**Ric Knowles**

# **Performing the Divided Self:** The Refugee Theatre of Ahmad Meree[1]

*for Majdi Bou-Matar*

Ahmad Meree is unique among Canadian playwrights. Bringing influences from the Theatre of the Absurd and the existentialist philosophy that undergirded much of that post-World War II theatrical moment in Europe to bear on his own position as a refugee of the Syrian war,[2] Meree has in his first three plays in Canada introduced a kind of neo-existentialist exilic refugee theatre that is grounded, unlike the work of most of the classical existentialists, in his own experience and in the realities of contemporary global politics and life in Canada. Meree's existentialist vision is not, like those of Jean-Paul Sartre, Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, and others who have influenced him, grounded in a universalist articulation of "the human condition," of "man" [*sic*] standing alone in the universe; rather, it is historically specific and deeply personal. And it lifts existentialist philosophy and the Theatre of the Absurd out of their positions as phenomena relegated to the historical past to constitute a renewed kind of exilic vision for the Canadian twenty-first century. This essay will contextualize Meree's work with an account of his own refugee experience, on which all of his plays to date are based, and try to locate the plays in relation to existentialist philosophy and Yana Meerzon's articulations of "exilic theatre" in the land now called Canada.

Exilic theatre presents perhaps surprising convergences with existentialist philosophy and the Theatre of the Absurd. Exilic theatre, as defined by Meerzon in her monograph *Performing Exile, Performing Self*, is "a transient state of transnational experience and transcultural art" that is characterized by what she calls the "exilic performative" (3), in which the artist living in exile (re)fashions an alienated, divided,

theatricalized self, employing autobiography, memory, metatheatre, and multilingualism (or the collision of languages).[3] Cut off from their cultures of origin, exilic artists—and particularly, I would argue, those who are refugees—are confronted with the freedom and obligation to (re)invent their own subjectivities and construct their own meanings. The so-called Theatre of the Absurd, thus labelled by Martin Esslin in a book of that name first published in 1961, is a grouping-together of a diverse body of plays by Euro-American men from the post-World War II period characterized by absence, emptiness, nonsense, and nothingness. The characters in these plays find themselves lost in a universe without meaning: "Cut off from his [*sic*] religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (Ionesco, qtd. in Esslin, *Theatre* 23). The plays—of Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, Genet, Pinter, Albee, and others—are inhabited, like exilic theatre, by characters who must take responsibility for fashioning their own identities and meanings, and like exilic theatre these plays are often self-referential and metatheatrical in form. They are also often, like Meree's plays, very funny. Many of the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd, finally, are grounded in the French existentialist philosophy that also emerged out of the horrors of World War II. Jean-Paul Sartre articulated this philosophy most comprehensively in his *Being and Nothingness* (*L'être et le néant*, 1943) and popularly summarized his view as "existence precedes essence" (588): that is, being has no inherent reason or justification, as a (universalist) "man" finds himself in a condition of angst, faced with the freedom and responsibility to, again, give meaning to a beingness that he did not choose.[4]

What I am calling Meree's "refugee theatre" draws from both existentialist philosophy and the traditions of the Theatre of the Absurd, and it rewards theoretical analysis based on Meerzon's articulations of exilic theatre. Meree's work is also influenced by a determinedly political, imagistic, and physical contemporary theatre in the Middle East and North Africa that I have witnessed in the past several years at Arab theatre festivals (the major sites for the dissemination of Arab theatre). This theatre largely reflects and addresses a widespread despair in the wake of the failure of the

Arab Spring movement throughout the Arab world, as the Theatre of the Absurd did in the wake of World War II. Much of that work focuses on issues of identity and remains grounded in European theatrical traditions, including the Theatre of the Absurd. This is particularly true of the work of the best-known Syrian playwright and Meree's favourite, Saadallah Wannous (Email), all of whose work is political, and whose early work was also strongly influenced by the European Theatre of the Absurd. Wannous came to be known for an attitude summed up in his World Theatre Day address in 1996, when he was suffering from the cancer that would kill him the following year: "Our lot," he proclaimed, "is to hope."[5] As we will see, Meree emerges in some significant ways from recent decades of Arab theatre that have been characterized, in a 2012 collection of essays inspired by Wannous, as "doomed by hope" (Houssami).[6] Refugee theatre, as exemplified by the work of Meree, I argue, emerges from a coalescence of influences that have brought him to write and perform himself into meaning, and even, ultimately, into some version of hope, in an alienating Canadian society that he did not choose, and in which, despite support from within the theatre community, he often finds himself alone.

Ahmad Meree came to Canada in 2016 at the age of twenty-five, co-sponsored as an actor and a Syrian refugee by the MT Space Theatre in Kitchener, Ontario. Meree was born in Aleppo, joining his school's theatre group and being cast in his first play at the age of fourteen. "But honestly before I even joined the theatre group," Meree recalls,

> I knew what I wanted from the time I was 10 years old. I wanted to be an actor. Performing with the school's theatre group and then later with a group in the University of Aleppo (although I wasn't a student in the university) I got the attention of a director in the National Theatre of Aleppo who asked me to join him in a play he was directing. (Email)

He was accepted into the National Theatre of Aleppo at eighteen and worked there for the first time with professionals, *as* a professional (Meree, "The Interview").

