it anew each
night in hopes of making further discoveries, then why do we insist on it taking us, as nearly
as possible, to a place we have already been?

In this thesis I ask: How can a performance be structured to give both audience and
performer not only the best chance, but also the most opportunities possible to understand
the subject matter at hand? How can a performance offer vastly divergent narratives to
different audience members at the same viewing, or to the same audience member at
different viewings (allowing for richer conversation afterward as multiple perspectives are
discussed)? Further: How does a theater maker create work about that which they don’t
understand, work that would result in experiences and understandings that are larger and
more diverse than those they had imagined or are even capable of imagining? I therefore
hazard a treatment of Exodus: a museum of between. Exodus was meant to serve as my thesis
performance, the capstone of the MFA in directing program at UMass Amherst. This written
thesis will attempt to address the aforementioned questions by describing the physical
performance and considering the theory on which the performance is based and the work
with which it is in conversation. In so doing, I offer Exodus as an experimental model of
composition, a viewing device through which to consider our collective condition.
CHAPTER 2
EXODUS: A MUSEUM OF BETWEEN

Exodus: a museum of between, a performance that I was scheduled to direct in the spring of 2020, is at its most basic level, an excavation of the idea of belonging. In reckoning with our current global refugee crisis (a crisis that the U.N. anticipates being one of the defining shapers of the 21st century), I began with a series of questions: *What does belonging mean? What is the lineage of my currently held understanding of the concept? Who wields the term? Over whom is it wielded? Why do people leave a place that they know for a place that they don't? Why do people react in the ways they do when people from elsewhere arrive?* Perhaps most importantly: *Who belongs? And who answers that question?* These are not questions that I hoped to lead an audience to, but rather questions that I began with, supposing that an ever-growing portion of my audience, and the world, would be reckoning with them as well.

---

1 The COVID-19 epidemic that swept the globe in the spring of 2020 derailed the project roughly a month before opening night. When the performance was canceled much of the planning work was done. The sets and puppets necessary to the piece were in various stages of design and development. While some of these were beginning to take shape, few physical components were finished. Rehearsals were just beginning. It is therefore difficult to decide upon a fitting tense to use when writing about this piece. The future tense can't be used, because the show is cancelled. The present tense doesn't suit our needs, even when talking about work that the artistic team was literally in the middle of when the first chapters of this thesis were written. A simple past tense would mislead, as one would infer the performance had happened. I will therefore use the past modal tense of “would have” even though it is cumbersome. In some cases the past tense will be used to connote work that had been completed or conversations or thoughts that I had already had at the time of cancelation. In later chapters, when describing stage actions, I will slip into the present tense (as stage directions would).
These questions would form the foundation of the performance, allowing each performer and audience member to not only find their own answers, but to also be pushed towards new questions. I elected to look at these questions through narratives of mass migration.

In tackling a performance that deals in themes as large as those addressed in *Exodus: a museum of between* (belonging, hope, xenophobia, power, etc.), I needed to find a performance form that allowed me to look at the subject matter from angles that I would not have been able to find myself through linear, sequential, or rational processes. I decided to model the form of *Exodus* on a kaleidoscope, a kaleidoscope through which to peer at themes too large, too politically volatile, too historically and culturally charged, in short too loaded with rigid layers of meaning to objectively see or creatively approach.

A kaleidoscope operates by viewing objects via two or more reflecting surfaces tilted at angles toward each other. It is true that the objects viewed through such a device are distorted through the process of repeated reflection. The same process, though, creates infinitely new juxtapositions and patterns which, while distortions, are also true mirror reflections of the subject, always distortions and yet always true.

To continue with the kaleidoscope metaphor, each medium employed in *Exodus: a museum of between*, would reflect both the primary subject matter and the reflection of the subject matter as cast by the medium contiguous to it. I will describe the various media employed in *Exodus* in detail in the following chapters. The kaleidoscope effect would allow us to see that which we already see in new ways, a horizontal shift of perspective. If the kaleidoscope turns this way or that, the subject matter shifts, new patterns are created, accentuating fresh detail and juxtaposing elements which our conventional gaze, influenced as it is by our dearly held biases, fads, folklore and not least of all rational common sense,
bars us from seeing. The effect would be similar to that of collage, where mundane images seen out of context and in juxtaposition with other mundane images in novel configurations create exceptional meaning, allowing us to find new insights in familiar images. In Exodus however, I sought a collage in constant flux, one never aligning the same way twice.

By grounding Exodus in the aforementioned questions, I knew I was taking on themes immense in their historical scope, whose meanings seemed to shift by the day. At times I felt culturally positioned too close to the subject matter to focus on the issues, while at other times I felt too distant and insulated from these concerns to see them clearly. I expected the audience to face similar challenges.

During the summer of 2019, prior to beginning this academic year, I took part in a tour of Poland with Peter Schumann's By The Light of Man, a cantastoria performance that takes an unflinching look at our current refugee crisis. While performing in Łomża, the conservative Polish federal government closed its borders entirely to Syrian refugees seeking escape from the horrors inflicted on their homeland. Within days of returning to the states, I.C.E. agents staged large raids on several farms in the direct vicinity of my home in North Carolina. The effect on the community was palpable. Members of local immigrant communities were scared to go to work, or to go home, to drive or to send their kids to school. For six years before enrolling in graduate school I had collaborated with Teatro Indigena de La Sierra Tarahumara, an indigenous farmer's theater operating just south of the Texas/Mexican border. My final season with them had been cut short as racist Obama-era immigration policies were replaced by the more overt bigotry of Trumpian border politics and made living and theater-making in the region a dangerous pursuit. Inversely, I feel incredibly removed from the large immigrant communities living in the Pioneer Valley. With few personal ties to these communities, my brief academic sojourn to the area has left
me feeling insulated from their concerns, as if they were far away and more political than personal. My own background simultaneously connects me to and insulates me from the concerns of mass migration. When considering the various historical trajectories of my family, who immigrated to the states from pre-Israel Palestine via France, from Spain via the Canary Islands and Cuba, from Ireland and most recently from Poland, I cannot help but feel a connection to those currently navigating the immigrant’s precarious path. At the same time, my privilege as a white, male-identifying U.S. citizen allows me to exist in relative comfort and offers me the tempting delusion that the concerns of immigrants are the concerns of others that are only taken up by those with a surfeit of time or money.

Accordingly, the piece would be created for both theater makers and audiences alike to examine themes too large to ever fully understand and yet are themes that we must all try to better understand, our future likely depending upon it.

If our perception of Exodus is essentially that of a kaleidoscope, where each component is fashioned and polished independently and allowed to exist in particular concert with another component only once, it is essential to consider the team I assembled to bring it all about, to develop the individual components that would make the whole. In the following chapters I will examine the individual constituent elements of the piece.

Collaborators

- MFA Directing candidate Vishnupad Barve would serve as assistant director and dancer. Barve comes from a farming family in the Indian state of Goa. His family, like millions of others across India, found it increasingly difficult to earn a living from agriculture and migrated to the city where jobs were more plentiful. I also knew that Vishnu was interested in creating theater that kept the various narrative and technical components as separate as possible (where text and visuals were not in
alignment or supporting each other but were instead liberated to follow their own path), ideas that excited me as well.

- MFA dramaturgy candidate Tatiana Godfrey would serve both as dramaturg and one of the principal singers in the cast. She would sing the songs of Orpheus, as they are written for a high tenor. Godfrey’s father’s family left the Jim Crow South as part of the Great Migration of African Americans in the first quarter of the twentieth century and settled in Ohio. Her mother left Puerto Rico as part of the huge Puerto Rican diaspora of the last quarter of the twentieth century seeking opportunities in the continental U.S.

- MFA studio art candidate Chenda Cope would design the exhibit and co-design the opera portion of the project (more on the exhibit and opera to follow). Cope’s background designing sets for Missoula Oblongata, an avant-garde theater troupe from Montana, coupled with her fine arts practice, made her perfectly suited to understand the delicate balance of this particular piece, existing at the nexus of fine art installation and performance.

- Theater and puppet designer Emma Brierley of Edinburgh would design the puppets used in the opera. Brierley has been working with immigrant communities in and around Edinburgh to create theater based on their experiences settling in Scotland during a resurgence of the particular brand of right wing xenophobia springing up across the U.K. We had previously worked together both at Bread and Puppet Theater and with my company, The Rural Academy Theater. I thought that her thoughtful, researched approach to design, coupled with her fast-paced, intuitive style of puppet construction made her a perfect collaborator. Brierley’s design partner Rory Mills, while not coming over for the project, would consult and advise from abroad (more on Mills’ contribution to the project later).
• Composer and multi-instrumentalist Danny MacNamera would not only serve as musical director, but would also edit and rearrange the piano reduction of the opera to suit our needs, while accompanying the singers on piano, clarinet, piano accordion and mandolin. I knew MacNamera through Bread and Puppet, though he had been living in Cleveland for some years where he directed his own theater company, The Possibilitarian Theater. Aside from being a versatile musician, his familiarity with puppet and object theater and ability to adjust his work on the fly made him a perfect fit.

• Shea Witzberger of Brattleboro, Vermont would serve as puppet builder and puppeteer. Early in her childhood, Witzberger’s family fled an impoverished, lethally polluted Appalachia for the promise of jobs and a higher standard of living in the Midwest. She went on to study opera before immersing herself in less conventional theatrical forms. She would therefore sing the part of Musica in the prologue. She has been working with The Royal Frog Ballet, a New England-based experimental theater troupe directed by my partner Sophie Wood. She possesses one of the most striking stage presences of any performer I have seen.

• Dancer, vocalist and choreographer Clarissa Soma Goncalves Cordeiro would sing the part of Eurydice in the opera and serve as choreographer and movement instructor for the piece in its entirety. Soma Cordeiro’s mother emigrated from Japan to Brazil, taking her place in the largest Japanese community outside Japan, (roughly 1.5 million people). Soma Cordeiro then come to the states to study and hoped to remain if she could find work in dance or theater that satisfied her visa requirements. We worked together previously on a piece that I had directed written by choreographer and omni-artist Wendy Woodson. Soma Cordeiro’s exacting attention to detail and interest in object performance made her a natural fit for the
piece. Furthermore, she would assemble an eight-person dance chorus of her classmates at Mount Holyoke College to perform larger dance sequences. This would allow her to rehearse them separately without traveling all the way to Easthampton.

- Bass vocalist Udo Lewandowski of New York would sing the part of Charon, the boatman who transports souls over the river Styx.
- Soprano vocalist Merced Caro would sing the part of Eurydice.
- UMass Theater alum Callum LaFrance would double as sound editor for our recorded audio needs and puppeteer. I had directed Callum in a toy theater performance for a production of *The Lily's Revenge* where I was impressed with his understanding of the nuance of puppet manipulation.
- A small brass band would be led by composer and bandleader Alejo Majcherski of New Orleans, LA. Majcherski would also be available to accompany MacNamera during the opera on trombone and tuba.
- Krystian Majcherski, Alejo's father, would perform the role of the Caretaker.²

² The space would be presided over by the ever-present roll of the *Caretaker*, played by the venerable and charming 78-year-old Krystian Majchersky. The Caretaker would function as an audience guide, ushering them this way and that as needed. He would also serve as a chance operations machine technician, resetting them or unjamming them as needed (these machines will be discussed in the next chapter titled: *Chance Procedure*). He would also title the scenes and offer some haphazard English translation of the Italian text. He would furthermore serve as museum guard and guide, insuring that the audience maintains a respectful appreciation of the exhibit. The space would need a manager, a technician, a janitor, and a master of ceremonies. He would be dressed in a one-piece, blue mechanic's coverall suit. In between his theatrical commitments he would return to his station at the back of the room where he would sit at a table, alternately playing solitaire, reading a paper, making himself cups of tea, etc. He would manage the space in every way, dealing with planned and unplanned events alike.
The project would exist at the intersection of three major elements: museum exhibit, oral testimony and opera. The performance would toggle back and forth between these constituent parts via chance procedure. That is, the order of the performance would be set, the acts of the opera rehearsed, the exhibit curated and installed but the timing of the piece (when an act from the opera would begin), would be decided via an unpredictable timekeeping mechanism. It seems appropriate therefore for my description of the piece to begin with this chance operations machine.
Figure 1: Poster for *Exodus, a museum of between* (Design by Gabriel Harrell)
CHAPTER 3

CHANCE PROCEDURE, STRUCTURING TIME WITHIN THE PERFORMANCE

Throughout the evening, the performance would shift back and forth between the opera and museum installation portions of the show. A large timekeeping mechanism would govern the timing of these changeovers. Designer and instrument maker Peter Hamburger of New York City had agreed to consult on the design and building of this device. Essentially the contraption would consist of a large block of frozen Mediterranean Sea water. The ice would be placed on a grate under a heat lamp. As the ice melted the water would drip into a pitcher mounted on the end of a long lever. When the pitcher reached a critical weight the lever would tip on its fulcrum, causing the far end of the lever to strike a bell. The water would then pour from the pitcher, now tilted downward, into a large samovar that the Caretaker would use to make himself cups of tea throughout the performance. The water was collected in the port of Piraeus just outside Athens and mailed to me by theater artist and puppeteer Evgenia Tsichlia.

