

THE LANGUAGE OF SELLING ETHNICITY: SATIRIZING THE
COMMODIFICATION OF CULTURE, THEATRE, AND IDENTITY IN THE *ALI &*
ALI PLAYS

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2: USING LANGUAGE TO CONSTRUCT AND SUBVERT THE EXPECTATIONS OF THE STAGE.....	17
CHAPTER 3: STRATEGIC SELF-EXOTICIZATION.....	22
CHAPTER 4: TROUBLING DISCOURSES.....	29
CHAPTER 5: LINGUISTIC STRATEGIES ON THE STAGE.....	36
CHAPTER 6: LINGUISTIC STRATEGIES ON THE PAGE.....	39
CHAPTER 7: IMPLICATING PLAYWRIGHT AND AUDIENCE.....	42
CHAPTER 8: UTOPIA AND ITS PARODIES: WHERE <i>THE AXES OF EVIL</i> AND <i>THE DEPORTATION HEARINGS</i> DIVERGE.....	44
CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION.....	48
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	49

ABSTRACT

If the exoticization of non-mainstream ethnic groups through the deployment of language and stereotypes is a pervasive, and successful, marketing strategy in today's Western media, then critical, deconstructive play with such language and stereotypes can act as a powerful tool for critiquing contemporary North American discourses surrounding race and culture. This thesis examines how Marcus Youssef, Guillermo Verdecchia, and Camyar Chai use satire and irony to take up this project in their collaboratively-written play *The Adventures of Ali & Ali and the aXes of Evil* and its sequel *Ali & Ali: The Deportation Hearings*. The eponymous characters Ali and Ali attempt to sell their plays to their audiences by embracing and manipulating linguistic stereotypes associated with ethnic "others." This thesis explores these plays as reflections on language as a tool for strategic self-exoticization, while also examining their implication of theatre, playwright, and audience member in the commodification of "otherness."

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Chapter 1: Introduction

At the point where commercial values intersect with representations of ethnic “others” in today’s Western media, the exoticization of ethnic groups through the deployment of language and stereotypes is a pervasive, and successful, marketing strategy. Take, for example, Koodo Mobile’s cartoon wrestler mascot El Tabador.¹ This strategy often relies heavily on linguistic stereotypes, such as exaggerated accents and peculiarities of syntax and word choice that are typically associated with the speaker’s ethnicity. Depending on the marketing strategy, these linguistic idiosyncrasies may be ridiculed, glamorized, patronized, sentimentalized, and so on. El Tabador, for example, plays the Latin Lover; however, along with his four inches and his signature *Lucha libre* costume, his melodramatic, heavily-accented speech makes him an endearing, but ultimately diminutive and ridiculous, caricature. Conversely, commercials for the German-based company Dr. Oetker feature Italian-accented voice-overs that are calculated to lend an air of sophistication, romance, and/or authenticity (“*Just like Mama used to make!*”) to their frozen, store-bought pizzas.² Marketers cultivate images of the “exotic” to capitalize on the fetishization of perceived difference while ignoring the lived experiences of people who identify with, or are socially recognized as belonging to, the ethnic groups associated with these signifiers. The othering of the “exotic,” as suggested by these representations, furthermore constructs a largely English-speaking, Euro-North-American audience as the Western “norm” to whom these products are being marketed.

¹ See, for example, “El Tabador Gets a New Look” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8vC6tL4D7c>) and “El Tabador’s Big Kiss” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgjzuzd59MA>).

² For sophistication and romance, see Dr. Oetker’s Ristorante advertising campaigns and for authenticity, see their Casa di Mama advertising campaigns (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eqW6U5bq970>).

Alongside these exoticizing tendencies, a number of discourses are cultivated within various sectors of society, which individuals and organizations use to sell positive images of themselves—perhaps by promoting themselves as “politically correct” or by obfuscating unpleasant realities. For example, governmental evasive jargon, disseminated by the media, is used to cover up potentially unsavoury governmental policies and protect political reputations and careers. Political discourses, George Orwell writes in his 1945 essay “Politics and the English Language,” are “largely the defence of the indefensible” (963). Because many governmental policies can only be defended “by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, ...political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness” (Orwell 963). Orwell argues that “the reduced state of consciousness” that results from the use of this “lifeless, imitative style” is, “if not indispensable, ...at any rate favourable to political conformity” (962-3). Such language often discourages critical engagement with its implied meanings.

The rhetoric of multiculturalism in Canada functions similarly: according to Himani Bannerji, it “has the merit of deflecting critical attention from a constantly racializing Canadian political economy” (9). Bannerji frames “official or elite multiculturalism as an ideological state apparatus”³ that functions “as a device for constructing and ascribing political subjectivities and agencies for those who are seen as legitimate and full citizens and others who are peripheral to this in many senses” (6). As a function of the state, “the language of diversity is a coping mechanism for dealing with an actually conflicting heterogeneity, seeking to incorporate it into an ideological binary which is predicated about the existence of a homogeneous national, that is, a Canadian

³ In her use of this term, Bannerji references Louis Althusser’s influential essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.”

cultural self with its multiple and different others” (Bannerji 37). While representatives of the state use the discourse of multiculturalism to validate existing state institutions, the ethnic “others” that such discourse seems to embrace do *not* benefit (Bannerji 47). They are not permitted freely to determine their own self-expression: instead, “the state of Canada wants its differentiated inferior citizens to speak in the state’s own language of multicultural identity, of ethnicity and community” (Bannerji 47). Thus the institutionalized language of diversity, while seeming to empower diverse ethnicities, actually de-politicizes their voices and further entrenches privilege differentials along ethnic lines.⁴

As these institutional discourses develop, they tend to become formulaic and revisionist while relying on buzzwords that may have become increasingly meaningless (like “culturally diverse” or “multicultural”), or conversely, intentionally inflammatory (like the use of “illegals” to denote undocumented immigrants). Through such discourses, the public institutions of the state—that is, the government and the media—often group people according to assumptions about their culture, race and linguistic patterns, while simultaneously promoting conceptions of themselves as morally superior, politically correct, and benevolent. This has become particularly noticeable in our post-9/11 climate with the increase in discriminatory practices like the vilification of Middle Eastern cultures and people in the media, which has both influenced and been influenced by governmental policy, and which has been framed as a matter of “national security.”

⁴ See also Smaro Kamboureli’s *Scandalous Bodies* and Neil Bissoondath’s *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* for further critical discussion on multiculturalism in Canada. See the work of Daniel Stoffman, Joseph Garcea, Augie Fleras, among others, for more recent treatments.

Working with the understanding that media treatment both exploits and discriminates against those who are deemed to be culturally and linguistically different from the norm, while “politically correct” discourses are used to manipulate how such differences are presented, this thesis considers the potential of the theatre as a space in which critical, deconstructive play with these kinds of language and stereotypes can also act as a particularly powerful tool for demonstrating the flaws in the discourses surrounding race and culture in North America today. This project of deconstructive play is taken up by Camyar Chai, Guillermo Verdecchia, and Marcus Youssef in their collaboratively-written play *The Adventures of Ali & Ali and the aXes of Evil: A Divertimento for Warlords* and its sequel *Ali & Ali: The Deportation Hearings*. These contemporary political satires, which I will refer to respectively as *The aXes of Evil* and *The Deportation Hearings*, speak to some of the most salient—and controversial—political and cultural issues within our current Canadian context. In particular, they draw attention to contemporary anxieties surrounding the (especially non-Caucasian) immigrant that facilitate a culture of interrogation and deportation; the vilification of Arabic speakers, Middle Eastern cultures, and Islam, especially after 9/11; the subsumption of Canadian culture and politics into those of the United States of America; and the hypocritical commercialization of multicultural discourse through such televisual favourites as what one character in *The aXes of Evil* calls the “ethnic family drama that offers you a window onto our nation’s culture yet resonates with universal themes” (*aXes* 49). In the plays’ exploration of all these concerns, language is of the utmost importance as both the *subject* and the *mode* of critique. That is, the plays’ critique focuses on the kinds of language that are used in certain governmental and advertising discourses and

representations of ethnic “others,” while also using the same kinds of language to expose these flaws.

In doing so, the *Ali & Ali* plays engage in a kind of doubleness that manifests as irony as it speaks both to and against the discourses of North American dominant culture. Reflecting on the uses of such doubleness, Linda Hutcheon identifies irony as a key postcolonial strategy, and “a double-talking, forked-tongued mode of address [that] becomes a popular rhetorical strategy for working within existing discourses and contesting them at the same time” (154). An ironical statement, then, may reflect current norms, but is framed in such a way that it also undercuts those norms. Irony thus becomes “a way of resisting and yet acknowledging the power of the dominant” (Hutcheon 163), a particularly important strategy when faced with the privilege differentials that have developed between ethnic and linguistic groups for economic and political reasons. Language has long been both an imposition and agent of (neo-)colonial authority and a mode of resistance to that colonial authority’s cultural and political hegemony.