Meree and his colleagues had been excited by the 2011 Syrian revolution (part of the larger Arab Spring), but were devastated when that movement devolved into the repressive Syrian war of attrition by

the regime of president Bashar al-Assad. "Suddenly a lot of Syrians like myself found ourselves under bombing in the middle of a war when you could die at any moment," Meree says (Email). He had been involved in protests and had been sought out by the regime at the theatre where he worked. He was, moreover, worried about being forced into compulsory military service in support of a regime he despised. In 2012 he left for Egypt and enrolled in the four-year program in the Higher Institute of Theatre Arts at the Academy of Arts in Cairo where he studied acting, with a minor in directing, and trained in such things as improvisation, juggling, piano, painting, and the history of drama, including both Western and Arabic theatre.

In his final year of studies, with the situation at home no closer to any kind of resolution, Meree's Syrian passport expired. The Syrian embassy in Cairo refused to renew it, and the Egyptians, who had been deporting Syrians, would not renew his visa. He couldn't safely return to Syria, and he couldn't stay in Egypt, a situation later reflected in his play *Suitcase*. "I started to lose hope," he says (qtd. in Fricker). He contemplated paying smugglers and undertaking the notoriously dangerous crossing of the Mediterranean to Europe, but, as reported by Karen Fricker, "Possibility opened up in the form of contact with Siba Al-Khadour, the co-founder and executive director of Levant Canada, a Kitchener-based organization that enables refugee sponsorship initiatives and supports refugee integration through the arts and culture." Al-Khadour contacted Majdi Bou-Matar, the Lebanese Canadian founding artistic director of MT Space Theatre, who started an *Indiegogo* campaign that raised $13,500 in two months to bring Meree to Canada. "When the opportunity to come to Canada came along," he says, "I didn't hesitate. But it still doesn't feel like I chose" (Email)—a comment that resonates with a major speech in his most recent play, as discussed below. Refugees do not have the right or opportunity to choose. His parents, at the time, refused to leave Syria; when they later decided to try to come to Canada, it was not possible. And of course Meree himself cannot safely return to his country of birth to reunite with them—a source, for him, of considerable anguish that underlies all of his dramatic work.

When he arrived in Canada in July 2016, he was picked up at the airport by Bou-Matar and Syrian Canadian actor Nada Humsi (also with MT Space), who welcomed him to Kitchener and to MT Space as his artistic home. According to Bou-Matar, most of the funding raised to bring Meree to Canada came from "Canadian actors, directors, and playwrights" who continue to provide him solid, and necessary, emotional support (Ahlmidi). When he arrived in Canada Meree spoke little English, but he quickly established himself as an actor and artistic associate at MT Space, where he has been a co-creator of their devised work—including two shows dealing with the experience of a Syrian refugee family, *The Occupy Project* and *Amal*—and co-director of their Young Company, a group of BIPOC students sponsored by MT Space to learn the rudiments of theatrical creation. He is also a core member of Theatre Mada, a collective of Arab theatre artists in the Waterloo Region founded by Humsi and Bou-Matar. In the six years since his arrival, he has established himself as a Canadian playwright with a unique semi-autobiographical perspective on the refugee experience. Meree's work as a playwright in Canada tracks his own emergence from civil war in Aleppo and the shelling that destroyed most of the eastern half of the city, including the neighbourhood where he grew up and the building he grew up in. It also tracks, from a personal if quirky perspective, the refugee experience in Canada. As Bou-Matar says, Meree's work is "humorous, it's political and it's very personal" (qtd. in Ahlmidi). His first two plays, *Adrenaline* (2017) and *Suitcase* (2019), both directed by Bou-Matar and premiering in Arabic with English surtitles at the Registry Theatre in Kitchener, have toured to festivals in Canada, were performed together as part of Theatre Passe Muraille's mainstage season in 2020, and were published together back-to-back in Arabic and English by Scirocco Drama, also in 2020. His latest work, *I Don't Know*, premiered at the IMPACT International Theatre Festival in 2021 directed by MT Space's current artistic director, Pam Patel. It is his first play written in English.

Meree's work might be understood to inhabit a subcategory, refugee theatre, of what Yana Meerzon has usefully identified as *exilic*—or later *cosmopolitan*—theatre, though I find the earlier term more

applicable to his body of work. Much of Meerzon's work is concerned with those whose exilic condition, geographical or cultural, has come about through the exercise of some degree of choice or agency and whose outlook is cosmopolitan. I use *refugee theatre*, however, to refer to work produced out of a need to *claim* some agency by artists whose circumstances have been forced upon them and who, in Wannous' terms, are "doomed by hope." Meree's work inhabits a virtually unexplored space in Canadian professional theatre, where the refugee experience in this country has rarely been the subject of theatrical representation except in the case of applied theatre in work with non-actors by artists such as Yasmine Kandil, herself an immigrant (though not a refugee) from Egypt.[7]

