

# Loss and Being Lost: Performing Precarity through Multilingual Text, Song and Music in Zoo Indigo's Don't Leave Me This Way

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## Abstract

This article examines the function of music and multilingualism in Zoo Indigo's *Don't Leave Me This Way*. Through an engagement with live music, song and multilingual spoken text, an "affective potential of tonality" (Fischer-Lichte 120) is explored to express themes of precarity. The use of multilingualism functions "to upset the position of dominant language" (Byczynski 33), further highlighting a cultural precarity in a Brexit-ridden Britain. Drawing upon Butler's constructivist view of performativity, the authors reflect on a narrative of loss and being lost communicated and understood through a dramaturgical framework of multilingualism, mother tongues, live music, pre-recorded sounds and song.

**Keywords:** Multilingualism, migration, precarity, musicality, loss

Zoo Indigo is a female-led Anglo-German performance company based in Nottingham, co-founded by Rosie Garton and Ildikó Rippel. Performed in German and English, our work uses song and live music alongside digital projection mapping to play with aural and visual interpretations beyond spoken dialogue. The devising process often starts from autobiographical reflections that allow us to address wider themes of gender, cultural identity, displacement and migration. In developing our most recent works, *No Woman's Land* (2016) and *Don't Leave Me This Way* (2020), we engaged in a process of physical revisiting to experience something beyond theoretical research, to undergo an endurance that we could take back to our rehearsal space and map onto our making process. For *No Woman's Land*, we re-walked a journey taken by Ildikó's grandmother after she was violently expelled from her place of birth in the aftermath of WWII.

We walked 220 miles across Poland and Germany, collecting footage, interviews, soundscapes and gaining an embodied understanding of distance and endurance. Our new piece, *Don't Leave Me This Way*, similarly called for a physical re-visiting of the past, retracing our cultural heritage in visiting our mothers' homelands—Ireland and Hungary.

## Introduction

*Don't Leave Me This Way*. Devised by Zoo Indigo. November 2020. Credit: Ben Hughes

Four white strips, two metres apart, run parallel from downstage to upstage. Stark catwalks. At the end of each catwalk is a set of white wooden suitcases stacked like stairways to nowhere. On the strip to stage right, a man plays a violin (Rob). On the centre two strips, two women appear in long black dresses to tinned rapturous applause, they bow in graceful acceptance. The far-left strip remains vacant. Projected text on the stack of suitcases asks the performers (Rosie and Ildikó) to prove their lost cultural heritage. Rosie blunders through a description of the Irish poitín making process, while Ildikó desperately dances the Hungarian Csárdás. They list famous Irish authors and Hungarian inventions, and perform a series of citizenship catwalks to audition for their motherland, while video projections on the set show footage of their research trips, the seascape in Ireland, vibrant couples swirling in dance halls in Budapest. A disembodied voice comments on the events on stage, the voice of Eurovision commentator Terry Wogan. This is a desperate competition, which they will never win with clichés and stereotypes.

*Zoo Indigo, Don't Leave Me This Way*

### **The Process**

In 2018, as Brexit loomed, we began to question our European identity. British citizen Rosie, embarrassed to be English in such a messy, exclusive and increasingly xenophobic political landscape, wondered how much of her Irish heritage she could claim; as a Christmas present, her mum had sent her money to apply for an Irish passport, maybe Rosie would finally get around to completing the process. German-Hungarian Ildikó had been granted “indefinite leave to remain” in the U.K. with her British-born children and husband, having lived here for over twenty years; she looked into gaining British Citizenship, but at a cost of £1,500 this felt out of reach. Matt Marks, our musician, planned to explore his Jewish heritage, to rediscover a history of displacement, flight and persecution.

In 2019, Ildikó, Rosie and Matt planned a series of trips across the continent to rediscover their cultural identities, travelling to Ireland, Hungary and Romania, learning songs and folk dances to embody their heritage. In January 2019, Rosie and Ildikó traveled to Budapest. Matt had been diagnosed with cancer and was not well enough for the journey. We re-discovered Ildikó’s Hungarian heritage as tourists. We participated in folk-dance classes, took walking tours to explore the Jewish history of the city on Matt’s behalf and attended concerts. We interviewed musicians and dancers about the re-emergence of folk culture in Hungary, which had been forbidden during Communism, and about their views on the EU, Brexit and the rising nationalism under the current far-right government in Hungary.