Identifying the imperialist imposition of language on colonized subjects “as a manipulative tool” used “to control [these subjects] more completely,” Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins recognize the importance of language for a “speaker’s sense of autonomy and dignity, both of which are diminished when the coloniser denies the linguistic validity of indigenous [and, I would suggest, “ethnic others”] languages” (164-5). Gilbert and Tompkins illustrate how postcolonial theatre can be a particularly effective form of resistance: “the careful redeployment of linguistic [sic] signifiers,” they argue, “such as tone, rhythm, register, and lexicon—can generate as much political resistance as the rewriting of history or the introduction of politically embedded

properties to the stage” (168). Furthermore, this “redeployment of linguistic [sic] signifiers” not only challenges the dominance of (neo-)colonialist languages on the stage, it also works to expose the power structures through which those languages have become dominant (Gilbert and Tompkins 168). According to Gilbert and Tompkins, “language functions as a basic medium through which meaning is filtered, but it also acts as a cultural and political system that has meaning in itself. The post-colonial stage acts as a principal arena for the enunciation of such a system” (166-7).

On the postcolonial stage and in other theatres critical of racial and ethnic inequities, irony thus offers a mode of subversion that does not simply call neo-imperialist language into question, but also makes an argument about the relationship between the superficial meaning of language and its contextual implications. As W.H. New argues:

irony often means saying what you mean at a slant, or saying two things at once—*oversetting*: so that a reader might hear (through the *performance* of a given set of words) not only their split levels of *implication* but also the divergent *relation* between an apparent surface intent and an often political undertow. (13; emphasis original)

Thus irony fosters an environment of critical thinking, which, rather than explicitly spelling out the ramifications of these relationships between surface and subtext, requires a personal engagement on the part of its audience to work through their often difficult and, especially in the case of the *Ali & Ali* plays, hard-hitting implications. The outrageously controversial humour of *Ali & Ali* generated by this ironical mode allows

the plays to directly address some of the most important issues surrounding the commodification of culture and ethnicity in a critical but nonetheless engaging manner.

A move towards critical self-evaluation (both personal and societal) is, in large part, the driving force behind the *Ali & Ali* plays. Demonstrating a profound investment in the doubleness of irony, these plays function via a two-tiered structure. On the primary level, these plays are the performances of the eponymous characters Ali Ababwa and Ali Hakim, two asylum seekers from the fictional Middle Eastern country Agraba, who are seeking official refugee status in Canada. In their shows, which combine dramatized and stand-up material, the Alis present a number of skits, jokes, and puppet plays, while also addressing and interacting directly with their audiences. Additionally, they propose plots for films, perform dance routines, and offer featured appearances from their security “expert” and a “French Intellectual” (*aXes* 85), among others. From the promotional voice-overs at the beginnings of their performances to Ali Ababwa’s shameless marketing of *Ali & Ali* “memorabilia” and other wares, the Alis’ commodification of the theatre becomes transparently obvious as they attempt to sell their performed and packaged ethnic identities to their audiences. Ali Hakim, however, is less willing to play into demeaning and false cultural stereotypes than Ali Ababwa and often becomes a source of the plays’ most heartfelt, but also most obviously scathing material. In all of these performances (for even Ali Hakim’s sincere polemics can be characterized as performances), the Alis capitalize on the power of language as a tool for strategic self-exoticization—that is, the marketing of oneself as exotic to increase one’s appeal as a commodity.

Even more than their characters, the playwrights behind *Ali & Ali* recognize this power of language as both an agent of stereotype and exploitation and a tool for subverting such abusive discourses. The *Ali & Ali* plays use the often-blatant self-exoticization of the Alis ironically to demonstrate the commodification of the theatre and of cultural identity. Even as the Alis engage in self-exoticization as a marketing tool, their lack of success suggests the ultimate disingenuousness of these exoticizing discourses and their failure to truly understand and connect with the ethnic “other.” Confronted by the Alis’ offensive vulgarity, and their efforts to sell themselves, which the authors frame in such a way as to make distasteful, their audiences are prodded into examining their own reactions, whether they may be of apathy, self-righteous indignation, enjoyment or something else. In particular, the *Ali & Ali* plays challenge the rhetoric of multiculturalism that represents culturally diverse voices as an integral part of an inclusive state while making their attempts to express dissidence, especially if those attempts apply vulgar or unflattering language to the state, socially unacceptable. Through the doubleness of irony, the *Ali & Ali* plays use humour to interrogate the doubleness of certain kinds of hypocritical, circumlocutory, and exoticizing forms of language whose use is often motivated by the potential for political and economic gain.

While both *The aXes of Evil* and *The Deportation Hearings* engage in many of the same linguistic and structural devices, the difference of the political moments during which these two plays were written is reflected in their thematic approaches. Originally performed in 2004,⁵ *The aXes of Evil* examines the often racist and ignorant policies of the George W. Bush administration, especially concerning the rhetoric and fear-

⁵ My primary source material for *The aXes of Evil* is the published version, from 2005.

mongering associated with the “War on Terror.” *The aXes of Evil* also interrogates the hypocrisy and commodification of contemporary theatre in the play’s staging of the repeated interruptions of Duncan, the manager of the theatre, who protests the Alis’ decidedly un-politically correct approach to “multicultural” theatre. Meanwhile, *The Deportation Hearings*, initially staged in 2010,⁶ shifts its focus to the rhetoric of hope and change used in the campaign to elect Barack Obama in 2008, and the racist hysteria surrounding the opposition to his bid for the presidency. While *The aXes of Evil* references the plight of the refugee, *The Deportation Hearings* more fully explores the climate of interrogation and threat of deportation facing the refugee/immigrant,⁷ whose words are often skewed against him or her and who is often presumed guilty, especially if he or she happens to be of Middle Eastern descent. It achieves these goals particularly through the interruptions of RCMP officer Suki, who conducts the deportation hearings of the Alis, but whose minority position as an “ethnic other” and female police officer complicates her response to the cleverly evasive pair.

In their investment in these concerns, the *Ali & Ali* plays coincide thematically and rhetorically with much of the previous work done by these three dramatists, especially Verdecchia. Among the precedents for *Ali & Ali*, Verdecchia’s *The Noam Chomsky Lectures*, co-written (and performed) with Daniel Brooks, very explicitly

⁶ My primary source material for *The Deportation Hearings* is the published version, from 2013.

⁷ As Carrie Dawson observes, refugee claimants, “many of whom have suffered extreme, lasting trauma and are operating in a language that is not their own,” are required to use narratives whose parameters are closely and strictly regulated by the state in order “to demonstrate their credibility and prove that their fear of persecution is ‘well-founded’ and ongoing” (“Thinking” 61-2). Refugee hearings can be quite violent in that a successful bid for refugee status requires the claimant to relive traumatic moments in excruciating detail, and to relate this narrative in such a manner as to prove his or her “credibility” (Dawson, “Thinking” 62).

connects the media with the marketplace via such declarations as “the Western press consistently caters to the interests of Big Business, because the Western Press *is* Big Business” (10; emphasis original). It is equally explicit about the complicity of both the playwrights and their audience (as members of society and participants in the theatre) in this system: “we are concerned with our own collective moral hypocrisy and cowardice, and ... with the movement in theatre towards a greater and greater focus on market forces” (Brooks and Verdecchia, 12).

An earlier collaboration between the writers of the *Ali & Ali* plays, *A Line in the Sand*—whose initial production in 1995 features Verdecchia as writer and director, Youssef as writer and actor, and Chai as actor—also shares the *Ali & Ali* plays’ interest in Western interaction with and representation of the Middle East. In particular, it examines the military and political intervention of the West in the Middle East and its economic and social ramifications, Canada’s complicity in these affairs, and the kinds of language that are used to cover up abuses enacted on the inhabitants of the Middle East, by individuals as well as organizations and countries. In an alternate second act, cut from the play in its initial production, a sarcastic, aggressive journalist interrogates “Marcus Youssef” concerning his apparent hypocrisy as a privileged Canadian citizen “preaching” against the abuses of the Gulf War (Verdecchia and Youssef 119). Anticipating many of the thematic concerns of *Ali & Ali*, the character “Youssef” draws attention to the racism of contemporary children’s films like Walt Disney’s *Aladdin*, while also protesting the Gulf War as “a really concrete example of how cultural stereotypes and propaganda can convince us to accept the wholesale slaughter of other human beings” (Verdecchia and Youssef 106). Perhaps most importantly, this second act troubles both the personal and

political positions of the playwright, who may be complicit in the very abuses and exploitations that he or she exposes. It also anticipates many of the critiques and often-personal attacks that political activists such as playwrights, hoping to denounce political and social injustice, may be expected to face.