Just across the room opposite this machine would stand an enormous pile of sand. This pile would be continually fed via a pinhole in a large container filled with sand mounted near the ceiling. The container could be refilled during the performance as needed by the Caretaker via a bucket suspended from a rope run through a pulley. When the audience would first enter the space there would already be a four-foot high pyramid of sand on the floor near the center of the room. The effect would be that of a giant hourglass, one that would turn the entire room into the slowly filling lower globe. The stream of sand would never stop, from the moment the audience entered, to the time when they would exit the space. The sand would be a mix of sand collected and sent from the Chihuahua Desert by members of Teatro Indigena de La Sierra Tarahumara and local sand dug from the farm.
where the performance would take place. While the hourglass device would not govern the timing of the scenes, it would be visually and thematically connected to the “water clock” that would be doing so.

A plaque relating the origin of the sand and water would accompany each device. It is morbidly ironic that these elements, which claim the lives of thousands of people annually, can so easily be bottled and shipped around the world for a small sum to be used in a theater arts project.

This bit of chance, I hoped, would keep the performance from falling into a routine, and would ensure that each rehearsal and performance would be timed differently. The aim would be for this chance-based metronome to generate new meaning each night by newly collaging content at each performance.

This use of chance procedure was influenced by the work of John Cage, specifically his work with the practice of Indeterminacy, and also the work of choreographer Bill T. Jones’ Story/Time. James Pritchett paraphrases a common critical treatment of Cage’s chance procedures when he writes: “if Cage has left his music to chance, if he has thus extinguished his authority as a composer, then all that remains is an idea…the pieces [of music] are thus about this idea of chance and are not concerned with anything even remotely musical” (Pritchett 2). If one is to believe this, then one is to believe Cage to be more a philosopher than a composer. If however, one believes, as I do, that Cage was primarily interested in the music that chance procedures could generate, then any criticism of his work should concern itself more with the music generated than with the theories on which his creations were based. Likewise, Bill T. Jones led his company in the creation of Story/Time via chance procedure. The performance consisted of an evening of back-to-back original stories, each one-minute in length, read by Mr. Jones while his company danced.
Longtime Bill T. Jones company member Jenna Riegel recalled that each night Mr. Jones’ collaborator Janet Wong would assign every story a number and enter those numbers into a website called random.org. The website would randomly order the numbers and thus provide Mr. Jones with the new order of his script. Meanwhile the choreography was broken into twenty or so individual sequences, which could be set in any order. Each evening a dancer would number these routines, enter them into the same website, and record their new dance routine sequence. This ensured that each night, not only would different stories be read (there were more stories than could be read in any one performance), but also that any meaning generated by the work would be formed by the new and random collaging of script and dance (Riegel Interview). Again, through my conversations with Riegel, it is my understanding that Mr. Jones was concerned less with the philosophical questions that the work posed and more with the practical advantages of working through chance. It allowed him to create work that was larger than himself. It allowed him to be continually surprised by his own work and therefore allowed him to continue to learn from it. It would be my hope that any criticism of Exodus would follow suit and critique the finished piece more than the devices by which it was governed. The chance generating mechanisms at work would be employed primarily to create a sum experience that would be greater than the parts. It is therefore necessary to examine the various components of Exodus that this chance procedure would govern.
CHAPTER 4

MUSEUM: FRAGMENTS OF HUMANITY,

DETAILS OF THE EXHIBIT

Exodus would aim to examine mass human migration via what Alex Kalman, curator and founder of the New York City based Mmuseumm, has coined “Object Journalism.” A collection of objects that individuals who left their homes in a moment of mass exodus chose to take with them would be exhibited along with relevant historical and personal citation in a curated museum setting.

Sculptor and set designer Chenda Cope was in the process of designing and curating the project when the epidemic hit. She aimed to play with our expectations of the white box and the black box, focusing on the friction between these two art spaces and the storytelling potentials and conventions of each.

Viewers of these objects would be asked to engage with narratives of mass human movement via the artifacts of these movements. These artifacts would be sourced from current immigrant/migrant communities as well as the descendants of past immigrant/migrant communities. The exhibit would ask: What stories do objects tell us about the condition of having to leave one’s home? Are there universal concerns when one sets out on a journey into the unknown that are expressed via the objects of such movements?

As the collection process for the exhibit was one of the few phases of the project that came close to completion, I will discuss it in the past tense.
This exercise in curation and collective storytelling would be, for me, the single most stressful feature of the project. The success of the exhibit required the trust of absolute strangers, in both the project and the artistic team (often with precious and irreplaceable objects). If the objects didn’t materialize, the exhibit couldn’t happen. If too few were collected, stemming from either a failure of collecting strategies, a vote of no confidence in the project, or simply the busy lives of people who have more pressing concerns than helping out an unconventional theater project, then the exhibit would be too thin to create the necessary visual dialogue between objects.

Below is a brief excerpt from some of the correspondence that I sent out to potential collaborators, soliciting objects to include in our exhibit:

*The exhibit is trying to hold as large of a view of migration/immigration as possible, to hold experiences of incredible hardship next to those of relative ease, those of immediate necessity and those of people who anticipated future hardship.*

*The project focuses on the movement of large groups of people to better understand not only why people leave (this question gets a lot of attention), but also why we respond the way that we do when people from elsewhere arrive.*

*If, as the UN predicts, migration will be one of the primary shapers of the 21st century, we’d like the exhibit to excavate a plethora of narratives, to examine a diversity of reasons for why people decide to leave a place they know for a place that they don’t and why they are received in the ways they are. We are not interested in splitting hairs over what is and what is not an event of mass migration. We are asking those who identify as being part of a diaspora to participate by loaning the exhibit an artifact of their journey. If you are interested in loaning the exhibit an object from your own or a family member’s life, we’d be honored and would love to include it in our exhibit.*
A small team of interested collaborators was assembled to reach out to potential contributors and translate the letter into the first languages of several immigrant communities. The group came about naturally as I reached out to friends and acquaintances who I thought might like to loan the exhibit an object and who expressed interest in the project, asking if they could pass on the call to members of their respective communities.

These collaborators included:

- Maria Muhareb, a member of an Egyptian Coptic community in Eastern Massachusetts
- Helen Rahman, who emigrated along with her parents from Bangladesh to the U.S. via Japan
- Hia Ghosh, an immigrant from Bengal, whose family, similarly to Barve’s, had left their rural, subsistence community to find work and income in Kolkata

In addition to the above names, Vishnupad Barve, Clarissa Soma Cordeiro, Tatiana Godfrey and Shea Witzberger (each already collaborating on other portions of Exodus), assisted in this work by reaching out to friends, family and members of their communities.

The process of collecting started slowly, as I reached out to people I knew directly who I thought might be interested and asked other members of the curation team to do the same. Some efforts were made to solicit the help of groups such as The Pioneer Valley Worker’s Center. I was interviewed on La Voz, a Spanish language radio program and publication broadcasting in the Hudson Valley and New York City. While these attempts to reach larger number of participants generated some results, the overwhelming majority of artifacts came from individuals that the artistic team reached out to personally. In every
instance, a personal phone call or email yielded better results than any attempt at mass outreach.

When speaking about the people who donated objects for the exhibit or who were interviewed (more on interviewing later), I have chosen to never include names. This is in part for basic privacy reasons (some only wanted their life details but not their names used in the exhibit), but also in consideration that many of these people are undocumented, or have undocumented family members living with them. At this exceptionally vulnerable time (I.C.E. continues to make raids as the COVID-19 epidemic worsens, while I.C.E. facilities are well known hotbeds for the virus where prisoners have little to no chance of receiving adequate treatment), it feels irresponsible to use anyone’s name without a thorough knowledge of their situation and their willingness to be identified in light of the altered political landscape. If the project were ever to move forward in the future, I would reconsider the wisdom of using any names attached to the objects or interviews. While the erasure of identity is certainly an oppressive act, perhaps omitting the names would call attention to our current political system, which turns being seen and heard into a risky proposition. As long as some members of our community have to remain anonymous to protect themselves, their families and their community, we cannot hope to fully know ourselves (if we are products of our communities). This rapidly unfolding global situation also points out how difficult it is to predict future political conditions and how a benign bit of information can quickly turn into injurious data.
Figure 2: prayer beads, Tibet to U.S.

The objects that ended up being collected and the stories behind the objects were as disparate as the group doing the collecting. They ranged from a sari woven by the great-grandmother of a middle-aged woman from Hyderabad currently living in Tennessee, to a half-used box of tampons brought by a young woman from Hong Kong recently settled in South Boston. A dry rotting pair of tennis shoes worn by a man smuggled out of East Berlin in 1979 was loaned to the exhibit the same day as a delicate mortar of kajal (a traditional eyeliner), used by at least 3 generations of a young woman's family who grew up in a Kandahari family living in Peshawar and who currently lives in Chicopee, MA.
Another participant loaned the exhibit a small empty wooden box in which he kept photos of his family. He had left the conservative West Virginia town of his birth not long after his 18th birthday, experiencing discrimination and fearing violence after publicly coming out as trans to his community. Within days, the exhibit had accumulated over a dozen objects brought out of religious, conservative regions of the United States by trans
and queer individuals seeking safety, acceptance, companionship, community and a more promising future in more tolerant, liberal regions of the country.

Midway through the collection process, a political activist in Tucson who would like to remain anonymous, working with the humanitarian group No More Deaths, began collecting cast off objects that he found while running water and food drops and administering first aid to undocumented migrants crossing the Sonoran Desert. Many dozens of water bottles, painted black so as to be harder to spot from the air, along with backpacks, clothes, and empty food tins, began to accumulate in the storage containers in my basement waiting to be catalogued and included in the exhibit. These were added to by unsettlingly similar objects washed up on the rocky shores of Lesvos and sent by a friend and humanitarian worker living on the island: a tooth brush, a backpack, and a child’s knit cap.

A Hungarian woman living on the Upper West Side of Manhattan for the past 40 years, whose mother hid in a Budapest attic during the Second World War, and who chose
to flee the authoritarian communist regime of the 80's, loaned the exhibit her much-loved egg pasta maker, saying:

Figure 4: nokedli maker, Hungary to England to U.S.

“*My biggest fear crossing the border from Hungary to Austria was, that they will discover my “spetzel” or in Hungarian “nokedli” maker. We left as tourists, and mainly looking for a different life, see the world from the closed off iron curtain.

It would have been hard to explain to the border patrol that I need the tool for a few weeks of trip to England. It was in 1981, I still have it, and use it occasionally.

Not very touching but home cooking makes a home HOME.

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Other objects included a Polish-English dictionary from a crossing in 1910 as thousands of Europeans participated in what would become the largest mass movement of people in history, a ring whose stone had been bitten off and hidden in the mouth of a now 92 year old Iranian American woman living in California as she was robbed leaving Iran 72 years ago, a small traditional mortar and pestle used for making za’atar brought by a man fleeing the Lebanese Civil War (one of the nearly 1 million people displaced by the conflict), a barely worn Tibetan chuba dress carefully brought from Kathmandu by a young woman resettled to Boston, and yet another wedding ring swallowed by a Cuban woman fleeing the revolution, whose legend includes obliging her husband, upon reaching the U.S., to pick through her stool until finding the ring.

I asked anyone loaning the exhibit an object from their journey to fill out a short form, the answers to which would be displayed on a small plaque along with their object. A copy of the questionnaire that I sent to those loaning an artifact to the exhibit can be found in the appendix along with an example of a completed questionnaire (See Appendix A).
Figure 5: Tibetan chuba, Nepal to U.S.
The objects and stories were literally all over the map. The exhibit suddenly seemed
to have its own voice and began to speak for itself. Uncanny similarities began to emerge
among the narratives of people who had next to nothing to do with one another and whose
stories, on the surface, had very little in common. Cast-off water bottles found in the
Sonoran desert are indistinguishable from cast-off water bottles found on the shores of
Lesvos. It was virtually impossible to not draw connections between a simple cloth doll
brought from The West Bank to England via France during the Second Intifada and a child’s
shoe found in the Chihuahua Desert. There were also interesting discrepancies between
stories that sound similar on paper: a Sega Genesis brought to the states with a nine year
old kid from Bangalore next to a small pouch of millet seed brought to the states by the
mother of a six year old from Hyderabad after being denied asylum in Europe.

These simple items that had borne witness to many of the great human movements
of the modern era began to reveal the humanity behind history and current events in
surprising ways. Typically, when introduced to someone’s story via any medium, we are
also introduced to an image of their body (live or reproduced). When looking at an actual
human body so many of our prejudices and assumptions are triggered.

In the early stages of dramaturgical development, Godfrey and I had thought to
include a photo of the owner along with the artifact in the exhibit. As the process developed,
I realized that this would undermine the strength of the exhibit. We are so rarely, in these
days flooded with digital information, given an opportunity to connect with a personal
narrative without an excess of images attached to it. In attempting to give our audiences
material that would allow them to find personal connection with the artifacts, we would
actually have been sabotaging such connection. The more I thought about the intricacies of
visibility politics, the more the idea began to feel exploitive. I felt that to reproduce
someone’s image in such a setting, especially as an ancillary device, was commensurate to a form of exploitation.

*Exodus* would therefore exist in conversation with the work of Performance Studies International Co-Founder and feminist scholar Peggy Phelan. Phelan writes in *Unmarked, The Politics of Performance* that “In framing more and more images of the hitherto under-represented other, contemporary culture finds a way to name, and thus to arrest and fix, the image of that other” (Phelan 2).