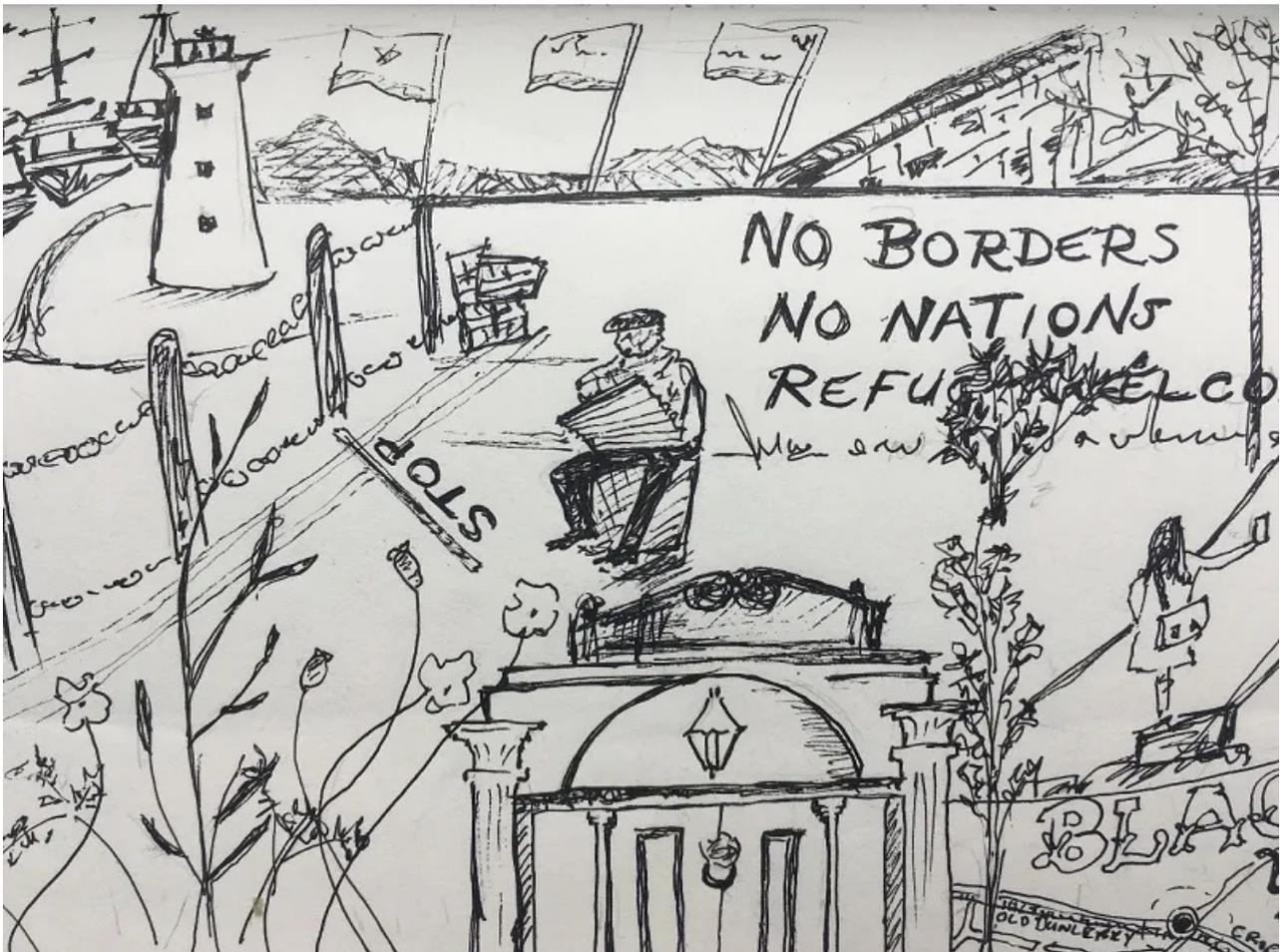
“Budapest Research Trip.” *Don't Leave Me This Way*. Zoo Indigo. January 2019

In May 2019, we visited Dublin with Matt, and were fascinated by the highly political performance culture. We talked to artists and joined in with slurry-sing-alongs at local pub gigs. In Dún Laoghaire, we walked towards the harbour and retraced Rosie’s mother’s steps when her family was forced to emigrate to Britain sixty years ago. Matt collated

sounds and songs and played the accordion as we watched the bobbing boats. He bought a new nose-flute and played it abundantly, a strange nasal soundtrack to our road movie.