Even more so than *A Line in the Sand*, the *Ali & Ali* plays are also profoundly personal. The characters Ali and Ali were originally created and performed by Youssef and Chai as a response to the culture of racial profiling that became prominent in North America after 9/11 (Wasserman 128). “As men of Middle Eastern origin with suspicious names and appearances,” Jerry Wasserman explains, “Youssef and Chai felt uncomfortable and sometimes frightened for themselves and their young families” (128). Youssef, as his character explains in *A Line in the Sand*, was born in Canada to an Egyptian father and an American mother; meanwhile, Chai immigrated to Canada from Iran as a child (Wasserman 128). Although not of Middle Eastern descent, Verdecchia is also intimately familiar with the difficulties of “straddling borders” that an immigrant might face, having moved to Canada from Argentina as a child. Issues surrounding race and immigration, often treated autobiographically, feature heavily in Verdecchia’s work, most notably in his *Fronteras Americanas*, whose interest in the use of language and ethnic stereotypes in the media resembles that of *Ali & Ali*. Thus, these three playwrights, “whose insider/outsider relationship to the North American experience” Wasserman identifies as being “increasingly typical of a Canadian theatrical community beginning to embrace its own growing diversity” (128), are uniquely positioned to address the problem of ethnic and linguistic stereotyping in the North American context. On the one hand, by virtue of their “suspicious names and appearances” (Wasserman 128), they have been

subject to some of the same kinds of ethnic stereotyping despite having lived in Canada for most, or all, of their lives. At the same time, they are profoundly aware of the potential hypocrisy of their own positions, as they share many of the privileges of their middle/upper middle class audiences, but not the refugee's predicaments that their characters Ali and Ali face.

In response to the climate of fear-mongering and increased scrutiny of certain ethnic minorities after 9/11, the *Ali & Ali* plays illustrate the hypocrisy inherent in the rhetoric of multiculturalism. This rhetoric is also profoundly Canadian, as Canada prides itself on having been the first country to implement multiculturalism as governmental policy in 1971 (Winter 15).⁸ Canada has a long history of incorporating this rhetoric of diversity into its spectacles.⁹ For instance, in her discussion of John Murray Gibbon's work in the 1930s, Antonia Smith demonstrates how spectacles involving ethnic minorities were designed to "consolidate white, British-Canadian identity, perform it as stable both for them and their immigrant audience, and in so doing cause it to function as a model of successful assimilation into 'Canadian culture'" (37). While such spectacles assure a "British Canadian elite...that they have nothing to fear from these foreigners because they can be assimilated and controlled," they suggest to an immigrant audience that "they can find social acceptance and the privileges of citizenship by performing

⁸ This year marks the establishment of what Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau framed as "multiculturalism within a bilingual framework," which "not only constituted an official state policy but was also 'the very essence of Canadian identity'" (qtd. in Winter 143).

⁹ Here I use the term "spectacle" to denote a "specially prepared or arranged display"—usually some kind of performance—"exhibited to, or set before, the public gaze as an object" ("Spectacle, n.1"). I also incorporate Guy Debord's articulation that "the spectacle appears at once as society itself, as a part of society and a means of unification" (12). This is especially true of "multicultural" spectacles, which cultivate an idealized, naïve conception of what is performed as a representation of society, and by doing so, aim to unify that society.

allegiance and cultural assimilation” (Smith 43). These “multicultural” spectacles continue to be deployed for a national and international audience; for example, during the Olympic ceremonies hosted in Canada in 1976 (Montréal), 1988 (Calgary), and 2010 (Vancouver). According to Jennifer Adese, “Multiculturalism as put forth in 2010 [that is, during the spectacles created for the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver] was a pacifying discourse that insisted that all peoples now sit in exactly the same relation to the state and that settlers are separated only by degrees of ‘ethnicity’” (497). The mobilization of multiculturalist rhetoric, in which culturally diverse “ethnic others” are used “as symbols of Canada’s uniqueness and diversity (key themes of multiculturalism),” illustrates how “Canada has actively sought to repackage the nation’s image ‘for commercial consumption and nostalgic renarration purged of historical responsibility’” (Adese 481).¹⁰

Recently, performance artist and former refugee Francisco-Fernando Granados, who has himself staged protests against the “enormous number of people forcibly displaced in the preparations for the [Olympic] games” (Dawson, “Refugee’s” 60)¹¹ during their 2010 installment in Vancouver, reflected on the kinds of multiculturalist language sanctioned by the Canadian media as providing “frameworks for representation... [that] were too rigid, too predetermined, too small” (31). Frustrated by the media’s interest in “repeating an idealized version of Canadian multiculturalism,” Granados remarks, “Refugees are meant to be grateful, and talking about the struggles of institutionalized discrimination or the brutalizing refugee certification process would not

¹⁰ Internal quotation from David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State* (Malden: Blackwell, 2002), 221.

¹¹ See his *Stillness Studies* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=I16FOsicXBE).

fit into these frames” (31). The affirmation of multiculturalism is widely used to build images of national identity, and specifically Canadian “moral superiority,” as Canada works to distinguish herself from the United States of America: Canada’s “mosaic,” “used to underline Canada’s distinctiveness vis à vis the American ‘melting pot[,]’ is] staged as a demonstration of Canada’s compassionate character,” writes Elke Winter (120).

Canada’s morally superior attitude to the U.S., rooted in her superiority/inferiority complex in relation to that country, is further explored in the *Ali & Ali* plays in the context of their interrelated economies. Through trade structures that are intimately intertwined, their common marketplace shares many of the same companies and advertising campaigns. Acutely aware that this sector of society is dominated by the economic powerhouse that is (or increasingly was?) the United States, Canadians often choose consciously to distinguish themselves from their neighbours on supposedly moral grounds, priding themselves, for example, on their “peacekeeping” as opposed to American “war-mongering.” Yet this country, which Ali Ababwa at one point refers to as “the United States of Canada” (*Deportation* 5), is economically and politically dependent on the more powerful U.S., and thus the Canadian sense of moral superiority is profoundly misplaced. While critical of U.S. foreign policy and the “War on Terror” in particular, the *Ali & Ali* plays are equally insistent on demonstrating Canada’s complicity in these questionable affairs, especially the substantial economic benefits the country gained as a supplier of weaponry for the American army.

In their demonstration of the ascendancy of the marketplace and its impact upon constructions of race, the concerns and approach of both the characters and playwrights

of the *Ali & Ali* plays are markedly contemporary. In his extended study of the “postcolonial exotic,” Graham Huggan identifies a shift from the nation-based empires of colonialism to the market-based empires of present-day neo-colonialism, particularly in reference to the kinds of exoticisms that are most commonly circulated in our current context. “Late twentieth-century exoticisms are the products,” Huggan writes, “less of the expansion of the nation than of a worldwide *market*—exoticism has shifted, that is, from a more or less privileged mode of aesthetic perception to an increasingly global mode of mass-market consumption” (15). Along with their creators and their audience, *Ali and Ali* are participants—although with differing levels of power and privilege—in a global economic system that exoticizes and exploits the ethnic “other.” In exposing this reality to its audiences, the *Ali & Ali* plays deflate the possibility of assumption of moral superiority—not merely as Canadians, but also as knowledgeable, politically-aware members of a “multicultural” society—among its audience members.

In fact, Huggan argues that the “humanitarian” urge to sympathize with the ethnic “other” can become a kind of exoticization as well. “Exoticism is bound up here,” Huggan writes, “not just in the perception of cultural difference but in the sympathetic identification with supposedly marginal cultural groups. Yet this urge to identify, as manifested in patterns of consumption, often comes as the expense of *knowledge* of cultures/cultural groups other than one’s own” (17; emphasis original). Interested in the “plight” of the ethnic “other,” privileged North America may find itself more engrossed in the reflections of its own conceptions about the lives lived in other cultures and societies than in actually listening to the voices, speaking in their own words, of those who have lived those lives. As Huggan notes, this tendency is bound up in “patterns of

consumption” (17) that lead to the commodification of constructions of identity—whether they pertain to the ethnic “other” or ourselves. For *Ali & Ali*, critical, deconstructive play with language provides a way to challenge these constructions and our complicity in them.