While we would display some personal and dramaturgical information along with the artifact, I wanted to keep it to a minimum. I felt that when faced with text, our critical, hyper-rational selves are prone to an intellectualizing and an analyzing that can result in the subject being kept at a critical distance. These practices can function as insulation between our nerves and the subject matter. An actual object, often physically marked, distorted or otherwise bearing witness to the human body that it lived with, holds a power that is not replicable or enhanced through exposition.

By maintaining our commitment to framing just the artifacts of mass migration, I hoped that our audience would find a profound connection with these narratives that contemporary storytelling conventions don’t typically offer. Alex Kalman, of Mmuseumm, said in an interview with The New York Times: “I don’t mean to get too philosophical, but I think I curate more like an editor at a magazine or a newspaper in the sense that we’re thinking about compelling stories, we’re thinking about relevant stories. These seemingly ordinary objects, they’re intimate and they’re incredibly revealing...you can explore big ideas through these small objects” (Barron 18).

At the time of writing, it appears that several of the objects collected for “Exodus” will be sent on temporary loan to Mmuseumm for an exhibit exploring similar themes. The
new exhibit will be the sequel to an exhibit that Mmuseumm recently closed displaying replicas of the objects found on the bodies of victims of police shootings. As our full show and exhibit couldn’t be realized due to the current pandemic, it is nice to know that some of these objects will still be allowed to tell their stories.

The artistic team and I spent a great deal of time discussing the ethics of exhibiting these objects. Both Kalman and Clare Dolan, founder and head curator of The Museum of Everyday Life, weighed in on this conversation. That there are different ethical concerns that one has to weigh when producing nonfiction work than when working in fiction, seems obvious. What then, are the ethics at play for a nonfiction installation, straddling the line between history museum and art installation, sharing space with and accruing meaning from a staging of early Italian opera? We asked ourselves: “What voices are telling whose story?” While not hiding the work of the artistic team, we thought it of primary importance to let the people behind the artifacts speak for themselves, directly to the audience with as little interference as possible. We not only solicited basic information around the specific journey of the donor, but also began planning a museum guide, a booklet to accompany the exhibit containing more dramaturgical work around the specific diaspora relevant to each artifact. Within this book, each of the artists responsible for the work would be given an opportunity to address their own positionality, speak their own story and discuss their relationship to the project. When putting the stories of others on stage, especially people whose lives have often been more difficult than our own, our choice to maintain a non-authoritative, non-didactic tone seemed especially fundamental. We made the commitment to present the objects as transparently as possible and to keep both the donor and the artist ever visible. While an audience member might take umbrage with the piece, we hoped that in such an event, this decision would open up the space for dialogue. We also agreed to never present the piece to potential donors as an event that we hoped would change their
situation for the better or would in any way create a more equitable or just world. We simply led with the belief that to be seen is a basic human need, that people don’t want to be invisible (though of course there are many regrettable reasons why an immigrant living in this moment may not wish to be seen). Whether someone wanted to be seen through the lens of this exhibit was a decision that only they could make. We could only provide as clear a view of the project as possible. We hoped that this exhibit, if done well, could provide a platform to see a side of the stories of people not often in the public eye.

CHAPTER 5

HONORING MOVEMENT: CURATING AND INSTALLING THE EXHIBIT

In January the designer and sculptor Chenda Cope and I began to meet regularly to discuss the design and curation of the exhibit. I knew that I didn’t want a space full of white rectangular pedestals that blocked the room visually. Cope suggested hanging the objects from the ceiling. Installing these artifacts that had traveled so far in a static exhibit, as if they were suspended in amber, seemed at odds with their histories. We suddenly hit on an idea: the artifacts had to move. The movement of these objects would reference the movement of the people who carried them.

The mathematician Rory Mills, of Mills-Brierley Theater Design of Edinburgh, has been working, alongside his theater projects, in the field of fluid dynamics. Fluid dynamics
essentially studies and aims to predict how fluids move across various surfaces. Though not part of his official doctorate work, which concerns itself with drying paint, Mills has been applying the formulas of fluid dynamics to the murmurations of flocking birds. I reached out to Mills because I was curious to see if diasporas could be studied, mapped and predicted using the same principles of fluid dynamics that he had previously applied to bird murmurations, namely those of flow velocity, pressure and density. While many of the forces that shape a diaspora are physical (rivers, oceans, deserts, weather systems), and therefore very similar to the forces that shape the movement of fluids, some of the obstacles which shape the mass movements of people do not have correlatives in the field of fluid dynamics: access to capital, gender politics, racist immigration policies, etc. While it is beyond the scope of this project to attempt to account for these discrepancies, Mills did note that when a diaspora is mapped across time and space, the flow of people eerily mirrors the flow of liquids. Moving masses react to increased political pressure in similar ways to how a liquid might react to a raise in temperature, or large groups moving en masse who encounter a closed national border will shift flow direction and velocity or fall into an eddying effect in a manor mirroring the flow of water encountering an obstacle blocking a stream. I began to study maps of diaspora beside charts demonstrating the flow properties of fluids. Cope and I discussed how to move the objects in a manner referencing these dynamics. A quick mockup of a few weights suspended from the ceiling of the performance space via line wound around a hand-cranked spool proved it was possible. The entire room of close to 100 objects could be rigged to move, so that as a mass it would appear to essentially flow. Realizing that the objects could move en masse, we believed we could manipulate them to move in waves and flows that could directionally shift, become momentarily static, loose direction and scatter into chaos before amassing into a cohesive
unit (all essential qualities seen in the movements of fluids, birds and diasporas). The artifacts would be able to flock.

Each of the curated objects would be suspended via monofilament from the ceiling of the performance venue (a height of approximately 18 feet). The lines, upon reaching the ceiling, would run through eyehooks and then to yet another eyehook in one of the four upper corners of the room. From there the lines would run down and around a spool that could be manually cranked this way or that, resulting in the suspended objects being raised and lowered. Each spool would animate four objects. Each corner would hold six spools, raising and lowering a total of 96 artifacts.
Figure 6: prototype for simple wall-mount spool crank that could raise and lower up to six objects at a time

This trial run breathed new life into the exhibit. When employed in this way the exhibit could be thought of not only as kinetic sculpture, but also as a shifting stage set for the opera performances, and perhaps more interestingly a phenomenon verging on puppetry. Not only could the entire piece move together, but specifically chosen pieces could also be animated independently. The figure below shows a trial hang of a dress. A now adult woman living in the greater Boston area loaned the exhibit a dress worn on her 9th birthday before leaving Bangladesh. The dress was retrieved from her mother who had managed to keep it all these years. The dress, hanging from a weighted bicycle wheel could be suspended by a rope spring, then wound and released, sending the dress on a roughly 3 minute pirouetting caper before it settled back into stasis. When animated next to a music box loaned by a Mexican émigré currently living with her family in North Carolina, the conversation between these two objects was spellbinding.
Figure 7: 9th birthday dress, Bangladesh to U.S. as seen in front of backlit backdrop mockup
Figure 8: dress in motion
CHAPTER 6

THE FIRST GLIMPSE

6.1 Experiencing the Exhibit

The performance of *Exodus* was to be staged in a newly constructed barn at Park Hill Orchard, Easthampton, MA. The building is one large room with 18’ ceilings and a cement floor. It is accessed by three large garage doors and two normal-sized doors. Park Hill has a rich tradition of hosting local and touring performances in addition to the production of their biennial Art in the Orchard Sculpture Walk.3

I feel that it would be helpful in understanding the piece, since it was never performed, for me to describe the basic sequence of events, as the audience would have experienced them, in regards to the exhibit. What follows is such an account. The account will be written in the present tense, as it should read like stage directions.4

Upon entering the space through the large, metal garage door #3, no exhibit is visible. The entire installation is raised in a static position, as flush with the ceiling as possible, leaving the floor space wide open except for a large pile of sand in the center of the

3 I have placed an image of the floor plan of the performance space in the appendix to help one visualize my description of the piece (See Appendix B).

4 In any stage directions or prolonged description of the events of the performance, I will switch to the present tense. It is too confusing and cumbersome to write: “The Caretaker would be sitting at the table”, etc. It will instead read: “The Caretaker is sitting at the table.” It should read much as stage directions within a script. When discussing the efficacy of the piece or theorizing about it, I will switch back to the past modal “would have.”
room and a dozen suitcases scattered across on the floor like so many forlorn headstones.

Once the audience is inside, the door slams shut from the outside, leaving the audience standing in a relatively darkened space except for the light coming from a lamp sitting on a decrepit card table at the back of the room (a distance of about 60’). The Caretaker of the space, a man in his late seventies with bushy white eyebrows that completely obscure his eyes, sits at the table with his back to the audience. After a beat, he stands and walks to the center of the room where he pulls a string hanging from the ceiling. The string turns on a penlight aiming down from the rafters, illuminating a thin stream of sand spilling from a small hole in a large container mounted near the ceiling. The stream is small enough as to have been unnoticeable, when unlit, as the audience entered the space. The stream lands atop the already impressive pile of sand standing at least 4’ high and slowly growing ever taller and wider. He returns to his seat at the table. An unseen piano is heard slowly playing the right hand part of Musica’s theme from the opening of Monteverdi’s L’Orfeo. On this cue, as if the entire room were some strange music box and the exhibit the twirling dancers, the artifacts hung close to the ceiling begin a slow, gentle descent. Ninety-six shadowy objects, lit only by these two indirect sources, begin to move en masse into their lower positions, like some massive flock of blackbirds in slow motion. These positions are of varied height, some lower to chest or head height, offering an obstacle to movement but making themselves available to scrutiny. Others remain high, visible but out of easy inspection. Once reached, these positions are held. The caretaker then walks back through the exhibit. As he does so, twelve extension cords dangling bare bulbs from their ends are slowly lowered from the ceiling into hanging positions just within extended reach. The caretaker makes his way from bulb to bulb, turning each on as he goes. The bulbs hang among the artifacts like some strange constellation, illuminating the objects without washing the entire room. The caretaker returns to his station in the back of the room. A school bell mounted on
the wall over his table suddenly rings. The piano stops. A small cardboard sign lowers directly in front of the standing audience reading: “The Museum of Between is now Open. Enter but Please Do Not Touch.” The piano begins again, this time with the fanfare that begins L’Orfeo. The objects, along with the light bulbs, begin to slowly raise and lower, moving at times out of sight and then back into view. The audience is allowed to begin wondering through the exhibit.

6.2 A Shifting Museum Space, The Dramaturgy of the Exhibit

The ever-shifting nature of the exhibit would insure part of our original mission. As each object would be at a different vantage point when viewed by each audience member, each experience of the exhibit would be necessarily unique. Serendipity would dictate which objects happened to be at eye level and therefore in view at any given moment. The conversation between adjacent artifacts that museum curators painstakingly study and cultivate would be in constant flux. New conversations would be initiated and cut short while older conversations would be re-instigated. In effect, if there were 100 audience members, there would be 100 museums. Moreover, if an audience member doubled back on their route through the exhibit, they would encounter a distinctly different exhibit than that through which they had just walked.

The intersectional nature of the piece also brings up interesting discrepancies around our cultural expectations of space. When one visits a history museum we have been taught to expect an attempt at objective curation. Perhaps we also expect to be presented with a “complete” story. I think it’s fair to say that despite what might be a slow shift towards acknowledging the positionality of the curator/ producing institution and a healthy
skepticism towards the idea of a complete story, that when we go to a museum we still expect to be greeted by an exhibit put together for us by an authority on a subject. The museum idea is therefore, essentially, a hierarchical, paternalistic idea. The information flows in one direction.

*Exodus* though, would make no claim of objectivity and would endeavor to maintain transparency as to the positionality of the curation team. We would though, acknowledge a certain curatorial responsibility: responsibility toward the artifacts, toward the people behind the artifacts, toward the world in which we live, to our audiences, to creating an experience that we believe would benefit audience and performer alike, and finally to art that seeks to create a more humanistic human.

CHAPTER 7

STAGING ORAL TESTIMONY

7.1 A Text in Flux

In a theater piece committed to the creation of an unrepeatable experience, it might seem at odds with the essence of the work to bring in recorded audio. In the following chapter I will discuss the staging of recorded interviews and their integration into the exhibit. I will remain in the past modal tense as the performance of these pieces would be left up to chance and most of the chapter is devoted to the thoughts and dramaturgy behind the use of interview audio and its effects on the overall piece.

Upon entering the space, aside from the pile of sand in the middle of the floor and the man seated with his back to the audience at the rear of the building, the only other
visual points of interest would be the dozen or so suitcases and bags standing scattered
across the floor. The suitcases would be plain, forgettable. The bags would be common
backpacks, feedbags or coffee sacks, tied closed. Within each suitcase or bag would be a
small speaker, playing back one of a dozen interviews done with representatives of the
following groups:

• People who have themselves been part of an event of mass migration.
• People who are descended from someone who has been a part of an event of mass
migration.
• People who have not been a part of an event of mass migration in recent or
remembered history, but who live in areas that put them at identifiable risk of
having to leave their home in the foreseeable future (especially as a result of rising
sea levels, political instability, gentrification, desertification and other factors
resulting from a changing climate).

While the interviewer’s questions would not be edited out of the finished versions of
these interviews, for transparency’s sake, I kept the questions intentionally simple and to
the point, with the aim of inspiring the interviewee to speak at length, to go off on tangents
and not feel hemmed in by the questions. Along with our commitment to highlighting our
individual positionalities, the artistic team felt it paramount that there be a platform within
the piece allowing individuals navigating the concerns of mass migration to speak at length
for themselves. We made a list of people we would like to interview and began reaching out
to them.