Meree's work deals with the (cruel) incongruity of the refugee experience largely through the destabilizing lens of an absurdist brand of humour that is stylistically closest to the work of Ionesco. It is firmly grounded, too, in the kind of philosophical existentialism propounded in the postwar Europe of the 1940s and 1950s that also underpinned much of what Martin Esslin famously labelled the Theatre of the Absurd, the only theatrical influence Meree identifies in a 2021 interview with his publisher ("The Interview"). He dates the Theatre of the Absurd's earliest influence on him to his final year of theatre school, when he directed and acted in Ionesco's *La Leçon*. Few non-immigrant playwrights in Canada are now influenced by the Theatre of the Absurd or directly by post-World War II European high modernism, but in being so influenced, Meree joins the company of other exilic artists from the Middle East who are trained under those influences and for whom the experience of postwar anguish or despair is still directly relevant. This juncture of influence and experience is evidenced in the work of directors such as Lebanese Canadian Majdi Bou-Matar, of MT Space Theatre, and Iranian Canadian Soheil Parsa, founder and director for over thirty years of Toronto's Modern Times Stage Company.

Meree's own grounding in what I think of as "the existentialist absurd," as I have argued elsewhere (Knowles 12), allows him to be unflinching in his representation of things that many in the West have little direct experience of—war, torture, deep personal and political

instability—without being exploitative of human suffering in the way much media coverage of the refugee experience can be. His plays are deeply felt without invoking the easy, appropriative empathy and the concomitant cathartic release of "a good cry," and they provide at once powerful and playful—indeed often very funny—theatrical windows into a world that was created, but hidden from view, by policies and practices of the Global West and North. And their grounding in the lived experience of a racialized and minoritized refugee allows Meree to avoid the pitfalls of philosophical abstraction.

In 2014 Meree had written a play, *Underground*, at the Academy in Cairo, as a response to what was happening in Aleppo. Four characters, strangers to one another, meet underground sheltering from the bombings, quarrelling ridiculously with one another when they could at any moment be killed. Unlike his later work, it was written in a fundamentally realistic mode; but like that work, it was inspired by his own experience, in this case, of gathering with neighbours in the basement of his family's building, struggling with one another, and taking political sides even as the lethal fighting proceeded outside. Although the play was never produced, it won first place in a new play competition at the Academy. The three plays Meree has written in Canada differ significantly from *Underground*, and from one another, in both form and content. The first, *Adrenaline*, the least complex but perhaps most immediately affective of the informal trilogy, deals centrally with grief; the second, *Suitcase*, with loss; and the third, *I Don't Know*, with fear.

## *Adrenaline*: Everything Becomes Meaningless

As Debbie Fein-Goldbach notes in her review of the play, New Year's Eve is a time of reminiscing. *Adrenaline* is set on the first New Year's Eve in Canada of its central character, Jaber, on the first anniversary of the shelling of his home in what is almost certainly the Battle of Aleppo (2012-2016)—the same event, and shelling of *his* home, that drove Meree to leave Syria. As he says, writing the play was his attempt to relive his experience of that terrifying time, and to tell the story of his Syrian experience to the world ("Playwright's Notes" 10; Ahlmidi). Jaber (played by Meree in every performance to

date) enters his tiny flat as though arriving at a party, complaining of the cold weather, and carrying groceries, leftover pizza from his work at *Pizza Pizza*, and gifts for his brother and parents. His mother, father, and younger brother are represented by what the audience for the one-person show understands, at least at first, to be indexical signs representing his living family:[8] audiences accustomed to suspending their disbelief at first willingly recognize a suit with a hat hanging from a coat stand as Jaber's father, whom he addresses, with great respect, as Abou Jaber. We accept that a shawl draped over a fan represents his mother, whom he teases lightly. And we willingly, if laughingly, allow a propane tank wearing a t-shirt and hat to represent his brother, Salim, whom Jaber defeats at a *PlayStation* game. The coat stand, fan, and propane tank seem, at first, to function as indexical signs for the audience but turn out to do so only for Jaber; for the audience, in the end, they are not only signs but, in Charles Sanders Peirce's sense, icons, standing within the fiction for what they are in the real world in the same way that the chairs and table do.

In the early stages of the short, thirty-five-minute performance Jaber distributes gifts, banter, and food to his family. "Thank God we are still together after all [t]hat happened back home," he proclaims (77). As he reaches back into memory, however—and autobiographical memory plays, as Meerzon indicates, are characteristic of exilic theatre, as the exilic subject attempts to reconstruct the shattered self ("Theatre in Exile")—we realize that these seemingly comic objects are in fact surrogates, in Joseph Roach's sense (2-3), for the family that is not there, but died in the bombing the previous year while Jaber was out buying bread. Roach outlines surrogation as a "three-sided relationship of memory, performance, and substitution" (2), and this relationship plays itself out quite precisely in Meree's monodrama. As in Roach's account, the surrogation here does not succeed; but unlike in Roach's examples, where surrogation is a community endeavour rather than an individual one, it fails spectacularly to stitch together a shaky continuity or to constitute intergenerational cultural memory. "Sometimes I feel like a traitor because I didn't die with you," Jaber says to his family, echoing Meree's own feelings of guilt at having escaped from Syria ("Playwright's Notes" 9). While Meree himself has asked, "What is the price that all

refugees pay for safety?" (Ahlmidi), Jaber, in *Adrenaline*, responds, still addressing his family: "You were the price of my safety," he says. "It's a very high price to pay / And I paid it" (87-88).