Chapter 2: Using Language to Construct and Subvert the Expectations of the Stage

This play with language manifests as irony in *Ali & Ali*, as its double meaning creates a space in which to compare and contrast—and to emphasize the divergence between—what is *said* and what is *meant*. In his formulation of the ironic mode, New proposes that the

blur between *saying* and *meaning* creates a sort of rhetorical diversion, a pause while meaning and function can be figured out; and often the figuring out occurs in an act of recognition (or, as D.J. Enright has it, “reverberation”)—rather than in an act of explanation—which means that irony, to be effective, depends upon context and shared knowledge. (13)

For the *Ali & Ali* plays, this “rhetorical diversion” (New 13) creates a space for humour, in its subversion of linguistic expectations, but also a space for deeper reflection on the implications of the kinds of language that the characters use. This “figuring out” (New 13), which must take place in the minds of the audience because it is not explicitly spelled out in the text of the play, requires “an act of recognition” (New 13) on the part of its audience that often involves a personal dimension. In addition, irony, according to New, “depends upon context and shared knowledge” (13): in this respect, the specific cultural context of the *Ali & Ali* plays makes these plays that much more hard-hitting for the privileged Canadian audience that it assumes, who are uniquely placed to understand—and to cringe at—much of their humour.

The subversion of linguistic expectations, a direct result of irony, can act as a powerful tool for exposing and challenging the power structures of society—which are often reproduced in the theatre. As Julie Byczynski illustrates, the representation of

linguistic difference in the theatre encourages a re-evaluation of the hegemony of certain languages and the cultural groups to which they belong: a hegemony often taken for granted in other contexts. “In the theatre,” she writes,

where one language is normally shared by actors and audience, dialogue spoken in minority languages can function in ways that upset the position of the dominant language *as* dominant. In the case of an English language theatre with English-speaking patrons, “foreign” dialogue has the potential to call into question the seeming authority that the English language has in that theatre. (Byczynski 33)

The *Ali & Ali* plays achieve these same goals by slightly different means. The language being played with in these plays *is* English, but it is frequently represented in such a way as to reflect the influence of the speech patterns of other languages. “You must forgive our English; is not always 100 percent,” Ali Ababwa explains, dropping the pronoun *it* (*aXes* 24). When “foreign” dialogue *is* inserted into the text, it is not meant to be intelligible by the audience, or even by the characters within the play. Instead, such usage signals the extent to which the hegemony of English and the Western culture associated with it have been taken for granted. Like the plays that Byczynski outlines, the *Ali & Ali* plays use linguistic difference to challenge the dominance of English in the theatre, although these latter plays are arguably more subversive in exposing and attacking the market forces that encourage the exoticization and exploitation of such linguistic difference, as well as our complicity in those forces.

The *Ali & Ali* plays’ very deliberate use of language depends on subverting the cultural and linguistic expectations of their audiences, constructed by the plays’ forms of

direct address as largely white and Western. The Alis attempt to sell their performances on a stage whose default language is pointedly English and whose context is privileged Canada. In fact, the opening lines of *The aXes of Evil* directly reference this positioning: when the Alis' pre-recorded promotional voice-over refers to the audience as "Mogadishu" (11), Ali Ababwa immediately acknowledges the mistake, saying, "We know you're not Somalia" (12). "We know where we are" (*aXes* 12), Ali Hakim assures his audience, suggesting that the "where" and the "who" of a place are directly related. "We had a little trouble at the border," the Alis explain, "No time to redo intro" (*aXes* 12). This explanation immediately exposes a privilege differential between the performers, whose status within the country is uncertain, and the audience who, presumably, did *not* experience "trouble at the border" (*aXes* 12) on their way to the performance. The theatre, after all, is typically the domain of the cultural elite, whose economic and social stability allows them the leisure of attending such performances.

In addition, Ali Hakim's slightly stilted response—"No time to redo intro" (*aXes* 12), in which the article *the* has been dropped—hints at a linguistic dimension to this differential that will be more fully explored in the rest of the play. The dominant language of the stage—English—is not the native language of the Alis, yet they must work with and within this language if they are to sell their performances to their audiences. The Alis rightly recognize that a performance not directly marketed toward its audience will ultimately be less successful than one that is: after all, they note, "As graduates of the Agrabanian Institute of Niche Marketing, Cross-Polinization, [sic] and Higher Colonic, we understand how to synergize our product to extract full value in the post-deal phase" (*aXes* 26). Thus the *Ali & Ali* plays work to challenge the complacency

of their audience through the exposure of the underlying market forces and privilege differentials at play in the theatre.

If the language of the theatre, as constructed by the *Ali & Ali* plays, is English, then the realm of cultural understanding dominant on this stage is also patently Western. The *Ali & Ali* plays focus on the depiction of broadly “Middle Eastern” cultures in a deliberately vague approach that highlights the so-called West’s elision of difference in its generalist understanding of the so-called non-West. In response to Duncan’s protest concerning the similarity of the Alis’ “ethnic dramas,” Ali Ababwa directly references this elision, saying, “you my friend as a member of the dominant culture, have a totalizing and homogenizing gaze that erases difference” (*aXes* 83).¹² These assumptions are promptly turned back on the audience, whose own homogeneity is satirically assumed by the plays. Rather than intending us to believe that there is really a single dominant culture, or a single entity we could plausibly call “the West,” the authors use language to construct an imaginary, cohesive whole known as “the West” that corresponds to the way Ali and Ali imagine their “sophisticated Western audience,” as Ali Hakim puts it (*aXes* 19). The Alis furthermore assume the privileged economic status of their audience, as, for example, when Ali Ababwa asks an audience member, “May I have keys to late model luxury sedan? Credit card? You will find that I can adapt quickly to your carefree lifestyle” (*aXes* 103). By presenting these constructions about their audience *to* their audience, the *Ali & Ali* plays put that audience in the same position of stereotyped ethnic “other” as the Alis themselves experience.

¹² Clearly, even left-wing, social justice-centric dogmas like this one are not exempt from the satire of the plays; such jokes serve to heighten the ironic humour of the Alis’ ability to code-switch.

Similarly, the plays use language to construct Ali and Ali themselves as broadly “exotic.” The depiction of the Alis’ home country, the fictional Agraba, incorporates elements of Iraqi and Iranian culture and history, while the name of the country itself is taken from Walt Disney’s 1992 film *Aladdin*. Likewise, the names of the Alis¹³ come from multiple popular Hollywood representations of people of Middle Eastern descent that have been disseminated through popular entertainment. Ali Ababwa is the stage name of the fictional character Aladdin in the Disney film: the many layers of performance intertexts suggest the artificiality of this representation, as Ali Ababwa is a fiction based upon a fictional character’s assumed identity. Meanwhile, Ali Hakim’s name refers to the unscrupulous peddler from the 1943 musical *Oklahoma!* Taking on the cultural assumptions associated with such representations, both Alis typify the stereotype of the hawker in a Middle Eastern bazaar, whose obsequious and sly manner never quite hides his interest in selling a product or “pulling one over” on his client. In a send up (on the part of the playwrights) of the ubiquity of the name “Ali” as an instantaneous marker of Middle Eastern descent in the Western media, the Alis’ names are themselves “stage names” like Aladdin’s, which they use to sell exoticized images of themselves to their audience rather than to reflect personal identity.

¹³ Additionally, the Alis’ names also suggest a possible play on “allies.” As such, the Alis may be attempting to present themselves as suitable allies of the “West” as a way to emphasize their (apparent) harmlessness and willingness to work within political and economic systems that benefit the “West.” Furthermore, the frequent use of the word within the media to denote military allies suggests the violence of both these global political and economic systems, as well as the violence enacted on the Alis as ethnic “others.”

Chapter 3: Strategic Self-Exoticization

This branding of the self as exotic through the strategic use of language is one of the central concerns of the *Ali & Ali* plays. Here I look to Graham Huggan's definition of self-exoticization as an "awareness of 'cultural difference' as a global commodity" (qtd. in Knowles 83). This commodity circulates transnationally, according to Huggan, "especially insofar as it includes the marketability of 'national culture' both within the nation and offshore" (qtd. in Knowles 83). The Alis' self-exoticization, which manifests in their embrace and manipulation of familiar stereotypes, is a marketing strategy by which they hope to sell their performances. By constructing themselves as exotic, they also attempt to establish the wares that they periodically flog as more "authentic" by association. For the playwrights, the self-exoticization of the Alis is a rhetorical strategy by which they hope to challenge the complacency of their audience in the face of the capitalist exploitation of ethnic groups.

The exoticization of the Alis is also a satirical self-exoticization for Youssef and Chai, the creators and initial performers of *Ali and Ali*, employed as a way to work through some of the stereotypes associated with their ethnic origins. In this respect, self-exoticization acts as a way to counter and expose the absurdity of stereotypes foisted on the ethnic "other." Furthermore, this self-exoticization is deeply personal for Youssef and Chai, who recognize not only the ways in which they have been deemed as "other" but also the ways in which they are complicit in that system of exoticization. In an interview, Chai relates one of his earliest experiences on the stage, which occurred when he was cast as Ali Hakim in a high school production of *Oklahoma!* "It was then, at seventeen," he recounts,

when I first realized that my fellow Canadians didn't see me as blond and blue eyed Oklahoman, but rather, as a creepy Persian peddler who enjoys de-flowering virginal white women....The idea behind our play's Ali Hakim is to take the negative stereotypes of the character from *Oklahoma!* and appropriate them for our own gains, without losing the clown and cultural tropes but adding dignity and complexity. (qtd. in Perry)

By creating and performing the Ali and Ali characters, Youssef and Chai expose the negative stereotypes with which Ali Hakim and people of Middle Eastern descent in general are associated, while also using those stereotypes to spark thoughtful engagement from their audiences.