The interviews would include:
• A one time farm owner, now day laborer from Goa, resettled in Delhi.

• A Polish holocaust survivor who left Europe for the states after loosing the rest of her family to the camps.

• A North Carolina man struggling to rebuild his sixth generation family home after Hurricane Florence flooded much of the coastal plane in the fall of 2018, and who is left wondering how many more times he will be able to rebuild or if his children will be able to make a home there.

• An undocumented, indigenous Mexican cattle rancher in Montana who fled the violence plaguing northern Mexico and who doesn’t know if or when he’ll be able to return.

• An Ohio man whose great grandfather left Tennessee as part of The Great Migration.

• An Israeli naturalized citizen who left the ancient Yemeni Jewish community of his childhood as a part of Operation Magic Carpet and who was given a fully furnished house from which a Palestinian family had been evicted, only to find that as a person of color that they were once again second class citizens in a tiered society.

• A Palestinian family living in rural North Carolina who after fleeing their home for the safety of their children, received a visa to the U.S. just weeks before 9/11 and the anti-Muslim wave that gripped the nation.

• A woman and her 3 children from New Orleans who lost their home in Hurricane Katrina and whose neighborhood has been turned into luxury apartments.

• A Puerto Rican couple living in Boston whose family lost their home during Hurricane Maria.

• An American ex-patriot living in Slovenia who left the U.S. to study medicine free of student debt and who remains so that his family can live in a country that offers universal health care.
• A South African whose family was privileged enough to be able to move during the first state of emergency declared by the apartheid government.

• A trans man living in Richmond, Virginia who left his rural home in West Virginia fearing for his safety.

• An avant-garde theater director living in Vermont who spent much of his childhood as a refugee from the American bombardment of German civilian centers at the close of World War II.

I have placed in the appendix a sample script that I sent out to the team who would be conducting the interviews (See Appendix C). Looking over it should help one understand the connection between the interviews and the artifacts. A large portion of the interviews would be devoted to the subject of packing: who did the packing, how someone packed, how they decided what to bring, what was left behind, what was lost en route, where they traveled, how they traveled, etc. We decided it best to each give interviews to people we knew personally and to insure that all interviews were conducted by at least two people.

I have also included in the appendices an excerpt of the interview with Peter Schumann given by puppeteer extraordinaire Paul Zaloom (See Appendix D) that was to be placed in one of the suitcases. It should serve as an example for the other interviews in its loose, meandering approach. What’s more, this particular interview is of value not only for its quality but also due to it being given by a child refugee, turned avant-garde theater director, who has given much of his career to creating theater that examines themes of war, refugeedom and the intolerant systems which corrupt our inherent humanist potential. This interview took place in the summer of 2019 when the form of Exodus was still very much in development. At that time I knew that I wanted to examine themes of mass migration via
personal interviews but had no idea how they might be used. Listening to the at times tragic, at times comic, always spellbinding recording of Schumann and Zaloom, I began to imagine something resembling the piece I’ve described here. The transcript of course lacks the charm of Schumann’s particular voice and the subtleties of his speech, but I made an effort to present his words the way he gave them. I believe that they read well and much is to be gained by spending some time with them. While the interview goes off on lengthy tangents, no edits would be made. The interviews, like the lives recalled, should ramble and resist streamlined narrative.

In lieu of a more traditional script, these interviews would assume that function. Since we, as a North American theater going public, assign a great deal of importance, whether due or undue, to the spoken word, these texts would undoubtedly serve, for those who listen, as a principal engine of meaning.

The theatrical effect of these interviews would be that upon first entering the space, the audience would register a low persistent murmur filling the room without any specific words or phrases readily discernable. This low murmur would continue, unrelentingly, throughout the entire evening. Once the exhibit would descend into the space and as the audience would begin to wander through it, only then would the suitcases and bags, and the stories within, be encountered closely, on their own individual terms. On top of each suitcase or pinned to each bag in small font, one would find a label reading: Hear Me.

Knowing that I wanted to create a platform for people personally affected by mass migration to speak directly to our audience (people who couldn't necessarily be present for our performances), the challenge lay in working with their recorded text in a manner where it wouldn’t assume the typical rigid quality of text in so much contemporary theater, but
would instead reinforce our commitment to the kaleidoscope principle. It had to stay in flux. We had to find a way to keep the audience from having only one experience of it.

The recorded interviews would be playing on a loop within each suitcase or bag at a volume that would insure that the words would not be understandable unless someone either sat and placed their ear against the outside of the suitcase or bag or picked up the suitcase or bag and placed their head alongside. It was our hope that interested audience members would either sit with a suitcase until they wanted to move on or would pick up a suitcase and take it with them as they navigated the exhibit, setting it down and leaving it behind whenever and wherever they wished. Such a decision would turn the interview into something akin to the guided audio commonly available in conventional museum settings.

It would be impossible for any one audience member to listen to all of the interviews broadcast from all of the suitcases. It would be surprising even, if someone listened to a third of them in their entirety. Once the exhibit was lowered into space, the artifacts would act as barriers to free movement, sculpting audience flow. Each audience member would have to find their own path through the exhibit, making countless decisions upon viewing an artifact whether to turn right or left. The suitcases and bags would sit within the maze-like corridors created by the artifacts, allowing audience members to stumble upon them by chance. Even if one wanted to listen to all of them, there wouldn't be time, as the audience would only be in the space for a little less than two hours (the total recorded audio would be approximately 520 minutes). What's more, the suitcases would be scattered haphazardly throughout the space and could potentially be continually on the move. An audience member interested in listening to a recording would have to spend a not insignificant amount of time finding one. In the event that they did find one, the case or bag could already have a listener, or two. It's likely that there would be some members of the
audience who would never have an opportunity or desire to listen to any of the recordings. One would also assume that an audience member’s exegeses of the finished piece would vary greatly depending on which interview, if any, they had spent time with. Each story, aside from its unique plot, would doubtless trigger all sorts of associations, assumptions and prejudices for each listener, having to do not only with the story line but also the perceived gender of the speaker, the accent, tone, etc.

Of particular interest to me is the fact that the interviews would have no direct link to the exhibit. None of the artifacts in the exhibit were donated by interviewees. Any connections made or meaning generated by the synthesis of text and object would be not only completely serendipitous, but also utterly unpredictable for the artistic/ dramaturgical team. While much of the dramaturg and director’s work would still center around the shaping of experiences, the experiences shaped would be divergent and not necessarily anticipatable.

In summation, there would be an infinite number of very different scripts available (if you consider a script the amalgamation of an audience member’s total textual experience), that an uncontrollable number of audience members would be privy to for a duration of the piece that would be beyond our control and that would coincide with completely random points in the operatic performance. In this way at the end of the evening, we could never concretely know what any given member of the audience had experienced. Had they picked up a suitcase? If so, which one? When and for how long did they listen? During which scenes or portions of the performance did they listen?

By creating a script unhearable in its entirety, unpredictable in its sequence and one that would make the possibility of any two audience members having the exact same textual experience incredibly unlikely, Exodus would transform a prerecorded script into a swirling
fog of narrative, one that would invite its audience to lose themselves within. An important facet of the kaleidoscope was falling into place.

*Exodus* certainly uses many of the conventions of immersive theater, such as a 360° performance space and an ambulatory audience, and therefore exists in conversation with such cultural icons as Punchdrunk Theatre’s *Sleep No More* and Mary-Corinne Miller’s immersive adaptation of Strindberg’s *A Dream Play*, performed two years ago here in the UMass Theater Department. I, however, have never found the term immersive exceedingly helpful to my artistic process or a descriptor that I enjoy using in reference to my work. When in an immersive theater event, I typically find myself profoundly uncomfortable and rarely escape a sense of resentment when asked to choose my own experience. Moreover, I generally have a feeling that the choices are false, in that they are usually leading me toward a desired end. I am well aware that many of my audience members, especially those coming from an academic theater background, would call the show that I am describing immersive. I would counter that the show is immersive only in as much as a museum is immersive.

Cope and I had made the decision to bill the performance primarily as an exhibit presenting artifacts of diaspora, while giving the opera secondary status in any advertisement. We believed that by giving top billing to the exhibition that visitors would interact in a manner befitting a visit to a museum without thinking much of it. Moreover, the opera, dance and puppetry performances, apart from making use of an ambulatory audience, would be structured by many of the typical conventions of traditional, non-immersive theater. Most of these scenes would be performed frontally, relying on the Caretaker to usher the audience into a desired position. The scenes would also be non-interactive, rigidly scripted and rehearsed performances demanding a style of viewing consistent with a more traditional understanding of the separation of the world of the performer from the world of the spectator. In essence, the museum installation could be thought of as immersive, as the
space-politics of a museum installation are essentially immersive, though the term feels odd when used in that context. I feel though, that calling the performances happening within the exhibition space immersive would be a stretch and a misrepresentation of the project. *Exodus* would, I believe, operate dually within the politics of the gallery or museum installation space and the more traditional, frontal European/American puppetry and dance performance space and exist in deeper conversation with the work of kinetic installation artists such as Ann Hamilton and Kiki Smith or the traditional Czech puppetry performances of Vera and František Vitek, as well as the choreography of Kurt Jooss and Peter Schumann.

### 7.2 Post Pandemic Stagings

In view of the recent COVID-19 epidemic that is still unfolding as I write this, the project, if ever allowed to continue, would have to include the voices of individuals whose lives have been uprooted and redirected by this global event. Already huge numbers of people are on the move. In India today literally millions of laborers are walking home (for some, a distance over a thousand miles), as nation-wide travel bans are levied and public transport is suspended. People all over the world are leaving the lives they have pursued and are returning to be with family and other forms of support as more illnesses are reported and paychecks quit coming. Others find themselves trapped away from their families and communities, unable to return. Closer to home, the pandemic has had significant and direct effect on the artistic team of *Exodus*. Vishnupad Barve, the assistant director, fled home to be with his family in Goa but was trapped by a nation-wide shelter in place order. Clarissa Soma Cordeiro, the choreographer, flew on one of the last flights home to Brazil to be with her aging mother, not knowing if she would have the funds to return to
the states and continue her studies. The voices of this pandemic must be included in any future life that this project has. Few forces have so visibly and quickly moved so many people across the planet.

CHAPTER 8

OPERA

8.1 The Evolution of Our Concept

Within this space defined by the intersection of historical exhibit and oral testimony, yet another story-telling medium would enter the milieu. Claudio Monteverdi’s 1607 opera L’Orfeo would be performed in chapters within the exhibit space. L’Orfeo follows the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. It begins with the pair falling in love, quickly followed by Eurydice’s death at the bite of a serpent. We then hear Orpheus’ lament and learn of his decision to journey to the Kingdom of Hades to retrieve his love. We watch as Orpheus crosses the river Styx and melts the hearts of Pluto and Persephone with a song more beautiful than ever they heard. We witness Orpheus’ reunion with Eurydice and Pluto’s peculiar condition for her return: namely that Orpheus must lead Eurydice back to the realm of the living without once looking behind him. Just as the couple approaches the light of day, the echo of Eurydice’s steps behind Orpheus becomes distant. Orpheus, fearing he is losing her, turns to see Eurydice, who is right on his heels, lost to the depths for eternity.
The narrative concept of our treatment of L’Orfeo would be that of an individual who experiences great loss and who sets out on a journey of epic proportions into the unknown to recover that which they have lost. Our opera would ask, but not attempt an answer to the question of whether or not Orpheus ever regains that which he lost.

As the global gap between rich and poor widens, the idea of the American Dream still persists among poor and marginalized communities around the world, but the odds of attaining this dream continue to shrink. This re-imagining of the ancient story of Orpheus and Eurydice would be used to further excavate themes of mass migration and the challenges that people engaged in these movements face. I find power in the idea of using a 400 year old opera, itself a reimagining of one of our most ancient stories, to help our modern selves grapple with the events of the day.

In choosing to direct and produce a staging of this classic tale, I assumed a place in the large, disparate, and far-reaching conversation of artists who have been inspired by the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. This is especially evident as Hadestown takes New York audiences by storm. I watched this piece in its earliest stagings in 2006 and ’07 when the journey to Hadestown was in a boxcar and the character of Hermes represented by a train-hopping hobo. I recall a conversation with co-originator and director Ben T. Matchstick (a fellow Bread and Puppet company member), where he talked about the train as an early American colonizing force and the reverse phenomenon of people traveling from Mexico to the U.S., riding atop “La Bestia,” as the trains crossing the border are known. His vision of the freight train speeding desperate migrants toward the capitalist nightmare known as Hadestown was certainly an influence for Exodus.

By choosing not to foreground the romantic narrative of Orpheus and Eurydice, our reading of the story uncannily parallels the story of the United States’ actions in Central and
South America: a strip-mining and exporting of resources, people and ultimately viable futures from their places of origin to the U.S. Those who remain are left with few recourses, other than immigration to the place where their futures were taken. Much the same narrative can be read in Europe, China and the United States’ exploits in Africa, South and East Asia, and the Middle East resulting in our modern refugee crisis. When read in this light, the future can be deemed the primary export of these regions, an export with little to no recompense or reparation paid, much as Orpheus’ future, along with Eurydice, was exported to the realm of Hades. It is strange irony that Homer locates the Greek underworld beyond the far western end of the world and that a quick study of the current Syrian and Sudanese refugee crisis shows millions upon millions of souls journeying west, searching for that which was taken from them.