As the celebratory New Year's Eve fireworks of his unfamiliar new homeland trigger Jaber's trauma memories of the previous year's bombing, the destruction brought about by those bombings is powerfully represented by his frenetic overturning of the table and visceral demolition of slices of pizza and disemboweling of vegetables. Recovering, Jaber slowly and deliberately tidies up the mess he has created and abandons the illusion. "I have to let you go now . . . I have to say goodbye to you" he tells his surrogate family (88). He methodically restores the coat stand, fan, and propane tank to their mundane, iconic thingness, and is left alone in what Meerzon might call his divided subjectivity (*Performing* passim—alive and safe, but alone and alienated in a world bereft of meaning or significance for him). "I felt," says Meree of his own experience, "like I was physically here but mentally and emotionally, I wasn't" ("The Interview"). Or as Jaber says in the play, in the earliest hint in Meree's oeuvre of the influence of existentialist philosophy, "everything becomes meaningless" (85). The show ends at midnight as Jaber, in isolation at the centre-stage table, in a moment of what reviewer Istvan Dugalin calls "painful absurdity," blows once, desolately, into his unfurling celebratory New Year's Eve noisemaker.

Many of the diverse body of plays that Esslin groups together as Theatre of the Absurd share a self-referential metatheatricality that is also characteristic of Meerzon's exilic theatre. "In exile," Meerzon argues, "the artists find themselves forced to generate instances of meta-discourse as they begin to rely on the devices of meta-dramatic, meta-theatrical, meta-cinematic, and meta-narrative communication" (*Performing Exile* 11). *Adrenaline*'s metatheatre manifests in a disarmingly simple way, as the audience slowly comes to realize over the course of the short play that it is watching the performance of a performance—what Meerzon calls the exilic performative of a divided self (35), both Jaber's and Meree's. Following Judith Butler and invoking J. L. Austin, Meerzon argues that all social identities are performative—that is, are performed into being—but that exilic identities are particularly and, unlike in Butler I would note, consciously so (17).

Theatrical representations of exile, then, are always and inevitably metatheatrical insofar as they are necessarily theatrical performances of the extra-theatrical performing of the self into being.

### *Suitcase*: An Overwhelming Sense of Loss

If *Adrenaline* is centrally about grief and wears its Theatre of the Absurd lineage lightly, *Suitcase*, a two-hander, deals most directly with loss and has evoked among (re)viewers such classics of the Theatre of the Absurd as Sartre's *Huis Clos* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (see Lucas; Dugalin; Fein-Goldbach; Nestruck). But the play was inspired by real-life tragedy. Meree tells the story of asking his mother, when he was in Egypt, to send a suitcase with new clothes to him by way of an old school friend, Abdullah, who was planning to leave Syria for a safer space in Cairo. But Abdullah never showed up. Meree and his mother only later learned, by accident, that he was killed just before his planned escape. This story, and Meree's own memories of "the things that I had hoped to bring with me, the things that I had hoped one day to go back and see and feel" (Email), but that were destroyed when his home was bombed, prompt the play's dedication to Abdullah "and to all those who wanted to leave but couldn't"—including his parents (*Suitcase/Adrenaline* 15).

Sartre's *Huis Clos*—a play that Meree says he "loves very much" (Email)—is the most obvious dramatic inspiration for the setting of *Suitcase*. As in Sartre, the action takes place in an abstract liminal space; in Meree's play, the setting initially suggests some sort of refugee holding centre. The play follows Samer, a Muslim musician, and his wife, Razan, a Christian journalist, played respectively in all performances to date by Meree and Nada Abusaleh. Together, like Didi and Gogo in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Samer and Nada wait, their single suitcase upstage right dominating a stage that is otherwise empty except for two chairs upstage centre and a stand-up microphone down left. The couple passes the time brushing dust—the residue of a bombing—from one another's clothing, arguing about why they left home when they did, reminiscing, playing games, rehearsing their English, and performing versions of their imagined future selves on the mic. Razan flirts and meditates, Samer vents his

frustrations or imagines life as a music star in a new land, and, with the metatheatricality that is characteristic of both the theatre of exile and the Theatre of the Absurd, each rehearses for the other what they will say to "him" when he shows up. Neither the mysterious "him" nor Razan and Samer's location is ever identified: "They don't know where they are," Meree says, "[t]hey are waiting for someone and something to happen. They could be alive waiting for a European immigration officer, or maybe they're dead waiting for God" (Ahlmidi). And like Godot, of course, "he" never does show up, except, perhaps, in the form of mysterious knockings and coloured lights—perhaps only imagined.