In their different ways, both playwrights and characters are engaging in what Dean MacCannell calls "staged marginality" which, Huggan writes,

denotes the process by which marginalised individuals or minority groups dramatise their "subordinate" status for the imagined benefit of a majority audience. Staged marginality, far from being a form of necessary self-subordination, may function in certain contexts to uncover and challenge dominant structures of power. (xii)

This "staged marginality" is largely strategic for Ali and Ali, who market themselves as obsequious and culturally naïve. Yet moments of emotional honesty, such as Ali Hakim's polemics concerning Canadian moral superiority, suggest that this self-presentation is more a spectacle intended to sell their products and themselves and to divert the audience's attention than a reflection of the characters' feelings or experience. Frustrated by the audience's lack of concern (he has just asked them for food for the second time to

no avail [*aXes* 54]), and the Alis' need to desperately pander to their audience, Ali Hakim bluntly denounces Ali Ababwa's latest marketing ploy: "Stop. That's enough, all this bullshit. There's no fire department in Agraba. Provisional Authority disbanded fire department. For being part of old regime. Only fire department I will give money to is the one making fires in occupiers' tanks" (*aXes* 54).

In an effort to cover up his partner's subversive speech, Ali Ababwa "*laughs exaggeratedly*" and responds, "Oh. Ali Hakim is having the irony" (*aXes* 54). Ali Hakim's candid speech, with its relative lack of exoticisms—the suggestion being this is his natural speech—is directly juxtaposed with Ali Ababwa's more obvious grammatical errors. Ali Ababwa's formulation, in which Ali Hakim "is having the irony" (*aXes* 54), is humorous because of its quaint turn of phrase, which represents that of a non-native English-speaker. Yet it is also ironic itself: by dismissing Ali Hakim's rebuke as "having the irony" (*aXes* 54), Ali Ababwa frames irony as merely a joke, and something that does not need to be taken seriously. Yet for the *Ali & Ali* plays, jokes, especially ironic ones, are essential to facilitating the critical engagement of their audience. Thus, through Ali Ababwa's very dismissal, the *Ali & Ali* plays urge their audience to think more critically about the things Ali Ababwa has dismissed—namely, the importance of irony and the genuineness of Ali Hakim's polemic.

In the *Ali & Ali* plays, strategic self-exoticization manifests itself as a multivalent rhetorical strategy, as the Alis seek to capitalize on the discourses of the marketplace, which present the "exotic" as fashionable and desirable, while the plays themselves contest these discourses by exposing their exploitation and dehumanization of the ethnic "other" through stereotype. Thus, the Alis' *mode* of strategic self-exoticization as a

marketing strategy is to deliberately play into the linguistic stereotypes cultivated by the West concerning native speakers of a language other than English. For example, they explore stereotypical forms of cultural expression such as ululation, and use Arabic-sounding gibberish to stand in for Arabic and other “foreign” languages as they appear in media intended for a Western audience who will find such usages of language exotic, but incomprehensible. For the Alis, these idiosyncrasies enhance their exoticism, and thus their marketability, while also distracting (or at least attempting to distract) the audience from any potential offense the Alis may cause. In turn, the *Ali & Ali* plays employ stereotypically “foreign” accents, incorrect grammar, and miscomprehension of words and their meanings as ways of representing the linguistic stereotypes attributed to ethnic “others.” The ironic presentations of these idiosyncrasies heighten the plays’ humour, and thus their satiric bite, and more importantly, open up a wider discussion about ethnic and linguistic stereotyping.

It is clear that the Alis’ self-exoticization is a strategy through which they hope to sell their performances. Yet what precisely are they selling and what do they hope to gain? The basis of the Alis’ motivation seems to be primarily economic: Ali Ababwa periodically hawks his “fine selection of wide merchandise available for purchase” (*aXes* 52), and mentions to his audience, “We are—due to circumstances beyond our control—practicing neo-liberals, and will sell pretty much anything for a price” (*aXes* 56). At another point he reminds Duncan, “We were to have been paid, on signing, a small sum, a mere pittance really, 3 percent plus sundry minor but necessary expenses. We are in great need of this money for lodgings and food” (*aXes* 93). With a similar goal in mind, Ali Hakim solicits the audience: “Well my friend, how ’bout now you buy me pizza? I

work hard for you, yes. I drive jeeps, make joke...” (*aXes* 100). The dramatic difference in the language of the Alis’ appeals demonstrates the way each Ali uses stylized discourses to appeal to their interlocutors. Acutely aware of Duncan’s demonstrated investment in “politically correct” speech, Ali Ababwa addresses him in the florid English that Ali believes Duncan will appreciate. In contrast, Ali Hakim’s bid, expressed in definite “Middle Eastern” broken English, highlights his own subordinate status (both socially and economically) as he attempts to garner sympathy from his audience. As Ali Hakim invites the audience to hear his stomach growl (*aXes* 100), he recognizes that an exchange must take place: his entertainment and jokes are offered for his audience’s money. Here the Alis’ uncertainty about the financial benefits they can hope to gain from their performances, which is highlighted by their strenuous efforts to market their performances and products, draws attention to the precarious economic position of the refugee and the dramatic privilege differential between the Alis and their audiences, points that are in turn representative of greater societal disparities.

But on another level, the Alis are selling more than just commemorative pillowcases and entertainment. They are selling images of themselves, constructed through the Western stereotypes that they believe their audiences want to see. After all, these are the stereotypes that are commonly disseminated through the media. While this self-exoticization, the Alis think, will help them to sell their entertainment and wares, they are also hoping to “buy” the audience’s recognition and acceptance. Perhaps this will come in the form of official recognition from the government: in one of his articles on *The aXes of Evil*, Wasserman writes that the Alis “put on a cabaret for their Canadian audience in hopes of acquiring official refugee status” (127). This is, at least, the desire of

the more optimistic Ali Ababwa. In contrast, Ali Hakim is more skeptical of the possibility of being accepted into Canadian society and asks his friend, “Ali Ababwa...you are really wishing to stay here with them?” (*aXes* 123). Ali Hakim’s well-founded reservations propose an alternate response to the gratefulness assumed and required of the immigrant/refugee in public discourses. Instead, Ali Hakim questions the status quo, hoping to find more equitable treatment for himself and the young family he has left behind in a refugee camp in Malta.

What can we make, then, of the Alis’ repeated failure to sell themselves and their entertainment as successfully as they might wish? After all, we never see if Ali Ababwa receives the very modest “3 percent plus sundry minor but necessary expenses” (*aXes* 93) that he claims were due upon the signing of the Alis’ contract with the theatre. Nor does Ali Hakim successfully manage to wrest a slice of pizza from the audience. And Ali Ababwa does not seem to have much luck in hawking his wares. Of course, these are theatrical plays and the audience cannot reliably be expected to respond. In fact, this lack of response—which can be seen as complacency—is, as the *Ali & Ali* plays point out, not only endemic to the theatre and society at large, but furthermore directly rewarded by the nature of the capitalist, exploitative global system in which we live. This lack of recognition and effort to rectify the situation on the part of those in privileged positions is precisely what frustrates Ali Hakim: “Cheap bastards. You Canadians—you can’t buy me a slice of pizza? How much did you make selling weapons to Americans, huh? Who armed the fundamentalists?” (*aXes* 54). Ali Hakim’s outburst requires the audience to examine what risks or uncomfortable gestures they would undertake on behalf of others or in the name of social change. Furthermore, the *Ali & Ali* plays illustrate the double

standard that exists in Canadian society, and the comforting lies told to cover up the truth. Meanwhile, Ali Ababwa attempts to cover up Ali Hakim's polemic, recognizing that, despite and in fact *because* of its truth, it will not help the Alis sell themselves. "Ali Hakim," Ali Ababwa admonishes, "They do not speak your language" (*aXes* 55). "My language?" Ali Hakim responds (*aXes* 55), suggesting that Ali Hakim does not feel this is "his" language at all, but simply the truth told plainly. Through this exchange, the *Ali & Ali* plays illustrate the rampant "illiteracy" of their constructed audience, who despite their (assumed) knowledge of English—the language in which Ali Hakim speaks—cannot or will not understand the implications of his speech.