The individual stories represented by the exhibit of artifacts would be strikingly personal. It was my hope that in the personal details of these artifacts that an audience member, when viewing these objects collected and installed en masse and operating in concert, might find glimpses of a larger human narrative: a universal striving away from fear and toward hope. Inversely, it was my hope that the personal could also be found through the universal, by a staging of an ancient myth left wide open for interpretation. I hoped that the opera could contain within it enough room for all of us, migrant and non-migrant alike, to find our own histories, our own worst fears and closely guarded hopes.

While the conversation between this most ancient story and this most modern story is evident enough if one makes the case, it would be important that the case not be made to the audience. The audience would have to be allowed to make the case for themselves, or not. If the narrative of the opera would become merely a metaphor for mass migration, an
historic vessel to be filled with a modern substance, I felt the story would be cheapened and flattened, reduced to a propaganda-like parable.

The scenes of L’Orfeo would therefore have to exist quite independently, possessing their own aesthetics, narrative structure and demands. The three components (exhibit, oral testimony, and opera) would exist as independently as possible, while necessarily living in collage by their existing synchronously in the same location. If an audience were to draw connections between these three elements it should be on their own terms and not prescribed through the manipulative synchronization of narrative. In so doing, the combined piece would maximize the number of possible interpretations, allowing any meaning generated to be personally manufactured.

I was also interested in exploring the friction between the politics of the museum space and of the theater space. Both spaces are public, presentational art forums and I was interested in the storytelling conventions of each. It seemed to me, that when going to see theater today, my expectations are that I will be privy to a personal account of an event as filtered through the artistry of the playwright, director, designers and actors. In other words, I expect to see subjective narrative. When visiting a museum, I have an expectation to encounter a more authoritative, objective product. What then, would be the implications of staging L’Orfeo in a museum setting? Would the performance gain some portion of the credibility normally afforded to museums? Would the exhibit lose some portion of its credibility by its association with the opera, exchanging it for some of the glamour and whimsy of the theater? By setting L’Orfeo in a museum space, would we be creating a version of site specific theater, layering the performance overtop of an existing museum space with its own conventions and lineage? Or would it read as a site-specific museum, layering the exhibit overtop of a theater space? In what way would the museum space be
viewed as a theater set? In what way would the performance become part of the exhibit/museum space? These are questions to which I didn’t, and still don’t, have answers. It was my hope though, that through the performances, and the reaction of the audience, that I would begin to answer some of these questions.

### 8.2 Staging our L’Orfeo

When I first began thinking about the style of performance that should exist alongside the exhibit, before I decided on *L’Orfeo*, or an opera at all for that matter, I knew that acting should play no role in the piece. Peter Schumann notes, “real pain in life is a serious relative of death, a terrorizer, usually a visitor of great consequence. The [actor’s] detailed imitation of pain...makes a mockery of the vital resources which enable our nature to fight pain or even submit to pain gracefully...Eventually, real intimacy has to bear the weight of imitated intimacy (Schumann 5).

The affected sincerity of the actor, especially in such close physical proximity to real-life artifacts of migration (many of which having borne witness to much real-life pain and suffering), could not help but cheapen the personal histories presented by these artifacts. To say that I felt some responsibility to these objects and the histories they represented would be an understatement. To attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter by watching an actor pretend to live out the individual narratives of the people most affected by the issue, seemed an at best silly and time-consuming, an at worst demeaning and deluding project. I believed any such practice would eventually result in a corruption of our ability to truly empathize with and celebrate the real people navigating these issues and their stories, unless these narratives were first given a makeup and costume artist to replace the real dirt under the nails with just the right amount of fake dirt...
and a scriptwriter and director to edit away all the fumbling, inconsequential, problematic life-stuff which gets in the way of an imagined pure or essential narrative. This practice would also have the unintended consequence of making our own narratives and those of the people closest to us, seem unbearably drab and poorly written.

As soon as I settled on L’Orfeo, I knew that each performer would have to be clear in the fact that they would be performing themselves, and would be self-consciously existing in the same space as their audience. This, I hoped, would give the artifacts and the narrative of the opera the room necessary to exist both in the private, inner realm of each audience member, as well as in the larger, collective communal space. I find it difficult for a theater piece to achieve the later condition when left to the reductionist posturing an actor, who the audience is asked to forget is faking a real acquaintance with a subject. During such a performance, I find that the narrative either only belongs to the character I am watching, or that I succeed in taking personal ownership of the narrative by seeing myself in the character on stage, essentially making the entire performance about me. In either instance, a personal ownership of the narrative obliterates any chance of collective ownership. Each audience member ends up leaving the theater either having not connected with the narrative, and therefore leaving the ownership of that narrative with the actor playing the role, or having connected with the narrative, and thinking the performance was about their own life.

I felt that to act the roles of L’Orfeo would also be to claim ownership of the narrative. If the actor were successful, the audience would forget that they were not watching the true owners of the narrative (even if those owners were fictitious). This form of chauvinism, I hope, will fall out of fashion in the same way that modern historians are attempting to position themselves not as the authority on a subject, but an authority on a
subject, conveying an incomplete and biased understanding of the subject to their public. Moreover, the opera form would seem to lend itself to this style of performance, as the characters and narrative presented are larger than life and the genre of performance is a far cry from realism.

Brechtian training speaks of an enjoyment in the playing of a role, which the performer shouldn’t try to hide from their audience. I wanted to advance that idea one step further. What if the performer didn’t try to hide from the audience their enjoyment in playing the *idea* of a role? Instead of playing Orpheus, one would be performing an idea of Orpheus, all the while visibly maintaining their own identity. This concept is close to my understanding of how the *Putali* puppetry tradition of Nepal operates.

Knowing that I didn’t want to use actors, I thought immediately of the benefits of puppetry. Instead though, of a puppet taking on the role of Persephone, the puppet would take on an idea of Persephone, or an easier way of saying it might be that the puppet would take on the *image* of Persephone. This seemed a more honest approach, where the theater maker and performer acknowledge their positionality upfront, never claiming authority or ownership of a narrative or role, merely the temporary use of it. Aren’t all images simply someone’s idea of the subject?

I wasn’t sure how to practically implement these concepts but I began keeping a list of ideas to try out in rehearsal. The most promising idea was simply that when any character would appear for the first time, whether it be Orpheus or Pluto, that they would be introduced presentationally by either the Caretaker or the performer or puppeteer presenting the role. As in: “And now we present to you the image of Persephone, Queen of Hades!” Or: “Behold! The likeness of Charon! Ferryman of souls over the river Styx.”
The opera is written in an archaic Italian that even modern Italian speakers have a hard time understanding. Dramaturg Tatiana Godfrey and I began looking into our options for how to convey the meaning of the libretto to our audience, or if the practice were necessary in the first place. The opera had been translated into English but the translation, when sung, was wretched, possessing none of the charm and rhythm of the original Italian. We discussed a printed translation in the museum guide, but I didn’t want the audience to have to split their attention between a performance and a pamphlet. We of course lacked the funds for conventional supertitles as commonly screened either above or beside the stage (this thesis project happening outside of the main stage season and therefore not given any of the funds normally accorded to a directing thesis). We settled on two options, which we would try out in the rehearsal process. The first option would be essentially act titles and plot synopses printed on cardboard signs and hung just before the start of each act. The other option, the option that seemed more promising to me, consisted of writing the title of the act as well as a live, real time English translation of the sung Italian (or at least parts of it), throughout the scene on an overhead projector. The text would ideally be projected on top of the unfolding scene, performers, puppets, etc. This would clearly make it more difficult to read. However, if the title and a brief synopsis of the scene could be either clearly projected or spoken prior to the beginning of the scene, then the English text of the libretto would be supplemental, interesting and illuminating, but not something that one would have to follow closely to understand the broad meaning of the opera.

Fairly early in the process, once we realized that the exhibit would be mobile, Cope and I understood that the artifacts could be raised or lowered to create the framing for the opera performances. Instead of building any sort of proscenium or extra framing devices, we made the commitment to only use the features of the building and the exhibit itself.
Because we wanted the audience’s attention to shift continually back and forth between exhibit and opera, the acts would not flow into one another. The timing of the beginning of each act would be governed by chance procedure via the water powered timekeeping mechanism. This meant that there would effectively be no transitions in the entire piece. An act would begin, be performed, and end, leaving the audience to reengage with the exhibit for a period of time before the process would repeat all over again. The acts themselves would be heavily excerpted. Danny MacNamera, the musical director, would make the musical edits. The opera would be pared down for a minimal number of voices accompanied by piano, clarinet and accordion. The story would be pared down to its most essential elements.

This idea of switching back and forth between storytelling mediums owes a great deal of indebtedness to the installation art of Ann Hamilton. In her 2012 work at the Park Avenue Armory in New York titled *The Event of a Thread*, the visiting public, or audience (it was hard to decide which we were), were invited to wander through the cavernous armory drill hall, where adult sized swings and billowing, hanging fabric kept the space in dynamic flux. At the end of each day a woman in a red dress would step out onto a balcony, belt out an aria from a Handel opera and release cages upon cages of white pigeons into the space. While the public moved through the space, actors would read snatches of poems, historical texts and excerpts of classic literature. Just when I thought I knew where to look, a poet sitting at a large desk would begin to write (the desk surface was miked) and read aloud from what she had just written. The collage of visuals and audio was not only based on this chance procedure, but also depended entirely on where one was in the room. I became fascinated with the idea of a single room holding a cacophony of disparate narratives. This piece, probably more than any other single work, had the greatest influence on the birth of *Exodus*. 
CHAPTER 9

REFLECTIONS ON AN ABORTED PROCESS

While much of the work of this project was never carried out due to the COVID-19 epidemic and the social distancing measures that ensued, I feel nonetheless that I learned a great deal in the planning stages of Exodus and that there are lessons to be gleaned from the parts of the process that I engaged with. This learning process began with the earliest stages of planning. The process of proposing projects to serve as my thesis performance was a lengthy and frustrating one for all concerned, as many of my proposals were dismissed as a poor fit for our department’s season. In hindsight, I believe that the disagreement stemmed less from the types of performances that I was proposing and more from my inability to find a way of representing them in a manner that allowed members of the department to engage with them on familiar terms. A more developed ability to code-switch when soliciting support from those unfamiliar with my work would have better served the project and allowed me to better use the resources made available by the program.

The process also offered me the insight that no amount of research and professionalism is a substitute for unabashed enthusiasm. While the former certainly have a place in any process, I believe that the resistance I encountered in the proposal process led me to feel as though I had to support any personal aesthetic inclination with mountains of supporting theory and exposition. One effect of this was that when presenting my ideas to potential collaborators and financial supporters that I would often lead with a justification of the work instead of a love poem to the subject matter and project. Having experienced resistance and skepticism, I came to anticipate it from places where it didn’t exist. I believe this not only made for unnecessary labor but also didn’t inspire the excitement in the
project needed for it to gain quick and easy traction. It also made for a somewhat paranoid working environment, where I began to second-guess each of my artistic impulses.

While my collaboration with Exodus’ designer Chenda Cope was unfortunately cut short, I found myself consistently excited by her design ideas and offerings. I imagine this was in part due to some naturally occurring rapport between us, but I also believe it had something to do with Cope’s background in sculpture and visual art. I find that the inspiration for my work comes again and again from sculpture and other visual mediums or music and rarely from theater. Collaborating with an artist steeped in a studio practice and eager to discuss aesthetics without regard for staging was refreshing and thrillingly helpful. I believe that my willingness to have these conversations came from a knowledge that Cope was well versed in performance making and understood the challenges of transitioning aesthetic theory to stage practice. I hope that Cope and I find the opportunity to collaborate in the future, but I would in any future collaboration, be interested in working with designers coming from studio backgrounds.

In the event that this particular project has some future life in a time when real audiences are allowed once again to sit before real performers, I think that the global rearrangement of people as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic should not only be taken into account in the artifact collection and interview processes, but perhaps even be allowed to be the primary focus of the piece itself. The manner in which, and the speed with which, the virus has moved millions of people across our planet will shape our lives for decades, if not generations to come. The long and short-term ramifications of this event on our lives will doubtless warrant much unpacking and consideration. Perhaps Exodus, a museum of between, could be a useful device through which to peer at our common predicament, in hopes of understanding it more thoroughly.
CHAPTER 10

HOLDING MYSTERY

Just as it would be impossible to predict future configurations within a kaleidoscope, or to predict the patterns formed at any moment in one kaleidoscope based on the patterns formed at the same moment in an identical kaleidoscope, so to would the narrative of *Exodus* remain essentially unknown to myself and the artistic team, even after opening night. The stories that we would tell would be uniquely occurring narratives: one-time only collages of media and information.

Not only would the elements of the performance form new collages each night, but the movement of the audience, fracturing to wander through the exhibit and coalescing into a more traditional theater audience unit to watch the scenes of *L’Orfeo*, would make it impossible for any two audience members to experience the same sequence of images or receive the same order of information. If meaning is in part built from the sequence with which ideas or images are processed, then any meaning gleaned from our performance would be necessarily an individually constructed one.