Their rehearsals, which take the form of mutual interrogations, involve the revelation of the torture that had drawn false confessions and betrayals from Samer at the hands of a regime he is even now afraid to name, and the violation that Razan, as a journalist, a Christian, and a woman, had undergone at the hands of ISIS. The accounts are graphic and powerful, but the depictions of the characters' relationship are laced with humour—even, in Bou-Matar's staging, physical comedy and farce. The rehearsals also constitute Meerzon's exilic performative, as Razan and Samer attempt to perform into being new versions of their now exilic selves, no longer as musician and journalist, but as humble sellers of popcorn: "there is nothing," Samer says, "like the simple life" (43).

As the action proceeds and Samer and Razan, in a scene worthy of Ionesco for its comic surrealism, see the story of the bombing of their home on the television news, we come to realize that the couple, in delaying their planned escape by one day, had died in the attack and are now in some kind of suspended afterlife, similar to that of the characters in *Huis Clos*.[9] They are nervous and uncertain, but also naively innocent, without the guilt or judgment of Sartre's Garcin, Estelle, and Inèz. Like Beckett's Didi and Gogo, however, they are waiting. As Meree says, "*Suitcase* reflects the post-traumatic psychology suffered by most of those who became displaced, who had to leave everything they loved behind with no option of returning, like myself. We are," he says, "waiting" (Playwright's Notes 10). In *Suitcase*, the waiting is broken up by flashes of concern, then certainty, about what they've forgotten or had to leave behind: the painting, the blue vase, the oud, the house, the neighbourhood kids, the salt, the fleece pyjamas,

the pomegranate syrup, the zucchini scorer, the smell of bread in the morning. The play ends, as Samer and Razan step into their otherwise empty suitcase, with, as one reviewer notes, "an overwhelming sense of loss" (Lucas).

*Globe and Mail* reviewer Kelly Nestruck, noting that Meree had directed Ionesco's *La Leçon* before coming to Canada, comments on the obvious influence on Meree here of the playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd, Ionesco and Beckett in particular, whom Meree elsewhere identifies as his favourites (Email). Nestruck usefully concludes his review by observing, "That post-Second World War artistic movement was a reaction to a world seemingly without meaning following unfathomable death and destruction, and by writing in this mode," he says, "Meree makes it clear that [experience] is not [just] a part of history for many of the people on this planet." Meree himself says that he had been attracted to the work of Ionesco and Beckett long before he really grasped its resonances, but that going through the war had deepened his understanding of their work: "I think because I lived through an experience close to what these kinds of artists went through after World War II, I got more and more interested in it and in creating it" (Email).

## *I Don't Know*: Performing the Divided Self

Meree's most recent play deals, like its predecessors, with grief and loss but is dominated by fear. *I Don't Know* is the playwright's most complex work to date, perhaps best described as an existentialist, absurdist farce about suicidal ideation, and it is where his own distinctive existentialist vision emerges most clearly. It is also the most directly autobiographical of Meree's plays and the one that most accurately reflects Meerzon's accounts of exilic theatre, particularly in its representation of what she calls "the artist's self-estrangement" (*Performing Exile* 5). Unlike the earlier plays, *I Don't Know* is about the refugee experience after the dust has settled, as it were, and the exilic subject—here named Saeed—finds himself alone in his adopted country. The play draws directly on Meree's own experience living in Kitchener, Ontario, using lines actually said to him by his therapist, and quoting verbatim from the results of his own web research on so-called Dr. Google.[10]

As the audience enters the space, Saeed (played by Meree in the premiere) is onstage, waiting. The Man (played by Majdi Bou-Matar) enters in his underwear—neither he nor Saeed knows what he wants, or why he has come—and starts to stoke Saeed's fears: of facial asymmetry, of cancer, of darkness, of death, of COVID-19, of herpes, of car bombs, of a bearded man (Meree, playing Saeed, has a large beard), and "of today, tomorrow, yesterday. Especially yesterday" (25). Later, agreeing that Saeed's life is "shitty" (30), a "farce" (16), The Man urges Saeed to kill himself, a proposition to which Saeed reluctantly agrees, twice. In the premiere, staged in the historic Waterloo County Gaol yard, the first attempt carried with it at once farcical overtones and a site-specific, metatheatrical frisson: when The Man presents the gibbet with a *ta dah!* that channels, on director Pam Patel's instructions, television game show *Wheel of Fortune*'s Vanna White, the moment is also ghosted by the fact that this same location was the site of at least three executions employing a similar stage and gibbet (see "Law and Order"). The attempt is interrupted when Saeed remembers, "I have to make a call." "Coward," The Man responds (20).

What gradually becomes apparent to different audience members at different times—bilingual speakers of English and Arabic will realize before monolingual English speakers—is that Saeed and The Man are the same person, The Man being perhaps best understood as an embodiment of Saeed's fear. This constitutes a powerful and literal embodiment of Meerzon's concept of exilic theatre involving "the divided self" (*Performance* 7-11), or perhaps more precisely, the *I* seeing the self as other (26). The fact that the audience's realization of this comes in large part through linguistic difference—some scenes are played out once in English, once in Arabic, with the characters' roles reversed—is also representative of exilic theatre, where "language often functions as a mechanism for constructing the divided self on stage" (40). At one point in *I Don't Know* Saeed complains to The Man in English, "I don't understand you. I don't understand the language you speak," to which The Man replies in Arabic, "Do you understand me now?" Saeed, clearly understanding, responds, "No, I don't understand that either." "You're scared," observes The Man (10). This multilingual confusion is perhaps best read as representing

what Meerzon, discussing multilingualism in exilic theatre, calls the "cultural explosion" brought on by the exilic position of being at once "*in between and above*," which postulates and conditions "the exilic performative as the émigré's site for the negotiation of self" (*Performing Exile* 22). In the case of the refugee this negotiation is, of course, not voluntary but obligatory, less a negotiation than a struggle imposed by circumstance.