“Dublin Research Trip.” Zoo Indigo. *Don't Leave Me This Way*. May 2019

For Matt’s musical and cultural Jewish heritage and his family’s escape from the 19th century pogroms, we had planned to visit Romania. On May 15th, before we were able to undertake the trip, Matt was admitted into hospital for an operation to remove a malignant tumour. His heart did not recover, and he died hours after the operation. A few days earlier, in Dublin, we shared his last supper with him (the best steak he’d ever had, he said), and he played his last tunes for us. The project came to a pause.



“Dún Laoghaire Harbour.” *Don't Leave Me This Way*. Dublin Research Trip. May 2019. Credit: Drawing by Rosie Garton

### **The Performance: *Don't Leave Me This Way***

In 2020, we revisited the research, trawling through the film footage, images, notes and drawings of our travels, the lively presence of Matt on screen and paper causing a blurring of grief. The loss of a friend and collaborator was entwined with the sensations of feeling culturally lost, of grieving for a sense of cultural belonging. *Don't Leave Me This Way (DLMTW)* premiered at Voila! Europe Festival in 2020 and is the performative response to the research and the sense of loss. In a playful exploration of belonging, cultural heritage and performativity of nationhood, the work grieves the loss of identity,

friends, home and the Eurovision song contest. In the shadow of Brexit, we, the performers, attempt to engage with our ancestral past to secure our position for the future.

Underscored by live music on the violin, the soundscape shifts between familiar national anthems to distorted or fragmented traditional folk music from both our present homes and our mothers' countries of origin. Ildikó moves between English and German, which is sometimes translated through projected text and sometimes not. We both sing in Hungarian. Throughout the work we purposefully use multilingualism to "upset the position of dominant language as dominant" (Byczynski 33), by decentering English language we hope to highlight a sense of cultural precarity in a Brexit-ridden Britain.

Infrequently, reference is made to the fourth strip and suitcase, indicating the absence of Matt and highlighting the fragility of life and furthering a positioning of precarity. We speak about his search for his Jewish heritage, and projections of him playing music on our research trips appear on the suitcase stack. Our new musician Rob, a friend of Matt, speaks only through his violin and accordion, sometimes duetting with Matt's projected image. He feels more articulate with instruments than with words. Through an engagement with live music, song and multilingual spoken text, tonality is used as a central dramaturgical device to express themes of precarity beyond the specifics of recognisable words. We consider how the tonalities of a "foreign" language are heard and interpreted as music, with the musical ambiguity that enables an expression of sensations and experiences that specific words would over-simplify. Yasmin Yildiz writes that the familial recognition of the tonalities of a mother tongue has a connection with the foundation of self which can: "stir something deep down inside a person" (203), further highlighting the transferable qualities of tonalities that have the ability to "penetrate the body and often trigger physiological and affective reactions" (Fischer-Lichte 120).

*DLMTW* journeys from national stereotypes and clichés to autobiographical anecdotes that question a sense of identity linked to nationhood. Rosie discusses wearing a "heritage cloak" (Zoo Indigo) as she realises that standing on Dún Laoghaire harbour, where her mother left behind her extended family to flee to England, does not immediately result in an inherited embodiment of Irish heritage. Ildikó confesses that she cannot speak Hungarian, her mother's mother tongue, and as such could not understand the dance instructor at the folk dance class in Budapest. As the performance unfolds, it becomes apparent that we are unable to reclaim our mothers' cultural heritage. We fail to perform our identity, and a sense of loss emerges, merged with the loss of our friend.

The project came out of an urgent desire to cling to our European identity, an identity of multiplicities, shifting and disappearing borders and merging communities. In times of precarity regarding our European identity, it felt appropriate to create a precarious performance response, expressing our heterogeneity, vulnerabilities and uncertainties with regards to our cultural identity, and ultimately our failure in reclaiming our lost heritage. We sought ways in which to connect with an audience through a mutual understanding of loss and feeling out of place, beyond the specifics of one language and of our individual situations.