Rebecca Solnit, in her book *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, paraphrases Plato (who is paraphrasing Meno), by asking the question: “How will you go about finding the thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you?” (Solnit 15). I take this to mean that every question is a leading question, in that it’s based on some amount of understanding and presupposes, at least in some small way, an answer. If the thing in question is truly unknown, then there is rarely enough information to form a proper question. This would account for how someone, despite a vigilant pursuit of the unknown, can make consistent and considerable discovery, all the while maintaining significant blind spots. The questions that guide their work and therefore any discoveries that they might make are based on an
existing structure and understanding and therefore progress predictably in a linear fashion. This could be thought of as vertical exploration, whereas what Solnit is referring to could be thought of as horizontal exploration. Of the Seder, Solnit writes: “The important thing is not that Elijah might show up someday. The important thing is that the doors are left open to the dark every year.” (Solnit 24).

One of the features of contemporary, commercially produced theater-making that has always seemed at odds with the creation of a piece that allows both its makers and audience to continually find new meaning in the work, is the rigid ordering of images and information, designed to lead an audience logically toward a conclusion. If a director knows exactly what story they are telling and where they hope to lead their audience, even if it’s toward a question, isn’t this a form of didacticism that ultimately limits any attempt on the part of an audience to originally engage with the subject matter? This practice would seem to maintain that an audience member shouldn’t have a thought that the production team didn’t anticipate them having. How much dramaturgical work typically goes into making sure an audience couldn’t misinterpret the intended meaning? Such a practice seems only a few steps removed from a kindergarten show and tell - a show and tell with, if we are lucky, a serious budget and a crack artistic team. Such work also supposes the artist to be an authority on the subject and not a pupil. Essential to my theater-making practice is the premise that I, as a theater-maker, am no expert. It would then follow that neither am I a knowledgeable guide leading an audience down a path that I have scrupulously mapped, but instead, am accompanying the audience down a path the end of which is a mutual mystery. I don’t wish to imply that I am not responsible for assembling the various components of the piece and devising a performance order. A kaleidoscope has to be built before one can look through it. The process of deciding what to include within the kaleidoscope would fall to my artistic team and myself and would not be left to the audience. Exodus is not an attempt to
discard the practice of composition, but merely an attempt at creating a more open, expansive form of composition.

Within Exodus I was searching for a form that would discard the phony academic fences erected between disciplines that mark someone either a director or a curator, a sculptor or an archivist. I hoped to find a performance/installation model that would reject the idea of the theater-maker or artist as an authority on a subject, much less the authority. As other academic fields, chiefly history, shift away from the idea of a single perspective carrying the impossible onus of supreme authority or objectivity, shouldn’t theater-making reimagine its charge as well? This new function would no longer require a narrative to be steered from the central perspective of the hero down a linear path, but would instead look to the periphery for guidance. Such a form would be necessarily non-linear. The question of theater makers engaged in such a pursuit, and the question to which the performance of Exodus would offer an answer, would then become: How do we create a theater that moves away from a culturally chauvinist and reductionist model and toward a form that honors complexity and values diverse realities? Such a reimagining shouldn’t devalue any one perspective, but should instead seek to position each perspective as holding value and truth, without holding a monopoly on either. Are there forms that can more readily hold a plurality of truths than others? Are there forms that put a subject matter on view and allow diverse truths to be found, coexist and comingle? Is all of the current talk of holding multiple truths a modern rebranding of an ancient understanding of mystery? While that

5 This trend can, I believe, be read in the evolution of theater history textbook titles beginning with Oscar Brockett’s 1968 tome, History of the Theatre, giving way to Glynne Wickham’s 1985 text, A History of the Theatre, and eventually to Zarrilli, McConachie, Williams and Sorgenfrei’s 2006 work, Theatre Histories, An Introduction.
question would need another thesis to be thoroughly unpacked, I conceived of Exodus as a house large enough to shelter a teeming galaxy of truths, and at its most primal core, desired Exodus to be a courtship of mystery.

In Exodus I had hoped to hazard an answer, not the answer, to the question: How can we create work that is focused and exacting while simultaneously leaving the door open to new interpretations, meanings, mysteries? In my thinking about the work, I continue to be steered by Solnit’s question: “Does the work [of art] mean what the artist intended it to mean?... Or is it larger than they intended” (Solnit 24)?

APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE TO ACCOMPANY OBJECTS ON LOAN TO THE EXHIBIT

* 

Please take a moment to fill out the information below to accompany your object.

1. Name (optional):

2. Please tell us the beginning and end points of your journey along with any significant midway points. (As in: From ____ To ____., or perhaps From _____ To ____ To ____ To ____ etc.)
3. Please describe how you traveled during each leg of your journey (Train, Boat, etc.)

4. Please tell us whom you traveled with. (Names are optional, but please tell us their relation to you).

5. Please tell us what year you left and what year you arrived.

6. If you can, please tell us in two sentences, the primary reason why you chose to leave.

7. How long did you have to pack once you decided to leave?

8. Did you pack or did someone else pack for you (a parent or family member)?

9. With whom did you stay when you first arrived at your destination (if anyone)?

   (Names are optional, but please tell us their relation to you).

10. When you left, were you planning to leave permanently?

11. Have you ever returned?

*(The questions are in the first person. If you are answering the questions regarding a relative or ancestor, please read: “they” wherever it reads “you”).

*The information provided will only be used in the exhibit to accompany and provide context for your object and will not be kept after the exhibit is over or shared in any other way. No photos or recordings will be allowed during the exhibit.

Thank you so much for helping make this project happen.

We are honored that you have chosen to participate in this work of collective storytelling.

Truly,

Gabriel Harrell and the Exodus team
What follows is an example of an answered questionnaire:

1. Name (optional): Tomáš Svoboda

2. Please tell us the beginning and end points of your journey along with any significant midway points.
   Czechoslovakia to Mexico to Brazil to U.S.

3. Please describe how you traveled during each leg of your journey.
   Hitchhiked from Prague to Bremerhaven. Boat to Mexico. Hitchhiked to Brazil. Flight to U.S.

4. Please tell us whom you traveled with.
   Alone.

5. Please tell us what year you left and what year you arrived
   I left in 1958 and arrived to the states in 1980

6. If you can, please tell us in two sentences, the primary reason why you chose to leave.
   Curiosity. Thirst.

7. How long did you have to pack once you decided to leave?
   One night.

8. Did you pack or did someone else pack for you (a parent or family member)?
   I packed.

9. With whom did you stay when you first arrived at your destination (if anyone)?
   I stayed mostly in migrant labor camps and with an anarchist group in Brazil.

10. When you left, were you planning to leave permanently?
    Yes.
11. Have you ever returned?

Yes.
APPENDIX B

PERFORMANCE SPACE FLOOR PLAN

Figure 9: a page from my production notebook showing the basic floor plan of the performance space
APPENDIX C

EXODUS INTERVIEW SCRIPT

FOR ORAL TESTIMONY COMPONENT

Do not record the following

Before going to interview anyone, talk briefly to them on the phone if possible. Try to understand the rough outline of the story you will interview them about. If you are not familiar with those events, take the time to research them well ahead of time. Go in curious and knowledgeable about the events shaping their life.

- Introduce yourself.
- Thank them for being a part of the project and agreeing to be interviewed.
- Talk a little about the project and why you’re interested in it (especially the oral history portion of the project).
- Make sure they know that apart from the show in April and a written thesis that nothing else will be done with their interview.
- Make sure they know that they don’t have to talk about anything they don’t want to talk about.
- Ask them if they’re ok with their name being included in the interview or if they’d rather it not.

Begin recording

- Record your self saying: I’m _________(your name) and this is a conversation with __________. (their name – if they’re agreeable to it being used).
- Make sure to record the date and location of the interview.

The following questions are suggestions of directions to steer the conversation.

Please don’t feel obliged to use them all or keep them in this order.
I don’t want the interviews to have the feel of answering a form.

The conversations should wander and follow the interest of the interviewee and interviewer. Don’t fret if you find yourself in a conversation that you think is off topic.

Let it sprawl. They will hopefully be tangential. The more they talk and the less we talk, the better.

• Where were you born?
• Where did you grow up?
• What sort of community was it?
• Describe your family. How many? Siblings? Parents? Part of an extended family?
• What did your parents do?
• At what point in your life was the decision made to leave?
• What were the principal reasons for leaving? Did you know these reasons at the time?
• Did you make the decision or was it made for you? If made for you, how did you feel about the decision?
• Once the decision was made how long did you have to prepare?
• Were you to travel alone or with others? Who?
• Were many members of your community also leaving? If so, had many already gone? Where were they going?
• Did some members of your family remain? Who?
• Did close friends remain? Who?
• Where would you go? (Who made this decision?)
• How would you travel (car, train, boat, etc.)
• Could you take many personal items with you? (Was space/time a limiting factor?)
• Did you pack yourself or did someone pack for you?
• How long did it take to pack?
• Did you pack just once or did you re-pack several times?
• Was it difficult to decide what to bring?
• If you remember can you walk us through the process of packing?
• If you remember, describe everything you remember bringing with you (no matter how mundane).
Was there anything that you couldn't bring that you desperately wanted to?
Was there anything that you didn't bring that you now wish you had?
What happened to your possessions that you didn't bring?
What was the year that you left? Do you remember the date?
Describe the first leg of your journey. How did you leave home?
Where did you go?
Describe the entire journey, all the legs of it. (*This is a great opportunity for the story to wonder. Follow up on any interest or question you have. But most importantly let them wander*).
Were there any items that you began with that you lost or left along the way?
What year (and date if they know it) did you arrive in your present location?
With whom did you arrive?
Where did you live when you first arrived? With someone?
Did you need to find work? If so, did you? Where?
Was there a community of people in your new home who were from the same place that you were?
Were their other immigrant communities in the place that you arrived? From where? Was there interaction between the communities?
When you arrived, what was the general feeling toward immigrants from the people who were already there? (*This is also a great place to let people wander/ go tangential*).
Were you viewed as an outsider?
Did you/ do you plan on remaining where you are permanently?
Do you still have family in the place you left? Friends?
Have you returned?
Do you still have any of the items that you originally left with?
How did your experiences with having to leave home, or having to do without (if that was the case. Especially in regards to family, community, food, money, security, etc.) shape your life once you reached your current destination? Your work? Your view of what is important?

Thank them again for being a part of the project and invite them to the show. (*April 24th and 25th, Park Hill Orchard, Easthampton*).
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW WITH PETER SCHUMANN

To be used in the oral testimony component of the piece

August 22nd 2019, Glover, VT. Interview given by Paul Zaloom.

What follows is an interview that would have been used inside one of the suitcases in our exhibit. Toward the end of the interview an unidentified person asks a few questions and Elka Schumann speaks briefly. My sincere thanks to Peter Schumann for allowing the interview to be used. The text of the interview is owned by Peter Schumann and any reproduction or quotation of the interview should be by his permission.

ZALOOM: At the end of the war in 1945 seven to eleven million displaced people and refugees were living in Germany, Austria and Italy. In 2016 the UN’s Refugee Agency reported that the number of displaced people were at the highest ever, surpassing even World War II numbers. The predicted number of refugees from climate change, water shortage, coastal flooding, etc. in 2050 is estimated to be between 25 million and 1 billion people...That’s to set some context I hope. Peter, I wanted to ask you where you were born and where you grew up?

SCHUMANN: I was born in ’34 in Silesia in a small town called Lauban, near a bigger town Liegnitz on a street that was lined with poplars trees, these tall, candle-like poplar trees and
our apartment in which we lived had a balcony and my mother tells me that our main entertainment was her swinging me to the beat of the poplar trees.

There was a little patch of a garden bed behind...the three or four story building. My parents had that little apartment. I was the fourth of five children, all very similar in age. My father was a high school teacher and we lived in that town till I was five years old and then moved to a suburb of the capital of Silesia... near Breslau... The capital was a very interesting city. Breslau was often referred to as the capital of the East. Kepler taught there at the University and it had very highfalutin academics and incredible architecture. Both protestant and catholic churches. Officially, I guess it was protestant, but it was mixed. It also had a large Jewish population. Naturally, my awareness of all that came later, because I was 10 by the time we fled.

In the year ’44, December ’44, Christmas, just before Christmas, our town was bombarded by the allies and buildings were burning. A neighbor’s house and then larger apartment buildings near the railroad station were burning and my parents decided to flee. My father was allowed to accompany us. All other males were forced to be in the defense force, but he had a...his left leg couldn’t move. It was stiff, so he was excused from that service till he took us where we went and then he was obliged to come back.

So he accompanied us...We packed bags of luggage. We went to the train station at least three times. All the trains were overloaded. We couldn’t get on them. The fourth time we succeeded. In between these going to the train and coming back home my parents reconsidered the luggage again and again. I remember one instance where they decided to take a suitcase full of silver spoons and other silver items and bury it in the garden because it was too heavy, and also their decision to allow each kid to pack a little bundle of their
liking and that included my brother taking a relatively fat volume of The Brother's Grimm and me taking our hand puppets. Puppetry.

ZALOOM: And you made your brother perform with you, right?

SCHUMANN: Well, that was later... So anyway, our family festivities: birthdays, Christmas, all that, always was accompanied by puppet shows. Which meant, you put a bed sheet over two chairs and you knelt behind it and you picked up the puppets and you played whatever came into your head. I mean the puppets told you the story because there was a robber, there was a princess, there was a hangman, there was a this and that, so.... you didn't have to make a story. The story was already in the puppets. So we did those regularly. So in a way we were all educated puppeteers. And those were wooden hand puppets carved by the Hornsteiners...My parents happened to be friends with these puppeteers. They were very prominent puppeteers in Germany and we used to get a hand puppet or two as Christmas presents. That's how we got the collection....Then Refugee life started.