Alienation from the self *as being*—a phenomenon Sartre calls *being for-itself*—grounds the play directly in existentialist philosophy, and in particular that of Sartre as dramatized in his plays, narrativized in his fiction, and expounded in his magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness*. Perhaps more obvious than the influence of Sartre on *I Don't Know*, at least as directed by Patel, is that of the most absurd and even farcical elements of the Theatre of the Absurd—particularly the work of Ionesco: the handing out of one outsized and dozens of other lollipops each time Saeed visits the doctor and the closing of the show with the 1958 song "Lollipop" as recorded by the Chordettes; The Man's use of a gloriously outsized pencil when Saeed dictates his will; The Man's donning of a grotesque black gas mask to protect himself from COVID-19; Saeed's entanglement in reams of computer paper, representing his online research, in a Keystone Cop-style chase scene; the use of a banana as a gun and, later, of another banana's voracious devouring by Saeed to represent sexual intercourse, with the subsequent discarding of its empty peel representing a used condom; and much more.[11] Patel's staging is clearly inspired by the play's dialogue. At one point, as a consolation for Saeed's fear of cancer, The Man offers Saeed a cigarette; at another, Saeed is reluctant to shoot himself because it will make a mess and he's just mopped, or because it will disturb the neighbours—to which The Man replies, "[I]t's a weekend" (31). Saeed is ultimately saved from this second suicide attempt when a sound cue from his cellphone indicates that he has a *Tinder* match.

But what is striking is that this is all grounded in the Sartrean view that existence precedes essence. Sartre's philosophy is rooted, in the introduction to *Being and Nothingness*, in the arguments that man—Sartre consistently uses the universalistic, masculine singular—stands alone in the universe and that existence itself is absurd in the sense

that it has, in itself, no purpose, no direction, no meaning (24-30). It simply is. As Sartre's English translator writes, "Being is already there, without reason or justification" (Barnes xxiv). And this is humanity's source of anguish, despair, and dread. It follows, then, that man is on his own, responsible for his own condition; is continually, of necessity, (re)making himself, as in Meerzon's exilic theatre; and is asking existential questions, that is, questions pertaining to existence. Meerzon writes of exilic theatre that, "unable to properly communicate with the new world, the exile repeatedly asks him/herself the essentialist questions, such as: Who am I? Where am I coming from? What is the purpose of my existence? What am I doing in this world? and Why am I doing what I've chosen or was pushed to do?" (*Performing Exile* 23-24). *I Don't Know* ripples with such questions—"have you ever been a bird?" (2), "why don't you want to die?" (140), "what does right mean?" (25), "what does truth mean?" (26)—and it echoes Sartre's position on the existential dilemma with remarkable accuracy. The Man tells Saeed, "Basically, you're here by chance. Two people had sex then you were born" (15). Elsewhere, Saeed asserts, "we're already here, we had no choice. I think we just have to make the most of it" (26), and later, "we fear [in order] to live. To survive. Everything we do, we do it because we fear something. Hunger, loneliness, death, extinction. . . . So, we eat, make friends, make love" (29). As reviewer Lynn Slotkin says, "It's all existential in Ahmad Meree's new play."

Meree's existentialist vision, like Sartre's, but unlike those of most academic Western philosophers, has been earned. *Being and Nothingness* emerged directly out of Sartre's having fought in World War II and served in the French Resistance. His discussions of despair, (in)decision, dread, and self-deception (or "bad faith"), however centrally reliant on reasoned argument, are grounded, at least in *Being and Nothingness*, not in abstraction but experience. Meree, too, grounds his existentialism in his own experience, as Nestruck has noted: of the Syrian war and, of course, of his own life in Canada as a refugee. "Much of the power" of Meree's plays, Nestruck writes, "comes from the knowledge that their creator is not dealing with abstract ideas, but embodies the subject matter; his presence on a Canadian stage is an artistic statement in itself." In Canada in 2021,

existentialism would perhaps have been largely understood as an obscure and dated philosophy, and the Theatre of the Absurd merely a (European high modernist) style among many others, stripped of its personal application and political import. For Meree, as refugee, both existentialist thought and its manifestations in absurdist theatre reflect and inform his deeply felt experience. As Meerzon puts it, "This search for 'essentials' often makes an exilic artist 'a modernist by default'" ("Theatre in Exile").