## Musical Marking of Loss and Absence

Four white strips. On the strip to stage right, a man plays the violin. On the centre two strips, two women perform a series of gestures. The sound of roaring waves overrides the violin. On the vacant strip footage appears, projected on a suitcase. Matt Marks plays the accordion: “There once was a man called Michael Finnegan.”

*Zoo Indigo*



“By the roaring waves.” Rob Rosa, Ildikó Rippel, Rosie Garton. *Don't Leave Me This Way*. Devised by Zoo Indigo. July 2021. Derby Theatre, Derby. Photo: Chris Webb

*DLMTW* developed out of Matt's passionate urge to explore his heritage, personally, politically and musically. We searched for Jewish traces in European music on his behalf, and the performance is interlaced with sound snippets of his poetical accordion playing, and the lyrics and sounds of Jewish-Hungarian music. The music marks his absence but also creates a presence. In a discussion on mourning and precarity, Judith Butler frames loss as both a sense of losing a physical being and of losing a connection with people or place. She proposes that grief as a result of loss is not a privatized act but, through its inability to be fully expressed in words, becomes a universally understood experience: “Loss has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all” (22). In *DLMTW*, the loss of a friend and collaborator is conflated with the loss of place, of nationhood, of cultural identity, of feeling situated. An audience member at Voila! Europe theatre festival 2020 reflected on this human condition and universal understanding: “Loss. It's personal and you start to reflect on a sense of national loss too or a sense of loss of identity” (audience feedback Voila 2020). The “we” of loss in *DLMTW* then resonates as a complex feeling of multifaceted experiences.

In discussing Verity Standen’s performances of the human voice, Maddy Costa proposes that music in performance has the possibility to transfer such feelings of precarity. Costa suggests that the ambiguity of music, which cannot be expressed simply in words, offers a more nuanced understanding beyond language. Music, in this context, then requires an audience to interpret this complex mode of communication, drawing from their own experiences. Analyzing Standen’s work, Costa notes: “But in terms of what it means? I couldn’t tell you. All I have are feelings, images, stories” (41).

In *DLMTW*, there are times when moments of loss, grief and misunderstandings cannot be expressed in words; and moments when the performers do not speak the language which would best express the sentiment. Rob plays an intricate violin solo, improvised and unpredictable like the ebb and flow of the Irish sea, cladding into musical form the inexpressible feelings of grief, unreachable by the symbolic nature of language. In these moments, the ambiguity of sound becomes the text, a musical expression of sensation and experience as opposed to a precisely articulated description. “This music is just what we need to reflect on those two stories” (audience feedback Voila! 2020). Rob does not speak on stage, but the sound of the violin expresses his identity. Here, musicality is used to both explicitly and subtly destabilise notions of social comfort and national settlement: “Rob Rosa takes to the catwalk to speak of his native homeland, but communicates through his instrument, with subtitled dialogue projected onto the suitcase—a further reminder of the theme of migration” (Snowe).



“This is how I speak.” Rob Rosa. *Don’t Leave Me This Way*. Devised by Zoo Indigo. July 2021, Derby Theatre, Derby. Photo: Chris Webb

In attempting to identify with her Irish heritage, Rosie describes the tropes of writing an Irish ballad, and as an example she interweaves a song written by the Zoo Indigo duo, remembering Matt's heaving breathing in Dublin. Ildikó joins in, harmonising, the lyrics at this point are ambiguous for the audience, not clearly linked to personal experience since there has been no mention of Matt's death in the performance thus far:

**Rosie** (*talking*): Irish song is based on the land, the people and the tales of Ireland. To find your lyrics you should first walk on the blustering shores. Feel the dark rich earth beneath your feet. Sit by a fireside, drink stout and poitín and surround yourself with luscious green vegetation.

Start with a time and place . . . specificity adds authenticity.

(*Singing*): You slowed our pace along the shore.

(*Talking*): Once a place has been established, the next stage is to paint the foundational image upon which the rest of the song can be built.

(*Singing*): And played discordant underscore.

(*Talking*): Together these lines create a movement, the sound and the word "discordant" offers something wrong about the situation. Now layer the drama.

(*Singing*): For brave and mad without wetsuit.

(*Talking*): Ensure you introduce your protagonist and their action.

(*Singing*): You chimed along with your nose flute.