Chapter 4: Troubling Discourses

Instead, the language of the audience, as assumed by the Alis and constructed by the *Ali & Ali* plays, is the language of the marketplace, of “politically correct” rhetoric, and of governmental “doublespeak.”¹⁴ Through these stylized discourses, language is manipulated in a variety of ways, usually for the economic and/or political gain of its users. In illustrating the use of these discourses by the Alis and other characters, *Ali & Ali* challenges their artificiality and exposes the motivations behind their use. Take, for example, the ways in which the Alis tap into advertising discourses for their own capitalist purposes. As Ali Ababwa assures his audience, “Yes, friends, here at Ali and Ali we make every effort to communicate with you in ways to which you are culturally accustomed and so provide many opportunities to purchase merchandise and commemorative memorabilia like *this* [at which point, a projected slide shows a commemorative plate, and Ali Ababwa continues] authentic ‘Royal Doulton’ plate” (*aXes* 25). Here Ali Ababwa explicitly identifies the cultural language of communication of his audience as the language of the marketplace. By saying “here at Ali and Ali” (*aXes* 25), Ali Ababwa furthermore brands himself and his co-playwright as a kind of company with a product to sell, thus exposing the reality of the theatre as a place of economic exchange. Finally, the projection of the commemorative plate illustrates the bombardment of advertisement through multiple media platforms.

¹⁴ Evocative of George Orwell’s *1984*, the term (rendered in the *OED* as “double-talk”) has evolved to denote “Verbal expression intended to be, or which may be, construed in more than one sense; deliberately ambiguous or imprecise language; used esp. of political language that is subject to arbitrary national or party interpretation” (“Double-talk | double talk, n.”).

Recognizing the utility of multiple platforms for advertising and marketing, the Alis provide a website that their potential shoppers might visit as well—that is, “www dot [*Ali Hakim ululates*] dot com” (*aXes* 26). This absurd URL not only highlights the Alis’ self-exoticization as a capitalist strategy, it also demonstrates the distortion certain kinds of expression undergo when they are repurposed for a marketplace that strips them of their communicative value. After all, how does one search for the address “www dot [*Ali Hakim ululates*] dot com” (*aXes* 26)? While definitely memorable, this website address is unsearchable, and thus useless, because it attempts to represent cultural expression in a form (that is, graphemic) that will not support it. Here, the Alis’ self-exoticization hilariously backfires as the play illustrates the artificiality of advertising discourses and jokes about the non-packageability of “ethnic” forms of expression.

Alongside this commodification of ethnicity, North American society privileges the grammatically correct, but over-rehearsed and formulaic, politically correct discourses that pander to appearances rather than actually enacting any kind of genuinely meaningful and respectful exchange across cultures. In response to this, the *Ali & Ali* plays draw attention to the hypocrisy with which such languages are used not only in media and governmental communications but also in the Western theatre itself. After the Alis’ particularly biting satirical representation of the self-righteous and “patriotic” tropes used in many Hollywood war films set in the Middle East, Duncan assures the audience that the theatre’s “mandate to represent, accommodate, dignify, and empower cultural communities through theatrical productions of high artistic quality doesn’t mean that well...” (*aXes* 47). Duncan trails off in the middle of his speech, suggesting that he fails to believe himself, as he hears how hollow he sounds. When Duncan begins again, less

confidently, sounding less rehearsed this time, his speech begins to take on a few ethnic idiosyncrasies: “Well, it means we have a responsibility to you, our audience, a responsibility we *tek* seriously, which is why I’ve taken the extraordinary step of *interruptin’* and...” (*aXes* 48; emphasis mine). Each time Duncan interrupts the Alis’ performance, his language begins as sophisticated, grammatically correct—and painfully orthodox, padded with the kind of pretentious and self-righteous rhetoric that often gets exchanged in “multicultural” spectacle (as well as governmental circles) like a kind of commodity. Rather than being heartfelt and sincere, this “politically correct” discourse is used to present the theatre as “multicultural,” and thus socially progressive and responsible.

Using the rhetoric of multiculturalism, Duncan insists that the Alis present an “ethnic family drama that offers you a window onto our nation’s culture yet resonates with universal themes” (*aXes* 49). The *Ali & Ali* plays take aim at these kinds of feel-good dramas that promote multicultural rhetoric, while de-politicizing, and thus muzzling, culturally diverse voices. The Alis stage a number of these dramas, in which repetitive storylines and the interchangeability of ethnicities suggest the formulaic nature of plays that present derivative, melodramatic material for an audience eager to consume the feel-good rhetoric of multiculturalism. Furthermore, the *Ali & Ali* plays implicate their audience as supporters of such fare: in demanding an “ethnic family drama,” Duncan assumes of the audience, “After all, that’s what ye came to see” (*aXes* 49).

However, as the Alis’ absurdity and vulgarity works away at Duncan’s self-righteous façade, his “multicultural” rhetoric breaks down. As he becomes more infuriated at the Alis’ antics, Duncan begins to respond more genuinely, and his own

language becomes progressively peppered with Scottish-isms. Having put off his pretentious “multicultural” rhetoric, Duncan instead takes on the role of the ethnic performer in the “multicultural” spectacle. Weeping with emotion as he completes his retelling of the bravery and torture of William Wallace at the hands of the “ruthless English bastards” (*aXes* 88), Duncan becomes increasingly marked as an ethnic “other.”

Duncan’s performance, which is suspiciously evocative of the 1995 Hollywood film *Braveheart* (Ali Ababwa agrees: “I saw this movie,” he says [*aXes* 88]), becomes a “multicultural” spectacle like the one Duncan had earlier demanded from the Alis. Acting within his new role, Duncan confirms the multiculturalist project, lending his authority as ethnic “other” to justify its righteousness: “I cannae tell ye how that makes me feel. It’s validatin’ you know, to have your own people, their history, their sufferin’ up here on the stage. That’s what we want to see. That’s why the people come. To get in touch with some basic human emotions...” (*aXes* 91). The absurdity and insensitivity of using the “sufferin’” (*aXes* 91) of the ethnic “other” to uphold multiculturalist discourses is further illustrated by Duncan’s unconvincing attestation of his “inoffensiveness.” When Duncan rails against the “ruthless English bastards,” he immediately addresses the audience, “No offence” (*aXes* 88). Later, he recounts, “the brave-hearted Scots withstood the attack of the English dogs—no offence intended—and their Irish vassals—no offence” (*aXes* 90-1). Despite his recognition that he must play the role of the harmless ethnic “other,” who must affirm “cultural difference” and avoid giving offense, it is clear that Duncan really *does* mean offence and that this rhetoric of multiculturalism, adapted for the ethnic “other,” continues to promote unrealistic conceptions of “multicultural” feeling. Furthermore, the authors spoof the process of “othering” by applying the tropes of the

ethnic “other” (as in colonized experience, terrible suffering, torturous history, et cetera) to an ethnicity (that is, Scottishness) that has been totally naturalized into the dominant Canadian identity. By applying these tropes to a Scot, the playwrights expose them even more clearly as tropes.

Like the euphemistic, high-sounding rhetoric used in “multicultural” discourses, the duplicitous, evasive jargon often used in governmental discourses is also satirized and critiqued in the *Ali & Ali* plays. This discourse is by no means the sole province of the political Right, represented by George W. Bush and his Republican administration in *The axes of Evil*. In *The Deportation Hearings*, the playwrights take aim at the kinds of language used by U.S. President Barack Obama, who, in the play, is rendered as “Osabama,” a send up of the power of language to create associations between unrelated entities (that is, Barack Obama and Osama bin Laden), as well as of the (well-publicized) hysteria surrounding the future president’s supposed Muslim, “anti-American” connections during the lead-up to the 2008 election. The Alis have the stick puppets “Osabama” and “Biden” sing, “Spew forth the mostly affirmative. / And never say what you really mean” (*Deportation* 75), as if it were a kind of chanted mantra, oft-repeated. Furthermore, “Biden” congratulates “Osabama” on his clever and deceptive renaming of a potentially unpopular government initiative:

BIDEN And I do think it was a fantastic idea to change the name of
 the War on Terror to “Overseas Contingency Operations.”

OSBAMA More syllables can be quite effective.

BIDEN It’s great, nobody cares about it anymore. Sounds boring.

(*Deportation* 75)

Here “Biden” celebrates the effect to which the manipulation of language can alter perspectives. Meanwhile, the difference between these two names—that is, Bush’s “War on Terror” and Obama’s “Overseas Contingency Operations”—suggests the differing political climates during their respective administrations as well as the differing approaches to self-branding of each of these presidents.