And while Sartre, at the heart of Parisian intellectual life in the postwar years, and ultimately a Nobel Prize winner, was in many ways the ultimate insider, Meree has remained an outsider. Or, as Algerian-born absurdist Albert Camus, Sartre's fellow resistance fighter, existentialist, and playwright would have it, Meree is *l'étranger* (the stranger, the foreigner).[12] For Sartre, what follows from the fact that the human condition is absurd, and even tragic, that all people stand alone in the universe, responsible for their own condition, is the recognition that they have the absolute, terrifying freedom to continually make themselves. "Instead of *being*," as his translator says, man "'*has* to be'; his present being has meaning only in the light of the future towards which he projects himself" (Barnes xxii; emphasis added). "Acceptance of one's absolute freedom," she argues, is for Sartre "the only existence commensurate with an honest desire to exist fully as a man . . . [even though] the recognition comes not in ecstasy but in anguish" (xxxi). To live with integrity, then—without what Sartre calls *bad faith* (*Being and Nothingness* 86-116ff.)—"one spends one's life pursuing and making oneself. [Bad faith] is the refusal to face the anguish which accompanies the recognition of our absolute freedom" (Barnes xxxix). But integrity, or even courage, involves accepting the absurdity of one's condition and along with it the freedom and responsibility, as critic Walter Kaufmann argues, "to reach above the stars" (47).

Meree's Saeed does not reach above the stars, and in fact the play seems to end where it began, in a closed circle with the same litany of *I don't knows* as at the outset, but with the roles reversed: it is now Saeed who shows up in his underwear and The Man who asks why he is there.[13] More importantly, Saeed begins, tentatively, to take control of his situation: to assume agency. Just prior to the final litany

Saeed makes choices: to control his own schedule and not respond to The Man's stoking of his fears, as he does at the outset. In dramaturgy sessions with me, and in rehearsals, Meree was clear that he did not want the play's structure to invoke typical, totalizing, high-modernist self-enclosure but wanted Saeed to be seen, in a vein more Sartrean and more culturally and historically located than that of many existentialist philosophers, to be accepting of his own responsibility for his own freedom, and for his ongoing self-(re)construction. This may also reflect the influence of Saadallah Wannous and the vision of a *world* that, like Saeed, may not reach above the stars but is nevertheless doomed by hope.

But unlike Sartre, Meree is not generalizing from his experience, writing from the position of what Sartre consistently calls *man*, positing a universal human condition that makes no distinctions based on gender, race, culture, position, or privilege. Meree is writing *from the position of the refugee*, the exile: the bearded, racialized Arab man in Canada, very much marginalized and often demonized and perceived as threatening. And there is another twist. As I have shown, Meerzon talks about exilic theatre as "an encounter with the self as other" (*Performance* 23). But it is not only the self, The Man, or some supposedly universal existential condition that Saeed confronts at the end, and this is where he most crucially differs from Sartre. He directly confronts the audience as well, an audience that is implicitly constituted as dominant-culture Canadian and as part of the problem for the refugee artist. In one of the play's few extended speeches—the play is for the most part constituted by rapid-fire exchanges—Saeed turns to confront the audience directly, metatheatrically positioning us, in the audience, as "you," constituting a community of which he is not a part. He grounds his second-person address in the specificities of the refugee experience in Canada here and now, the expectations aroused by his very presence as a refugee that "we"—the audience—have "generously admitted" to "our" country, and in the personal: "I'm supposed to be happy . . . Ambitious . . . Hard working . . . I have to be a functioning member of society," he protests:

> I have to work and make money to eat, pay rent and be happy. SAEED. Isn't that what my name means?[14] I have to

> be happy in a place I did not even choose. No one asked me for my opinion or if I wanted to come. I did not even choose my appearance, my family, my country. I did not choose anything. Then suddenly, BOOM, I opened my eyes and found myself here in front of *you* and I have to do all this and if I don't, I'll be letting you down and become a burden on a society I did not choose. And if I object, they will tell me to look at others. *You too* are telling me to look at others and comparing me to them. Why should I do that? (28; emphasis added)

## Conclusion: O Canada!

Meree's plays are fundamentally autobiographical, fictionalized versions of his own experience, as I've described it, as a Syrian refugee coming to Canada, a country he did not choose, and facing expectations and circumstances not of his own making. What they don't acknowledge within the fiction, except through their very metatheatricality, is that the autobiographical source of the plays is a writer and actor.[15] As an exilic artist Meree has made what Meerzon suggests is the liberating choice for the exile—as exile, as artist, and as human subject—to write and perform himself into existence, choosing, in Sartre's terms, to accept the responsibility that the fact of being-without-meaning imposes. At the same time, unlike Sartre, Meree is fully conscious that this condition is globally unequal and is socially and historically produced in the here and now, by *us*, his audience, which can safely be presumed in the Canadian theatre world of 2021 to be overwhelmingly made up of white settler Canadians. Referring to the life he escaped in Syria, Meree says, "I felt hugely responsible and could somehow hold myself accountable by writing" ("Playwright's Notes" 9-10). As both playwright and actor, Meree has chosen the exilic performative in response to the dilemma of the refugee artist directed towards the future: he has chosen to write and perform himself into meaning. This requires accepting a terrifying, Sartrean freedom: "Basically," Meree says, "I can do whatever I want in my plays" ("The Interview"). In doing so, Meree has at once written and performed himself into being as an artist in Canada, carved out a new kind of refugee theatre, and brought new life to the Theatre of the

Absurd with its underlying existentialist thought by grounding both in the culturally and historically specific rather than in philosophical abstraction or any universalist "human condition."