**Rosie and Ildiko** (*singing in harmony*):

And as we wander through the town,

Your usual chatter calms right down.

You slow our pace along the shore,

There's a tacet now in your underscore.

"Irish Song." *Don't Leave Me This Way*. Devised by Zoo Indigo. November 2020. Rehearsal Video

Musicality is used here to express connections between song, landscape and cultural identity. The tonality is found through a familiar Irish ballad structure and sound, the sentiment of which also mourns for a loss of a physical body. Pieter Verstraete articulates a "musicalized voice" (1) on stage, that contributes to notions of narrativity and performativity. The musicalized voice is presented as a term to cover both the narrative qualities of the physical voice on stage, and the more abstract notion of 'narrative voice' (1). Verstraete proposes that in postdramatic theatre, the musicalized voice has the ability to "create unstable narrative positions as to allow slippages of identity, metaphor and

closure” (3), echoing Hans-Thies Lehmann’s argument that the postdramatic musicalization form insists on the spectator making “associative connections and to draw a coherent narrative out of the presented events” (3).

In *DLMTW*, the dramaturgy is formed through voice, music and soundscape with the specifics of dialogue relocated as a secondary source of meaning. Snowe, in her review of *DLMTW*, argued that the “multi-sensory experience utilises various mediums in order to effectively engulf the audience into the characters’ personal stories.” We suggest that the sounds and musicalized voices present an “aural space” (Fischer-Lichte 123). The narratives of loss (death, displacement) and being lost (cultural relocation, losing at games of Nationhood such as the Eurovision Song Contest) are communicated and understood through a dramaturgical framework of musicality of multilingualism, live music and pre-recorded sounds.

### Performing Nationhood

Four white strips. Two performers catwalk their heritage, telling stories of their national heroes and heroines. Kevin Barry was an Irish Martyr, Rosie suspects, and Ildikó’s namesake slayed Attila the Hun with his own sword. She tells the story in Hungarian while stabbing one of Rosie’s Irish potatoes against her chest. Both then dance feverishly, Riverdance and Csárdás merge and collide, to the violin flipping furiously between the clashing musical styles . . .

*Zoo Indigo, Don’t Leave Me This Way*



“Riverdance and Csárdás.” Rob Rosa, Ildikó Rippel, Rosie Garton. *Don’t Leave Me This Way*. Devised by Zoo Indigo. July 2021, Derby Theatre, Derby. Photo: Chris Webb

Through performing national stereotypes, we playfully critique the performativity of nationhood, toying with Butler's radical constructivist view of performativity, which "is thus not a singular 'act,' for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it requires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition" (*Bodies That Matter* 12). Throughout the performance we literally "perform" our lost nationalities in a series of competitive catwalks, explicitly presenting nationality as an "act" practiced through cultural repetition and rituals. Within the work we attempt to escape our cultural identity and claim our mothers' European heritage (Irish, Hungarian), which, ironically considering their history of migration, feels a more secure positioning in a precarious Brexit-ridden Britain. Anxiously proving our right to our cultural heritage, we share facts and recipes of national dishes, and eventually spoken text merges into song and frantic dances.

Through singing the Irish ballad, the harmonies hauntingly reverberating in our bodies, and through repeatedly performing the vigorous Csárdás until exhausted, we perform and embody our cultural heritage. However, the tonality in *DLMTW* also represents the loss of cultural heritage, as the Csárdás bleeds into the deconstructed British and German National Anthems, it reveals a narrative of the performers' "slippages of identities" (Verstraete 3). Despite performing our lost heritage, we fail to escape our nationalities (British, German). Rosie tells the audience that she tried to "crawl into her mother's Irish shadow," but that it didn't quite fit. Ildikó speaks in German, with subtitles projected on the suitcases translating her confession: "When I first came to England, I borrowed my mother's Hungarian heritage. I was embarrassed to say that I was German. But that's what I am, where I am from" (Zoo Indigo). As Butler suggests, subjects do not choose to perform an identity but are "hailed into an identity by the regulatory discourses of society" (qtd. in Friedmann). The performative nature of our cultural identity is not a choice, it is embodied, and therefore, as Ildikó informs us as she wipes herself down with dry hands, trying to rid herself of Germany's history, "the past doesn't really go away—it sticks" (Zoo Indigo).