ZALOOM: ...On the fourth try you went to the train station and you left? Which direction did you go? You were fleeing the allied bombing at that point...?

SCHUMANN: Yeah, but also the rumbling of tanks which we assumed were the Russian army. We would hear bombardments that didn’t sound like areal bombardments and we could hear these huge noises that tanks make. It was quite curious because we had the habit of seeing lights in the sky for quite a while and we called those lights Christmas trees and those were fireworks that the allies put above a town that they bombarded for sighting their
targets and for us they looked like Christmas trees. And we called them Christmas trees. So those Christmas trees were hanging at Christmas time in the sky and people fled. And the trains were super loaded, including roofs and bumpers, you know, between the trains. Everything. And we... fled towards the town where our mom's... our grandma... and her sister, Vera lived. This was my mom's favorite sister, Vera. And I think she had in mind to stay there for a while. So we went there. And I don't think it was more than a night or two. Hamburg had already been bombarded. Hamburg was a huge port city and was about 85% destroyed. So there were only ruins there and a few houses... One of the houses that a sister of my [mother] whom we all knew and loved very much stayed and her husband was a soldier. And her two boys were there. And, well, anyway. Very tense, everything. And we left and she committed suicide.

(Very long pause)

ZALOOM: When you left there, where did you go?

SCHUMANN: We left towards the Baltic. To Schleswig-Holstein. That's near the Danish border. To a village where my parents had met as young people. My father as tutor to a land owning family and my mother as a nurse to that same family. And they had met there.... And I think those folks were informed that we came. We were picked up with horse buggy.... And anyway, so it wasn't just us arriving. There were many refugees arriving in that village and all the surrounding villages. Tiny little villages that had a style, a medieval style of agriculture with straw thatched one-story houses where the actual farmers lived. And the landlord in a mansion near the barns and the horse stables and all of that. And these villages
were flooded by refugees. So there were people walking, horse back, dragging kinder wagons, little hand wagons. Floods of people. Pomeranians. Silesians. East Prussians. All Eastern provinces. Emptied out.

ZALOOM: And they were all fleeing the Russians?

SCHUMANN: They were fleeing the Russians and they were at that point not yet expelled. So they both fled and expelling probably started already. I'm not so sure.

ZALOOM: And there were also ships that were taking refugees from the Baltic coast and soldiers from the Baltic coast to Denmark and around the coast to other parts of Germany. Is that why you headed in that direction?

SCHUMANN: No. I think the goal of my parents was to be out of bombardment areas. They assumed the countryside would be secure. And also they had that connection to that farming family. It was a big, ancient aristocratic family who owned probably three of the big farms in that province, Schleswig-Holstein....Their kids were my father's students. And anyway, yeah ok, so we got a little room for our family in that mansion. Next to us was a Pomeranian family, also got a little room with three kids. Then there was an East Prussian guy who had come with horse and wagon. Some of these refugees integrated themselves into the farm work. This was a horse worked farm with about a hundred milkers, cows. Horses did all the work. They didn't have tractors and such. Actually the better horses had
all been drafted into the army or cavalry. So they had only the old horses and so forth. My brother became a horse-man. He was three years older. So at age 13 he was one of the team workers of the horses. I became a milker. Yep.

ZALOOM: How did the...local community receive people who were coming as refugees...There were shortages of food at that time. Were you considered a threat? Were you welcome? What was that dynamic like?

SCHUMANN: It was a very difficult dynamic. The village simply wasn't built for this overload and my parents didn't feel that we should go to the local school. They thought it was too dangerous. So they sent us to a school that was like three miles away. We had to walk there and back. The local kids beat us up.

ZALOOM: Many of us have heard your stories of gleaning individual grains of rye in the fields and baking communally. Was this happening at this time? Was this later on?

SCHUMANN: No, the village had these old habits. They had a communal oven about the size or a little bigger than my big oven here and villagers would bring a board of loves, each family once a week, and a baker would heat the oven and you know, peel your loves in and you came back and you had to have a sign on your loaves so that you could find which one your loaf was and the curious thing was that ...all the heating...it was a very cold winter. The Baltic froze over that winter. The heating wasn't done like here with split wood from trees. What they used for fuel for heating the ovens as well as their houses was the cuttings from
the hedgerows. It’s flat country and they have hedgerows between the fields and annually they cut down. The hedgerows which grow back and all that shrub, that is the fuel that they use for heating their houses and heating their wood stoves and also their baking ovens. So there everywhere are giant piles of brush. And that’s what people used for it. They didn’t cut down trees for heating purposes.

ZALOOM: So this was the winter of ’45? Is that right?

SCHUMANN: Of ’44 or ’45. We arrived there in ’44, yes, then came the turn of the year ’45. In May ’45 was the capitulation. So the Brits arrived in jeeps and so on. And the villagers didn’t know what to do. I don’t know. There wasn’t much, there wasn’t any fighting there. No ground fighting or anything. Everything was finished. It was capitualized, you know.

ZALOOM: ....Can you tell us what you ate for breakfast?

SCHUMANN: (Laughs and pauses) Turnips.

ZALOOM: And what did you eat for lunch.

SCHUMANN: (Laughing) Turnips.

ZALOOM: And what about dinner?

SCHUMANN: (Still chuckling) Turnips.

ZALOOM: So, I’m guessing you ate a lot of turnips.
SCHUMANN: We were so sick of turnips we couldn’t look at them anymore. But it was the one big quantity food available. The only thing. Everything else was precious. Grain was precious. Veggies were precious. A piece of meat naturally.

Off and on a pig died or something happened marvelously or somebody, a soldier, there were soldiers in encampments around us and they shot a calf, or something like this happened, and then all of a sudden there was a piece of meat or something. So, it was like that.

ZALOOM: I’m curious how your relationship to food in your life was influenced by your being a refugee?

SCHUMANN: Well, that it is precious. So we had to learn all the mushrooms, you know, and all the berries. We had to learn stealing. Climbing into the lord’s orchard and stealing pears and apples. Which was punishable, badly. And so on. Yeah, we did everything. We went fishing. There was a little pond. We tried to catch some fish in there. Everything possible. We were always hungry. So...

ZALOOM: And did that experience have an effect on the way that you regard food or handle food, think about food...

SCHUMANN: I think so. Surely it does, yeah. I mean there were also fantastically interesting snacks. For example, the farmers had the habit of storing sugar beets. They
chopped them up into little pieces and they stored them on a wooden floor. And we, village kids, not just us, the refugees, everybody knew about where that floor was. So we snuck...

ZALOOM: And they were raw sugar beets that you ate?

SCHUMANN: Well, those were sugar beets that were dried and they were sweet like candy. But we also collected sugar beets in the field and made our own syrup. And I remember my dad negotiating with a local blacksmith a little press, and we had a little press to press the beets with and then it gets boiled for a long time and all that.

Yep.

ZALOOM: What was the economy like in that situation? I imagine there wasn't a lot of cash going around....

SCHUMANN: No. There was no value to cash. My father taught the kids in school. My father just taught. He just sat in the meadow and the kids came and he did a half an hour biology and a half an hour Greek language, half an hour mathematics, half an hour literature and like that. He knew English, Latin, Greek and taught those. And kids in return would give him dried peas, I remember.
When the Germans invaded the east and went all the way up to Stalingrad and close to Moscow, Leningrad. They did a lot of scorched earth. They killed tens of millions of people and then when the Russians, after Stalingrad, when they...started moving Westward, Stalin I think publically said “Do whatever you want.” That included the rape of half a million German women and the murder of...many, many, many civilians. I’m just wondering, because so many German soldiers and German civilians were desperately trying to get to the West because they did not hear these rumors apparently about the allies who had bombed them...

Can you talk a little about what you heard and what you thought about the Russians at that time?

SCHUMANN: Well...My family is curiously, was so interested in...They loved Tolstoy. They loved Leskov. They loved Pushkin. My parents learned Russian after the war when we were refugees. They took Russian lessons. So they didn’t have any of this anti-Russianism in them at all...Our friend in Germany was one of the best Pushkin translators. Henry Von Heisler. Russian literature was a big thing. My father knew Pushkin short stories by heart.

ZALOOM: But did you hear rumors? Were people around you afraid?

SCHUMANN: Sure. The Baltic froze that winter, ’44, ’45. That is an extraordinary event. It’s the bay in the Baltic, it’s called the Lübicker Bucht. It’s a huge bay. You can see the province of Mecklenburg on the other side. We, as kids, we walked over the frozen Baltic, which doesn’t freeze like a lake. It freezes like a mountainous moon landscape. Because as the sea freezes, the waves pile up ice. So it’s mountains of ice and we loved that landscape. So we went ... until we couldn’t see land anymore, into the Baltic. And refugees came over the
Baltic. Because the other side, Mecklenburg was Russian occupied and this side was British occupied. So they came....

(discussion of where they were on the peninsula, with Schumann using his left hand to simulate the peninsula and pointing out towns he had referenced with his right).

ZALOOM:... There’s were a lot of people fleeing to the Baltic Sea hoping to get on ships that would take them...further West into Germany and there were also many German soldiers who were trying to get on these ships. It was a very chaotic scene on the Baltic Coast in many different ports. Did you witness any of that...were you close to the ocean where you were?

SCHUMANN: We were pretty close to the ocean. I think the walking distance from the village to the ocean was at most two kilometers. I think rather one and a half. Gravely road, there. And one day a few boys, local boys and me stood on the hillside from which you could see all the way to Mecklenburg over the Baltic, over that bay and airplanes, there was a huge, huge ocean liner, harbored right there on the other side, on the Mecklenburg side, and these airplanes flew straight overhead us and the sound of it, unforgettable. That very steady sound and then...(whistles) and then you saw fire spring up. And they kept bombarding that ship. And then the next week every day there were piles of bodies on the shore. And they were all dressed in prison uniforms. So, it was a bombardment of a prison ship.

ZALOOM: ...Do you have any idea towards the end of the war how close the Russians were and were they still advancing toward you?

SCHUMANN: No, the rest of all that was meetings of Churchill, Stalin, Roosevelt, you know, sitting together and figuring things out... Like Silesia with the stroke of a pen was made over
to Poland and East Prussia to Russia. It was all done with writing and bartering between the main powers.

ZALOOM: Right, The Yalta Conference I think. So when did you see your first allied occupier and what was the relationship with them and how did they treat you?

SCHUMANN: They didn't. I mean, it was amazingly normal. They just arrived with jeeps. I don't know what they did. There was some incidents with... Polish prisoners who had been workers on this farm had gotten hold of a gun and a ship had wrecked, right there in that bay and the sailors were housed in that manor. And I remember an incident where the Polish people with their gun, these young men, and these sailors were in the room together with the owner, the aristocrat who owned that place. And I don't know what demands they made or what it was, but the sailors all stood there like this (crosses his arms), and the people with the gun didn't dare, didn't seem to dare do anything. Sort of petered out. Nothing happened. So no drama evolved out of that story.

ZALOOM: So, once the armistice was signed by the Allies on May 8\textsuperscript{th} and the Russians on May 9\textsuperscript{th} what happened next? Where did you go?...

SCHUMANN: We stayed on the farm. We didn't know where else to go. We couldn't go back. We knew what happened to Silesia. There was no transportation. My father looked for a job. He hitchhiked with army vehicles to nearby bigger towns and he found a teaching job in a high school nearby, not so nearby. Took him half a day to get there. Kiel. It's a bigger town. And, yeah, he started teaching in that school and his family was on the farm. So he came and visited weekends if he could find rides. But the only rides available were army vehicles....

ZALOOM: How long were you there? Where did you move next?
SCHUMANN: We were there till ’48. We moved to Hanover. That’s Saxony. Northern Saxony. In German Niedersachsen...And my dad got a huge job there. To be headmaster of a double school that had to be thrown together in one building because there wasn’t enough buildings and so on. Hanover was probably 90% destroyed. Something like that. All ruins, ruins, ruins. And so the buildings that were left were very precious, so they consolidated a lot of schools and things. And he got that huge school. (laughs) to headmaster and oh my god. And we were allowed to live in one of the classrooms. It wasn’t a classroom. It was like it was meant for office or something like that. So our whole family crowded into a couple of rooms and lived in the school for a few years.

ZALOOM: And when did the situation with food change? Did the allies provide any food to you or where you on your own until you moved to Hanover?

SCHUMANN: Yeah, even in Hanover, bartering was still a common way of getting food. And I don’t know when money became important...probably took a few years. But I remember when I ate my first piece of chocolate (chuckles).

ZALOOM: When was that...was it in Hanover?


ZALOOM: How ‘bout your first cigarette, do you remember that.

SCHUMANN: (laughing) Oh, cigarettes, oh my god. We had soldiers encamped that taught us cigarette making and smoking. That was a common habit...There wasn’t any tobacco available but they knew how to make cigarettes from horse shit. That was very common. The horse shit mixed with leaves. I forget which leaves. (chuckles). We were all chain smokers.
ZALOOM: Horse shit chain smokers.

SCHUMANN: As a ten year old.

ZALOOM: I'm curious. I remember seeing Gray Lady Cantata #2 and remember feeling like it was such a primal representation of war that I just had this feeling like it had to be something that was really influenced by your experience. Just the sound of the bass drums, the way the lights flashed...can you talk a little bit about how your experience of the bombardments and your experience as a refugee influenced your work in specific ways and in general ways.