In December 2021 Ahmad Meree performatively declared his allegiance to Canada, once again performing his new self into being, and was, in what J. L. Austin calls a felicitous speech act (22), declared a Canadian citizen. On December 22, 2022 he posted the following on *Facebook*:

> I am grateful for life for giving me another chance after I was very close to death so many times.
>
> I am grateful to the [I]ndigenous people of Turtle Island for having me on their land.
>
> It's emotional and absurd how the world looks at you differently because now you hold "decent" citizenship, while you are still the same person!
>
> O Canada, I am a citizen!

## Notes

1. I am grateful to Ahmad Meree for responding to my questions by email during the pandemic. All information and quotations from him are from the email listed in the Works Cited unless otherwise indicated. I am also grateful to him, Majdi Bou-Matar, and Nada Abusaleh for inviting me to assist in rehearsals for *Suitcase*; to Meree and Pam Patel for hiring me to work as dramaturge on the 2021 production of *I Don't Know*; and to Patel for talking with me about her decision-making process as director of that show. All references to the rehearsal project derive from my direct participation in it throughout. I would like to dedicate this essay to the memory of Majdi Bou-Matar, who passed away suddenly in June 2022.
2. This event is known in the mainstream media as "the Syrian civil war." Meree, however, feels that it was not a civil war but a war of repression and has asked that I refer to it as "the Syrian war" (Email).
3. Meerzon argues that "multilingual theatre uses language to depict our divided self as situated between experience and repetition, repetition as distortion, and trace" (*Performance, Subjectivity, Cosmopolitanism* 36).
4. The Theatre of the Absurd, as Esslin discusses it, groups together a wide variety of plays that are very different from one another in form. Similarly, existentialism is a complex philosophical movement that encompasses a diverse group of thinkers "from Dostoevsky to Sartre" (Kaufmann), including Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Rilke, Kafka, Heidegger, de Beauvoir, Camus, and others; and Sartre's *Being and*

*Nothingness*, his fullest articulation of his philosophy, is a long and complex book. Meree indicates that he did study existentialism and, particularly, Sartre while at the Academy of Arts in Cairo, but not, he says, in great depth (Email).

5. As I write, Meree is adapting Wannous' play, *The King is the King*, for Pleiades Theatre in Toronto.
6. For a good short account of the current state of Syrian theatre, see Elias; for discussion of Arab theatre more broadly, see Houssami.
7. Meerzon incorrectly identifies Kandil as a refugee ("Theatre and (Im)migration" 19).
8. I am using *indexical* in the semiotic sense outlined by Charles Peirce, who distinguishes between iconic signs that resemble what they represent (an actor stands for a character), indexical signs that point towards their referent ("him," "there," a knock at the door, smoke), and symbolic signs such as words that stand in for their referent by convention but have no logical connection or resemblance to it (Peirce 5).
9. According to Meree, some in the audience believed the couple still to be alive, as revealed in talkbacks, and he indicates that ambiguity about this is what he wanted. To me, the show eventually makes clear that they did not survive the bombing.
10. Meree's therapist, for example, advised him, "You should try to think about the things that you really have control over" and to "write down what you just said on a paper and try to put it up on your fridge where you can look at it 10 times every day at least," both lines that appear in the play (9). The line "Smoking exposes your face to toxins. It makes sense that smoking was directly related to facial asymmetry in the 2014 study" (7) alters only one word—changing *a* to *the*—from an online article in *Healthline* (Watson); the line "HHV-8, also known as Kaposi sarcoma-associated herpes virus (KSHV), has been found in nearly all tumors" directly quotes, with the punctuation altered, the US Library of Medicine (Mesri, Cesarman, and Boshof 33).
11. These farcical touches are the invention of Patel, who says they are a function of her generation—Xennials, or the generation bridging Millennials and Gen-Xers—and are not indicated explicitly in the script (Personal communication). Meree fully embraced them in rehearsal, indicating that they represent "the kind of theatre I like" (Personal communication).
12. *L'étranger* translates literally into English as "the stranger" or "the foreigner," but its title when published in English was *The Outsider*. A novella by Camus, it is the story of a French settler in Algeria who does not weep at his mother's funeral, kills an Arab man, is tried, and is sentenced to death. While Camus rejected the label *existentialist*, I would argue that his novella is a central example of what I have been calling the *existentialist absurd*.
13. An earlier version of the script included another scene following this one, in which Saeed laughed at The Man's renewed attempts to frighten him, and which ended in an armed conflict. Full disclosure: as dramaturge, I was involved in the decision to cut that scene.
14. Saeed, a man's name, literally translates as *happy*.
15. The partial exception to this is Samer in *Suitcase*, who is, however, a musician: he only briefly imagines his future ability to perform himself, musically, into fame and fortune.

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