*DLMTW* also explores the notion of performativity as a subversive act of mimesis or parody of nationality (specifically Britishness and Germanness), to "denaturalize and deauthorize the structure of domination, disclose its social construction, imply the possibility of change—all of which can be read as deliberative or unconscious acts of resistance" (Friedmann). Butler, in *Vulnerability*, claims that resistance assumes a situation of precarity, which provokes action. The "act of resistance" in *DLMTW* is voiced through the references to popular music (such as samples from the Eurovision song contest), which are underpinned by a contemporary struggle against historical narratives. Cvejic and Vujanovic (qtd. in Puar) suggest that such political potentials of the performance body are a "symptomatic embodiment of ongoing precarization" (175).

Through media projections and sound design, a further critique of British and German nationalism is portrayed. On the stack of stairway suitcases there are two suitcases which open to reveal stereotypical microcosms. Rosie's British case contains a rose cottage, a double decker bus and a phone box, while Ildikó's world includes a Bavarian castle, a large beer and a sausage. The worlds consist of white cutout flats, surfaces for media

projection. Initially, there are animated images of the national stereotypes, beer is frothing and Ildikó's big sausage glistens, Rosie's thatched rose-clad cottage glimmers in soft sunset filters. We hear Marlene Dietrich's *Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuss auf Liebe eingestellt* (1930) and the Beatles' *All You Need Is Love* (1967), the sentimental tonalities of our national treasures reverberate in the space. The soundscapes then shift, and we hear sound fragments of crowds cheering and soldiers marching at the Nazi rallies in Ildikó's hometown Nuremberg, and black and white archival footage of the rallies is projected on the suitcase. The Beatles in Rosie's worlds are replaced with Irish voices, describing the discrimination experienced in the 1950s in Britain, while the romantic sunset imagery fades into a black and white video of Irish immigrants. The microcosm suitcases reveal the insides of the sentimentalities of extreme nationalism and the power of music and sound to unite a nation, such as rousing speeches, chanting, marching in unison, as well as through the potential of popular music to unify a group of people.



"German Suitcase." *Don't Leave Me This Way*. Devised by Zoo Indigo. November 2020. Rehearsal image. Photo: Barret Hodgson

### **Musicality of Multilingualism**

Ildikó addresses the audience in German. She tells of her mother's move from Hungary to Germany aged 22. Wrapped in a Hungarian shawl of embroidered flowers, long dark curly hair, looking "gloriously foreign." The embarrassment of being an outsider engrained, she never taught her daughter her mother tongue. Rosie is translating this text. But Rosie does not speak German. Ildikó could be saying anything . . .

*Zoo Indigo*

*DLMTW* attempts to employ multilingualism in order to destabilise and decentre language, and specifically English language in a Brexit-ridden Britain, as a dominant tool of expression in performance. Julie Byczynski states that "in the theatre, where one language is normally shared by actors and audience, dialogue spoken in minority language can function in ways to upset the position of dominant language as dominant" (33). The inclusion of multiple languages aims to challenge established hierarchies amongst languages, with English being the most dominant. In *DLMTW*, multilingualism is clearly linked to the cultural identity of the performers. Ildikó is a migrant living in the U.K. and was born in Germany to a German father and Hungarian mother. In the performance, German, Hungarian and English collide, using playful approaches towards (non-)translation, and sometimes text flows from one language to the other in the same section. Hungarian represents a "multilingualism 'from below,' associated with 'minor' languages, non-marketability, and invisibility" (Karpinski 154). This is specifically related to the increased xenophobia brewing in post-Brexit Britain, aimed at economic migrants from Eastern Europe.

Ildikó narrates an anecdote, in German, about her mother's Hungarian heritage, and this text is translated into English by Rosie, three languages colliding and combining. "One day a bus driver mocked my mother's Hungarian clothes and mimicked her accent, so she never spoke Hungarian at home any more. . . ." (Zoo Indigo). This personal memory reinforces the sense of Eastern European languages presenting a multilingualism from below in contemporary Britain.