SCHUMANN: I remember a bombardment in that village. I woke up in the middle of the night to loud noises and I looked out and I saw a forest burning. And I ran around and woke everybody up. And they all got up and run in the cellar and they were all trembling from fear and I only remember how I found it only exciting. I didn’t feel any fear. But then we heard the bombardments. The bombs fell all around us. All over. And I mean really big detonations and stuff. And I only remember that it was not fearful...And then next morning when was all over...it seemed to be a aimless bombardment where a squadron of airplanes just got rid of their weight and ammunition and dropped it. And they missed all the buildings. There were giant craters all around the farm. One next to the chief, the biggest barn. Another one right outside. All over the place. And not a single thing was hit of any importance. And then water collected in those things and became swimming pools. Yeah. That was a lucky bombardment. For once. But the bombardments earlier, no, there was no such aspect to them. You felt helplessly exposed. That’s what it is. Even as a kid, you didn’t have any choice but being in fear. Yeah. (pause) Well, sure, I mean my first production in American I called Töten Tanz, The Dance of Death. In ’61...It's actually a medieval traditional
dance that happened during the years of the pestilence. All through 14\textsuperscript{th}, 15\textsuperscript{th} century there was huge Dance of Death events in France, in Germany and all over the place. And so that was a dance that I had developed in Germany in the ‘50’s and then when I came here to New York. These are all boring stories because I told them before. The War Resister’s League and The Living Theater did a call for a general strike for peace and I offered that Dance of Death and that’s what we performed.

ZALOOM: I’ve heard you speak of that, but I actually don’t know when you did your first puppet show.

SCHUMANN: Ah, my first hand-puppet show I did it as a kid in that village because the soldiers who were encamped there, they had a tent for meetings and I don’t know what else, and I went around the village and I went to the tents of the soldier and I said: "We are doing a puppet show." And we set up our normal curtain there and I, um, enslaved my brother. (laughs) “It’s not your puppet, it’s my puppet.” I mean he’s three years younger, he had to do what I told him to. So, yeah. Puppet shows.

ZALOOM: Was there cigarette barter or anything like that? Would they tip you or give you anything?

SCHUMANN: No, no. There wasn’t anything like this. It just was a puppet show. (pause) Yeah. (chuckles). Yeah. Utter ridiculous. Wonderful. Yeah.

ZALOOM: Can you tell us when you did your first puppet show as an adult...? It wasn't the Töten Tanz? That was a masked dance?

SCHUMANN: Yeah, we called it a dance company. Near Munich. We lived, Elka and I lived with friends in a little village near Munich and we started, tried to start a dance company,
that we called: Gruppe Vier Neun Tanz and we did performances in various locations. Wherever people let us do it. But also I did concerts with my friend Dieter who played clarinet and later learned the cello and we just advertised a concert and asked churches I remember in Munich. And they gave us space. And we did performances of those things.

ZALOOM: I don’t mean to be pushy, so when was the first puppet show?

SCHUMANN: Well, that’s it. These dances were puppet shows because they included asking ten people to be inside a big bag and only their arms would stick out and then their hand moved...sound familiar? (laughs). And stuff like that. But also big painted faces and objects and so forth were part of it. Rope. Roping each other together and seeing what could we move. Like, after we are totally roped up. Yeah. So sort of a very basic, physical dancing. But, underneath it all, deeply influenced by war. Definitely.

ZALOOM: Was Germany a hospitable place for avant-garde dance at that time?

SCHUMANN: No it wasn’t. It was all to zero effect, I would say. Exactly zero or maybe zero point one or something like that. No more than that. No. So when I saw people doing...you know we were friends with quite a man, an aristocrat from Bohemia who was the head of The Old Pinakothek, that’s one of the oldest museums in Germany. In Munich. And he took a liking to our dance and doings and invited us to the Donaueschingen Festival, which was the biggest avant-garde music festival in the world. With Stockhausen, Boulez, Fortner. All the big names in music had their beginning in Donaueschingen, so they all came there. Luigi Nono. Schoenberg’s son in law Ligeti. Everybody was there. So this was an enormous event. And the music, well it’s all owed to Schoenberg in a way. It was revolutionizing and revolutionary music. It was incredible, the radicality of it. Especially the discovery of Webern. Webern, who wrote most of his stuff in two and three minute pieces and those
pieces were explosions. They were, [laughs]. Yeah, that was the atmosphere. So, in Danaueschingen and in a couple of radio stations, I think Cologne and Paris had programs of that kind of thing. And that was it in Europe. That was it. Yeah, but America was similarly not ready for any Schoenberg revolution at all.

ZALOOM:...I’m just really curious, because you mentioned Schoenberg, who was an artist who mainly worked the interwar period, in the Weimar period and...

SCHUMANN: And fled to America and tried to get a well paying job here, hopelessly, yep.

ZALOOM: So, I’m guessing you knew the work of Otto Freundlich, the sculptor, Dix and George Grosz and Emil Nolde and all the interwar German expressionist, New Objectivity painters and sculptors. Just indulge me and tell me how you first found out about their work and how much you feel like you are indebted to them in your own work.

SCHUMANN: Yeah, deeply indebted for sure. Yeah, Kirchner and you know the wood carving tradition in German Expressionism especially but also the relationship to medieval art. Like Dix was a war prisoner in Colmar where the Grunewald Altar is.

ZALOOM: In the first war.

SCHUMANN: Yeah, in the first war. Most of Dix’s work is in relationship to the Grunewald Altar. And that is just one hell of a central piece for the development of art that people are even now unaware of. How the Grunewald Altar was the change of Middle Ages to Renaissance. And eaten up both, all the essence of Middle Ages and The Renaissance are contained within that altar.

ZALOOM: And you became aware of that interwar expressionist, new objectivity when you were in college studying sculpture and dance...
SCHUMANN: No, in high school. Yeah... Totally.

ZALOOM: And was there any kind of public rehabilitation of these artists that you were aware of?

SCHUMANN: Well, some of them were alive. Heckel was alive... Grosz was in New York teaching. Beckmann was in New York. You know there was a lot of Germans, both musicians writers and so on. Thomas Mann was in America. Brecht was in America. The whole big cream of these revolutionaries had fled or otherwise succeeded to get out of there. And as you know, some of them went to Russia first... Most of them ended up here in the states.

ZALOOM... I make illusion to the gleaning that you did after the harvesters... Would you explain how you gathered rye?

SCHUMANN: Well, for being a milker I got a little milk, you know, for our family. For the other foods you really had to glean. For the sugar beets or the turnips or the potatoes. You had to go after that. You had to know when they harvest and then go. And the fields at that time looked like, so there were the farmers with the horses doing the harvesting and tossing in and there was a wall of refugees going over the field behind them every little inch was taken. In line. Everybody with a bag (laughing), going and picking up every little piece. That's what they lived on. So you picked up everything. And the grain picking was the most important one. It was, it's still the staple. You know, it's what people grew up with. In these old diets bread is the big staple. One major food. Out of three meals, two are bread meals, and that continued. Bread was used as payment. Bread was sacred. Bread couldn't be put into upside down position. There were so many rules for bread... No, but anyway, that was the most important thing. To pick grain. And since the main grain in that area is rye, mostly what you picked was rye and you had the little coffee grinder and you grind the grain and
you make your sour dough and, you know. And my mother had learned baking from one of her...nurses, you know, people who helped her with us kids. She was a country woman...and from then on after, I think I didn’t learn wheat bread or any other form...like birthday bread or Sunday bread or something like that. It just didn’t exist....Like cake. Whereas the rye bread was what people ate.

ZALOOM: And the starter that you use now is derived from your mother’s starter, is that right?

SCHUMANN: No, no. It’s starter that I got from my sister, and I always say it’s 150 years old. So thirty years ago it was 150 years old. So now it’s 155 years old.

OTHER PERSON IN THE ROOM: When you were fleeing, in those years, what was your clothing, what did you wear?

SCHUMANN: Probably what we brought and my mom...Well actually it’s a pretty good question. We had to pick the fences, the barbed-wire fences for sheep wool. And my mom learned spinning and I remember having pants that were made from it.

ZALOOM: So she would glean the wool that got stuck on the barbed-wire fences?

SCHUMANN: We would glean it. We would bring it to her. She...got herself a spindle, I think from Hamburg, from my aunt’s house. And she learned spinning. There were villagers who were very good at it. And she would knit and knit our everything. And the rest was the rags we had brought from home...

ZALOOM: So you were really living, in many ways like medieval times...

SCHUMANN: Yeah, that’s how it was. I think it’s called refugeedom.
OTHER PERSON IN THE ROOM: How did that experience of never ending hunger inform your perspective coming to the United States and how you thought about the American Dream...?

SCHUMANN: Well, when you are thin enough you want to be fat enough. You come for the fat. No, I came for a visit. I didn’t come to America to get fat. We came to America to visit Elka’s parents...And then we got stuck.

ZALOOM: What do you mean?

SCHUMANN: You know, hot glue on the seats. No, it wasn’t a desire to move to America. Our impressions at that time of America that we had in Europe were not good ones. We were not impressed by what was happening in America. We were much more interested in what was happening in Eastern countries. That seemed much more interesting, these developments in Eastern countries. Because there were developments inside these so called communist block countries. So, no.

OTHER PERSON IN THE ROOM: But you did settle in America...so how did these experiences influence...

SCHUMANN: Right. Well, you know, it’s gleaning and garbage picking and all that. I think in New York...we had the biggest mop and broom stick collection that you could imagine. Should have started a museum right there and then. Because every time you went on the Lower East Side you would see broom sticks or mops that would be tossed out and we collected all of them and all the early puppets were all built...All the wigs were mops and all the sticks that supported the puppets were broom sticks. Or mop sticks...

OTHER PERSON IN THE ROOM: How did you and Elka meet?
SCHUMANN: Hmmm. Secretly.

OTHER PERSON IN THE ROOM: ...As a child living in a war zone or as a refugee how did...the war or the refugee life effect your family relationships...?

SCHUMANN: ...War, especially that Nazi war was horrible. We grew up as kids and when my parents had visitors we were put into a room to not listen...there was no talking. You know, because my parents couldn't afford for us to listen into what they talked with adults. You know, it was all secrecy. People were afraid all the time. In a fascist country you are afraid all the time. You are afraid of everything. You can’t speak in school...And I don't remember my parents giving us orders so as to not say who was there and all this but I remember this fearful atmosphere. Tremendously. Or when somebody came into the house and we were, (whistles). Shoved away. That’s what war is like. Or Fascism.

ZALOOM: Did you have a sense as a kid what would happen with the Gestapo and people ratting each other out and hidden radios and all that, people listening to the BBC?

SCHUMANN: No, there wasn’t any BBC in our...My parent’s didn’t listen to radio. Radio was awful. It was all propaganda....They had a radio, but I don’t think we, the kids, listened to radio. It was all propaganda you know. “Now the German Army succeeded to take that Polish town”...It was all like that...

OTHER PERSON IN THE ROOM: Have you ever been back to where you grew up?

SCHUMANN: Yes, we traveled in Poland. Our best audiences we always had were always Polish audiences ...Very enthusiastic audiences...But the town of Breslau was falling to the Russian Army after capitulation. So in other words they organized the self-defense of the home forces, which included kids from 12 years on to kids 84 years old to defend the city
after it was already destroyed. Breslau was the most destroyed city in the war. It was like a field of ruins. And I remember when we went there...oh my god. You climbed up on rubles of brick to go from one street to another... And they rebuilt it! And the strange thing about the rebuilding of Breslau is that Breslau is beautifully rebuilt....the old city is rebuilt as it was before the war by a population of Polish people who were forcefully moved into that area after the war. They didn’t want to be there. They were forced from Galicia and other areas that Russia took. They had not chosen to be there. And they rebuilt that city...incredibly... There was this 18th century Italian painter Canaletto. He had painted Krakow and I think Breslau. He was a city painter. And they had used his paintings to rebuild the city.

OTHER PERSON IN THE ROOM: Do you remember what you felt when the war was over?

SCHUMANN: When the war was over? I was picking nettles for the pigs I think. Something like that. I don’t know. I was working on the farm. I wasn't very aware of when the war was over. The war was over in stages. For us the war was over when we went on that train and had to go away from home. And then the other events were all in stages. There wasn’t a day where the war was over.

OTHER PERSON IN THE ROOM: Can you talk about when you were in high school and you tried to have a dance company and you tried...

SCHUMANN: To get my classmates to learn flying. Yeah. I gave flying lessons. But they didn’t work. We had, at the school that my father had, had a huge loft that was unutilized so the only thing that was in there was big roles of flooring. Like linoleum style stuff that was harvested every so often because it was worn through. Had holes in it and new stuff had to be put in. So those rolls were up there and I painted on them to make giant paintings. And
that whole space was available so I thought we could learn flying. If we could hop higher and higher eventually you know, and use your arms. I remember attempting again and again. We thought yeah, almost...

ELKA SCHUMANN: But wasn’t your oldest sister conscripted into being...

SCHUMANN: She was, into being a cleaning whatever, yeah...She must have been 14. Yeah. Four years older than me...So yeah, she was conscripted to work and they ruined her health, badly....They gave her pills against menstruation...just terrible. It was terrible. So they used kids in the war. As many wars do. They use kids...

(Schumann interview).

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