While noticeably less critical of the aims of such discourses, the *Ali & Ali* plays nonetheless satirize the often confusing, convoluted kinds of language characteristic of the Academy, while also using such language to elucidate the goals of the playwrights’ project. Intending to justify themselves against Duncan’s “multiculturalist” critiques, the *Alis* stage a short video presentation from their “embedded critic” (*aXes* 85), the wonderfully named Jean Paul Jacques Beauderrière dada. Here the *Ali & Ali* plays poke fun at the reverence shown chic theorists like Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard, while also using language—here French—to joke about beautiful “derrières.” Furthermore, the joke connects these Big Theorists to the absurdist aesthetics of Dada, while also suggesting their position as patriarchs (Dadas). “The tactic of Ali and Ali,” Jean Paul Jacques theorizes, “is to provoke an excess of reality; their hypothesis is that the system itself will commit suicide in response to multiple deadly farts (which in the symbolic of the unreal are pure utterances dependent on no referents)” (*aXes* 85). Although a direct spoof of Baudrillard’s work,¹⁵ Jean Paul Jacques’ theory nonetheless illustrates the project of the *Ali & Ali* plays. After all, the humour of the *Ali & Ali* plays, fueled by

¹⁵ See “The Spirit of Terrorism,” in which Baudrillard writes, “The terrorist hypothesis is that the [Western] system itself will commit suicide in response to the multiple challenges posed by deaths and suicides... It is the tactic of the terrorist model to bring about an excess of reality, and have the system collapse beneath that excess of reality” (17-18).

irony, and here rendered as “multiple deadly farts,” is precisely the plays’ greatest weapon against “the system” as it “provokes a critical rupture in the discourse of power” (*aXes* 85). Through their use of humour and irony, these plays work to “rupture” and deconstruct the systems of power at play behind the institutionalized discourses of the media and the state.

Chapter 5: Linguistic Strategies on the Stage

In conjunction with the juxtaposition of childish language with that of academia, the humourous irony of Jean Paul Jacques' theorizing also emerges through the unique staging of the *Ali & Ali* plays. In particular, they employ a variety of theatrical mediums, placing the aural, such as speech and music, in conjunction with the visual, such as projected slides and videos, to enrich the irony of these theatrical vocabularies. Thus, accompanying his astute—if semi-ridiculous—analysis of the Alis' project, Jean Paul Jacques shares his formula for determining the project's value:

PROJECTION:

$\frac{Ali^{ali}}{Fart} = x \text{ (ticket price } \partial) / \text{ authority index —}$
 $(if / either / or + \int \text{ audience prudishness or}$
 $\text{confusion})$

approx = the collapse of Western civilization
as we know it

Or at very least

A profound challenge to those values we hold dear (aXes 86)

The inclusion of this formula, made possible by the use of the projection, offers a written complement to Jean Paul Jacques' verbal theorizing. Of course, the formula is ironic in that such an equation cannot actually be calculated, and therefore cannot be expected to illustrate the results that it proposes. Here the playwrights parody the “mathemes” of Jacques Lacan (another French theorist), whose inclusion of formulas in his own work are sometimes derided as attempts at false rigor. Although the equation is nonsensical, it draws attention to several important aspects that factor into the efficacy of the plays' satire, such as the cost of admission, the reaction of the audience, and their willingness to invest in the authority of the plays and playwrights. As a complement to Jean Paul Jacques' verbal affirmation that “the *jouissant* farting or jerking off of Ali *qua* Ali

provokes a critical rupture in the discourse of power,” the formula promises “*at very least / A profound challenge to those values we hold dear*” (*aXes* 85, 86; emphasis original): indeed, this is a result to which a perceptive audience can attest.

In another instance of unique staging, site-specific references to the communities in which the plays were first staged, some of which are preserved in their published versions, play a role in heightening their humour, its controversy, and the implication of audience members. For example, in *The aXes of Evil* the Alis mistake the Vancouver East Cultural Centre, where the play was initially performed, for the “Vancouver East Church Basement” (21). Known as The Cultch by the time *The Deportation Hearings* are staged, this theatre is reborn as the “Gentrified Vancouver East Church Basement” in this later play (5). Quite literal in their naming of the theatre—The Cultch is, after all, an abandoned church—the Alis, whether inadvertently or not, draw attention to the context of the community in which the theatre is situated. The skewing of the theatre’s name reflects an ironic recognition of the building’s reality that pokes fun of the pretensions of theatre in Canada to offering cultural improvement (“Cultural Centre”), in contrast with its low-budget actuality (“Church Basement”). In *The Deportation Hearings*, the “gentrified” aspect of the “church basement” further suggests the pretentiousness of the middle/upper middle class (who presumably make up the bulk of the Alis’ audiences), whose urge to “gentrify” rough areas often works to erase rather than to celebrate local culture.

In another site-specific reference, the Alis remark that they are “proud to bring to you” / “and the people of Mogadishu, Bosnia, the Congo, Liberia, Senegal, Gaza Strip, and South Surrey-White Rock” / “our show” (*aXes* 23). The last place name references a

local community with which an audience from Vancouver (where the published version was staged) would be familiar. By grouping South Surrey–White Rock with these other, more “exotic” but contested zones marked by political unrest, the playwrights create a humorous juxtaposition. On the one hand, an audience might not expect to hear such a community-specific reference, so the subversion of their expectations can be humorous. The inclusion of this reference creates a contextual joke, which is often enjoyable for those who are privy to its meaning: as the footnote tells us, “People love that shtick” (*aXes* 23). This facilitates the audience’s “act of recognition” that W.H. New foregrounds as essential to the effective deployment of irony (13). On the other hand, the placement of this community among the others encourages the audiences to think more deeply about why such juxtaposition might be humorous. Thus, this “recognition” is not merely an appreciation of the joke, it also involves an active examination—a “figuring out”—of the implications behind it (New 13). In thinking about these implications, an audience member might be compelled to examine the connections between these places, fostered largely by the globalization of markets, that are much more intimate than one might initially suppose. Conversely, that same audience member may be prompted to probe the kinds of privilege and economic differentials that might be experienced by members of those various communities.

Chapter 6: Linguistic Strategies on the Page

While largely dependent on situational humour, the *Ali & Ali* plays also function in interesting ways as written documents, as in the authors' use of playful stage directions and footnotes that enact the same kinds of ironic manipulation of language as the dialogue and other performed languages of the plays. For example, a footnote identifies Ali Hakim's ululation (that is featured in the Alis' website address) as "That crazy-ass tongue-wailing Arab types do in moments of emotional intensity" (*aXes* 26). This of course is highlighted in the written version of the play, when the difficulty of transcribing ululation becomes very apparent. Here the footnote engages in the same kinds of generalizing language that exoticize non-mainstream forms of cultural expression in the speeches of Ali and Ali. But it is also itself racialized, as it engages in North American slang that originated in African-American speech patterns (for example, "crazy-ass"). The deliberate lack of neutrality even in the footnotes suggests the pervasiveness of the Western fascination with, but incomprehension of, cultural forms of expression deemed to be exotic.

In a later instance of ululation, here vocalized by the Caucasian character Tim, the stage direction transcribes it as "lebulebulebu!" (*aXes* 52). This ridiculous attempt at representing ululation suggests the appropriation of cultural forms of expression by those who do not fully understand their implementation. Furthermore, Tim "ululates" in an effort to describe the mug that Ali Ababwa is trying to flog to his audience. The irony is that the "ethnic" stereotypes being marketed to the Alis' audience are, in fact, mirrored reflections of (what the *Ali & Ali* plays satirically assumes as) the audience's own understanding of such forms of cultural expression. Through this ridiculous

representation of “ululation,” the playwrights illustrate that the ethnic stereotypes through which we understand “other” cultures are themselves created by and filtered through Western acts of cultural appropriation.

In similar ironic play with stage directions and footnotes, *Ali & Ali* pokes fun at the doubleness of “politically correct” discourses like that of multiculturalism in the theatre. As Duncan delivers his speech concerning the theatre’s “pro-active education and outreach mandate,” the stage directions indicate that “*ALI & ALI nod vigorously and give thumbs-up*” (*aXes* 48). If interpreting this stage direction within a North American context, the reader, now presumably familiar with the Alis’ characters, may find their enthusiasm for the pedantic Duncan confusing. However, the footnote to this stage direction explains, “Though in some parts of the Middle East, the ‘thumbs-up’ gesture is rude, Ali and Ali are conversant with North American idioms” (*aXes* 48). While the footnote implies that the Alis are engaging in the positive form of this gesture, the footnote simultaneously draws attention to a second, less positive interpretation. In this ironical presentation, the footnote seems to suggest a choice of interpretations to the reader. If the reader has been paying attention, however, he or she will understand which one is appropriate.

In their exploration of the possibilities of the post-colonial theatre’s “refus[al] to uphold the privilege of the imperial language,” Gilbert and Tompkins observe that “a particularly effective form of subversion occurs when one character moves between registers, showing that s/he is quite capable of using all manner of linguistic codes but chooses certain ones strategically” (177). By illustrating the Alis’ ability to move between the gestural idioms of both the Middle East and North America, the *Ali & Ali*

plays illustrate the Alis' capacity for subversion of dominant discourses, such as that of the multiculturalism Duncan attempts to force on them, yet they manage to do so while simultaneously appearing to be polite, and thus palatable to their audiences.