Lehmann applies the term "polyglossia" in analysing multilingual performance, the coexistence of multiple languages: "The principle of polyglossia proves to be omnipresent in postdramatic theatre. Multilingual theatre texts dismantle the unity of national languages" ("From Logos to Landscape" 147). Multilingualism in *DLMTW* challenges the horizontality of languages through a mashing up and reinvention of language. Ultimately, the aim is to de-hierarchize the dominance of English in contemporary British performance. *DLMTW*, furthermore, attempts to stage the multiplicity of languages, critically addressing a sense of "strangeness" and "otherness" of foreign languages. Meerzon *et al* argue that migrant authors often use the concept of the mother tongue as a marker of their characters' otherness or strangeness, no matter how irritating, exotic, or threatening this strangeness might be. They thus blur the boundaries between the language of the dominant culture and the language(s) of the minority (Meerzon et al.259).

DLMTW deliberately plays on a grotesque otherness of the German language in a rendition of national stereotypes read from a German flag that Ildikó pulls out of her underpants, seemingly birthing her national identity. The list of stereotypes is stereotypical in itself

- *Biergarten*
- *Bratwurst*
- *Sauerkraut*
- *Schnapps*

a linear, organised structure consisting of stereotypically German sounds, including convoluted compound nouns and the velar and palatal fricative

- *Gemütlichkeit*
- *Achtung*
- *Pünktlich*

“ch” reverberations. This list is read aloud to a violin solo, the presto of Johann Sebastian Bach’s sonata in G-minor (no. 1, BWV 1001). The rigid marching structure of words

- *Gesamtkunstwerk*
- *Leitmotif*
- *Glockenspiel*
- *Gestalt*

spoken to the rhythm of Rosie’s stomping feet is juxtaposed to the intricate and circular structure of the Bach sonata which Ildikó declares as “yearningly un-German, a multiple musical orgasm” (Zoo Indigo). The music itself has no constant rhythm; it playfully and polyphonically disrupts expectations of stereotypically German music, whilst Ildikó reinforces the expectations in her list of stereotypes. This juxtaposition challenges national stereotypes in a playful manner. Meerzon et al, citing Carlson, argue that “from a political perspective, foregrounding multilingual voices in performance is a way of resisting “nationalist stereotypes” and working toward “multicultural democratic equality” (260).

The performance ends with a reveal of Matt’s death, a sense of loss of identity through losing the people in our lives, combined with a loss of cultural identity. We perform a spiritual song, which we encountered in Budapest, during a walking tour of the Jewish quarter. We witnessed past and present merging, reminders of the horrors of the Holocaust in Hungary, frozen in time as “the past sticks” (Zoo Indigo). In Budapest, we also witnessed signs of communities gathering and celebrating their culture today. The tour guide sang a Jewish-Hungarian song to us, *Szól a kakas már*. “Beloved by Hungarian Jews, it has come to be associated with the Shoah because of its Messianic longing” (Senechal).

The song combines a typically Jewish melody and tonal arrangements with Hungarian lyrics and song structure, a soundscape of cultures merging, revealing traces of migration, integration, as well as separation and persecution with echoes of the Shoah

lingering in the lyrics, a song of mourning and loss, yet also hope. We bring this fractured merging of cultures and identities into the performance. We adapted the melody, and developed complex harmonies, in order to further represent our multiplicities. We sing to the chiming drone of a wine glass, a reference to the wine we drank in Budapest, “*Bulls Blood*, a strong Hungarian red, and we are drunk a lot of the time!” (Zoo Indigo). This playful anecdote merges into the narration of our memory of the Jewish quarter. The story spoken in English is interrupted and then replaced by the Hungarian song.

*Szól a kakas már  
Majd megvirrad már*

The familiarity and meaning emerging through the majority language, English, slowly disappears into words that are merely sounds to a British audience. This produces a “glossopoeia,” as coined by Jacques Derrida, a text consisting of “intonations, vibrations, visuality, movements, and gestural contact” (Papaioannou 14). Meaning slips in this instance, in a Derridean sense, and the non-translation brings us closer here to the real beyond language, to present the inexpressible experience of grief. In a discussion on the creation of atmospheres in theatre spaces, Fischer-Lichte writes of odour and sounds as fundamental atmospheric conduits. Sound, she claims, has the ability to both encompass and penetrate spectators, triggering heightened physical and emotional responses:

When a sound resounds in the listeners’ chests, inflicting physical pain or stimulating goose-bumps, they no longer hear it as something entering their ears from outside but feel it from within as a physical process creating oceanic sensations. (119)

*Zöld erdőben, sík mezőben  
sétál egy madár.*

The replacing of the familiar English with the unfamiliar and seemingly strange sounds of Hungarian creates a rupture in the representational nature of language and theatre. The focus shifts from the symbolic nature of text to the sensual, a language prior to meaning, a Derridean glossopoeia, which

takes us back to the borderline of the moment when the word has not yet been born, . . . when repetition is *almost* impossible, and along with it, language in general: the separation of concept and sound, of signified and signifier, of the pneumatical and the grammatical, the freedom of translation and tradition, the movement of interpretation, the difference between the soul and the body, . . . the author and the actor.

*Derrida 240*

Glossopoeia and polyglossia also have the potential to move beyond meaning and the symbolic register, to engage with the real and corporeal aspects of language. Meerzon et al argue that multilingualism relies on the audience’s “ability to construct meaning . . . through reading paralinguistic cues vital to speech-making: changes in rhythm and intonation, speed of delivery, pauses, gestures, postures, facial expressions, movements,

and so on” (260). Derridean glossopoeia is similar to Fischer-Lichte’s concept of tonality in terms of describing language as music and affective texture rather than text producing clear meaning. The glossopoeia of multilingualism potentially opens a fissure within the symbolic fabric of theatre, letting the real leak into its fibres. In this instance, the Hungarian song weaves in a melancholy of loss and grief that is unrepresentable through language; the loss of our friend, the trauma of forced migration, persecution. The history that sticks, that reverberates, a history part of Matt’s identity. And through the glossopoeia of multiple languages and the merging of song and speech seeps the grief for our friend.

*We put this moment into our pockets, for Matt. It is his story too.*

*Zöld erdőben, sík mezőben  
sétál egy madár.*

We sing the song as an epilogue and eulogy for Matt and the precarious and multifaceted identities we have, scattering ashes of what is lost. Projections of Budapest in the snow from our research trip appear on the stacks of white suitcases. Standing downstage we slowly release the ashes from our hands, singing in harmony as the lights fade down to the gentle drone of the violin.

“Hungarian Song.” *Don’t Leave Me This Way*. Devised by Zoo Indigo. November 2020.  
Rehearsal Video

## Conclusion

Butler (*Precarious Life*) insists that precarity should be acknowledged as a condition that makes us human; she urges us to consider that an exposure to “otherness” is what makes us vulnerable, and that such fragilities reveal commonalities between us which in turn makes us ethically accountable to each other:

If I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you. I cannot muster the “we” except by finding the way in which I am tied to “you,” by trying to translate but finding that my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you. You are what I gain through disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know.

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Expressions of loss unite us through a shared identification of vulnerability. Those expressions are often inexpressible through the symbolic order of language but emerge from an affective texture of glossopoeia. Fischer-Lichte proposes that “the transience of performance is epitomized in its tonality” (120); she suggests that the ephemeral nature of theatre is made even more precious by the fleetingness of sound. We return to the notion that sounds have the ability to penetrate the body, and tonality has the ability to trigger physiological responses caused by swells of indistinguishable memories.

We propose that the colliding and combining of multiple languages has extended capabilities to move the spectator beyond language, to an affective space where text is experienced as materiality that stirs us from within. The two of us searched for songs and

music in order to fill our lungs and bodies with the reverberations of our cultural heritage, to claim our lost identities, to feel a sense of belonging in our bones. But those tonalities of origin moved beyond the structures of language or the idea of nationhood and uncovered the precarity of home and belonging as a construct that is always already lost. While national identity and cultural heritage are concepts that we accept as being part of our identities, we equally acknowledge the artificial nature of such notions. In multilingual theatre, where language is exposed as a symbolic construct, one can experience the affective power of tonality within language. In this instance, language, and the differences created between us when speaking different languages, is precarious, is momentarily undone, and potentially, momentarily, so is the monolingual paradigm and the construct of nationhood. A medley of familiar and “foreign” tones of music and language creates tensions between difference and belonging. This is accentuated by a desire to capture and contain the evanescent and misty reactions to tonalities, which, rendered as a futile task, exposes a further fragility in us all. Butler emphatically writes that in order to understand each other, we must acknowledge such precarities: “Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something” (23).



“Matt Marks at Dún Laoghaire Harbour.” *Don’t Leave Me This Way*. Dublin Research Trip. May 2019.  
Photo: Ildikó Rippel

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