Chapter 7: Implicating Playwright and Audience

By working to critique the very acts of commodification in which it participates, the theatre— as it functions in these plays—becomes a space in which playwright and audience member are both implicated in, and hence must reckon with, the commercial exploitation of “other” cultures and peoples. This implication of playwright and audience is not merely incidental, but instead integral to the project of these plays. In reference to some of his earlier works, Verdecchia describes his very conscious decision to implicate himself in his plays as “a response to...so-called political theatre that we saw in Canada...where a play, a good play, is presented and it deals with a problem...but the problem remains very far away.... But, in fact, we are, in many different ways, complicit and involved in all of these problems” (qtd. in Harvie 46). This sense of complicity extends to the spectator as well, who is refused the possibility of moral superiority, whether as a Canadian or as a politically aware member of society, and must instead reckon with his or her own role in the commodification of cultural difference.

The implication of the audience, after all, is embedded in the title of *The aXes of Evil*. Its subtitle—*A Divertimento for Warlords*—suggests that we, as the audience to whom this “divertimento” is being presented, are also the warlords. Typically associated with the Middle East, the figure of the warlord connotes physical, political, and economic power gained by the violence of force. These are the “warlords,” Paul Corey writes, “who use the war on terror as an excuse to establish neo-colonial dominance” (299). Furthermore, the use of the word “divertimento” markets the play as a diminutive, merely entertaining spectacle: this suggests that the audience, as constructed by the *Ali & Ali* plays, is interested in consuming spectacles of the ethnic “other” that do not require more

critical engagement on the audience's part. "Divertimento," coming from the Italian word for "fun," further illustrates the use of "exotic" languages to promote an appealing image. Similarly, the title of *The Deportation Hearings* positions the audience as "jury," or at least witnesses, to the Alis' immigration trial, the outcome of which is more or less already determined before either of the Alis has a chance to speak. By locating the responsibility for these exploitative systems within each one of its spectators, the plays work against the "doublespeak" of governmental discourses, for example, that attempt to disguise the truth or actively place blame elsewhere. By engaging the playwright and audience in an examination of their own complicity, the *Ali & Ali* plays stretch beyond what New calls a "poetics of resistance" to enact, as much as theatre makes possible, a more active "politics of resistance-in-action" (33). After all, as much as theatre strives to present different perspectives and encourage audience self-examination, it is ultimately up to the audience member herself to choose to what extent she will be affected by and more importantly, *act* to correct the failures of society that the plays expose.

Chapter 8: Utopia and its Parodies: Where *The aXes of Evil* and *The Deportation Hearings Diverge*

In the efforts of the playwrights to encourage their audience to a sustainable “politics of resistance-in-action” (New 33), the parting notes of the *Ali & Ali* plays are of paramount interest—indeed, this is where *The aXes of Evil* and *The Deportation Hearings* diverge in their tactics. Although *The aXes of Evil* ends with the explosion of the titular aXes of Evil—that is, a weapon of mass destruction—the final segment sees the Alis relating a dream from which they have just awoken, and apparently shared, in which they visited an idyllic version of their home country, Agraba. Ali Ababwa speculates, “This must have been Piña Majorca” (*aXes* 125), a reference to the Agrabian version of paradise, to which Ali Hakim replies, “No, Ali, I think perhaps it was the future” (126). This final line of the play represents a dramatic departure from the rest of the play’s biting satire: although an ironic parody of utopias would perhaps be more expected considering the tone of the rest of the play, the seriousness of this final line suggests a quietly positive outlook that imagines and hopes for the possibility of a better world, even if the play cannot fully invest in that vision.

Like the “utopian performatives” Jill Dolan examines in her *Utopia in Performance*,¹⁶ the ending of *The aXes of Evil* “allow[s] fleeting contact with a utopia not stabilized by its own finished perfection, not coercive in its contained, self-reliant, self-determined system, but a utopia always in process, always only partially grasped, as it

¹⁶ Building on J.L Austin’s definition of a performative speech act as one that *effects* the action it enunciates, Dolan uses the term “utopian performatives” to denote “small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense” (5).

disappears before us around the corners of narrative and social experience” (6).

Significantly, this “fleeting” (Dolan 6) utopia comes to us through the second-hand reporting of a dream, which is further called into question by the various interpretations that the dreamers offer. Perhaps the most important aspect of Dolan’s formulation for the *Ali & Ali* plays is the idea of “a utopia always in process” (6): utopia is only an ideal for the world of *Ali & Ali*, but it is one that the audience may be able to get closer to through active recognition of and resistance to the societal flaws that *The aXes of Evil* exposes. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that the playwrights seem to have been uncomfortable with or at least uncertain about this ambiguously positive ending: as Wasserman notes, they have changed and even cut it in a number of productions (141). As it is, their decision to keep the ending for the published version suggests at least a measure of optimism and a desire to acknowledge the possibility of change.

While *The aXes of Evil* thus ends on a somewhat hopeful—if ambiguous—note, *The Deportation Hearings* remains much more ironic in its “happy ending.” In the sequel, Suki, the RCMP officer charged with determining the Alis’ refugee status, decides instead to run off with Hong Kong, the actor the Alis have hired to assist them in their show, to “Timbuktu, to drink the sacred yak milk of [Hong Kong’s] ancestors” (*Deportation* 98)—despite Hong Kong’s protestation that he’s from Ottawa. Having evaded the most current threat of deportation, and celebrating the intercultural romance between Suki and Hong Kong, the Alis proclaim, “You see, Ladies and Gentlemen, things really are different now” (*Deportation* 99). “It’s a whole new era in the world. Once again,” declares Ali Ababwa, as he and Ali Hakim break into the Jai Ho dance routine from *Slumdog Millionaire* (*Deportation* 99). Of course, there is nothing really

“new” about this world in which visible minorities continue to be seen as “ethnic others” regardless of their home countries, and in which feel-good films like *Slumdog Millionaire* exoticize cultural difference for financial gain. In this way, the artificiality of the dance routine itself (which links back to the plays’ earlier *Aladdin* and *Oklahoma!* references, as well as these works’ shared purpose as Hollywood entertainment) frames the discourse of hope as similarly artificial, phony, and constructed.

Considering the very similar plot structures of the *Ali & Ali* plays, the ending of *The Deportation Hearings* suggests direct commentary on that of *The aXes of Evil*. In particular, the sequel addresses the original’s utopic ending, by putting the “happy ending” of a feel-good film such as *Slumdog Millionaire* in its place. *The Deportation Hearings* satirizes this “happy ending” as a kind of commodification of utopia, in which the “utopia” offered is not hope for a better world, as in *The aXes of Evil*, but the reunion of lovers whose exoticism makes the film more marketable. The sustained satire of this ending makes the tone of *The Deportation Hearings* generally more biting than that of its predecessor and refuses even the ambiguous ideal of utopia that *The aXes of Evil* offers. Yet in their various endings, the one semi-utopic and the other wholly satiric, the *Ali & Ali* plays both present the potential of the theatre as a space to deconstruct the languages of performance, and of society, that seek to exoticize the ethnic “other” for financial gain. By offering us a conditional utopia, *The aXes of Evil* asks us to examine what we must change before we can arrive at such a utopia, while also allowing us the hope that will encourage us to strive for at least a version of it. *The Deportation Hearings*, on the other hand, invites a critical evaluation of the kinds of simplistic and willfully ignorant representations that populate the media but that fail fully to account for the lived

experiences of the ethnic “other.” Through its sustained irony, this ending prompts its audience to apply the ironic lens built up throughout the play to the doubleness, the artificiality, and the exploitative nature of the kinds of language we encounter in our everyday lives.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

As manifested in their tone, thematic content, styles of humour, staging, and political projects, the *Ali & Ali* plays use language as a means of challenging the exoticization and exploitation of the ethnic “other” so prevalent in North American discourses, particularly those of government and advertising. By deliberately employing stereotypes of ethnic “others” disseminated in the Western media, these plays use linguistic difference to fuel productive, and controversial, satirical irony that speaks to the commodification of culture, theatre, and identity in our contemporary North American context. As Ali and Ali attempt to market their plays to their audiences, they engage in strategic self-exoticization as a way to capitalize on their own cultural difference, which has been traded as a global commodity. Yet as the *Ali & Ali* plays make clear, the responsibility for these kinds of exoticization of the ethnic “other” cannot be displaced to another country or some abstract concept. Instead, both playwright and audience must wrestle with their own complicity in the commodification of cultural and linguistic difference in the global marketplace.

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