

NAZ YENI

Interview with Göze Saner

Göze Saner is a lecturer in the Department of Theatre and Performance at Goldsmiths, University of London. As an undergraduate, she studied Philosophy at Bryn Mawr College, USA. Upon graduation, she returned to her hometown, Istanbul (Turkey), and joined Bilsak Tiyatro Atölyesi where she trained, devised and performed for five years. She also performed with Alchera Tiyatro and ran workshops as a freelance actor-trainer at festivals, universities, and cultural centres. In 2004, she came to the UK to begin her practice-based PhD at the Department of Drama and Theatre, Royal Holloway, University of London, which culminated in her performance *the truth about the tyrant* in June 2007 and her PhD thesis, *From Tyrant to Clown and Back: An Actor's Practical Study of Archetype in Performance* in 2008. Göze has trained with The New Winds, led by Iben Nagel Rasmussen of Odin Teatret, with Claudia Contin and Ferruccio Merisi on *commedia dell'arte*, with Enzo Cozzi on leather mask-making and with Alison Hodge on her clown. In 2005, Göze founded her company, *cafila aeterna*, www.cafila-aeterna.com.

Migrant Steps is a theatre project that engages migrant women living in the UK and Europe. Starting from the figure of a travelling tortoise and combining methodologies such as psycho-geography, performance art, physical theatre and autobiographical writing, the project explores the participants' relationship with the cities where they live.

Q: I wanted to ask you, first of all, about the origins of the project. What made you come up with it?

A: I think it was in 2008, maybe, that I started working on the animal tortoise as an archetypal figure. My brother-in-law bought me a book that was called *The Tortoise*. And I was like, 'OK, this is my next archetype. after finishing the PhD - which was on the tyrant. Now, the tortoise will be good for me, I will need to be slow – I've got a very manic energy...' etc. etc. I was working in the studio and looking for the tortoise through my training as a performer, what I call the laboratory work, thinking about voice, action, stories. I was also going through a process in my life, where unrelatedly, I was feeling out of place where I lived; homeless almost. And I was going through a kind of emotional crisis. And I started walking every Sunday.

I would slam the door behind me, start walking, cycle somewhere, park my bike and get lost. And it became a kind of ritual for me, where it was about enacting the fact that I was already feeling lost but somehow taking pleasure in it. I really got to know London very well; through this process. Because even though I had been living in London for a couple of years, I don't think I'd ever visited places that were out of my regular route. Also through this experience of getting lost, I developed a practice of walking, which again I wasn't theoretically aware of at that point. I hadn't read the Situationist International, I mean, I had read some Debord maybe but I wasn't aware of this process of drifting.

So, on the one hand I'm in a studio, working on the tortoise, on the other hand, I'm kind of walking. I can't see the connection yet. I kind of think that those are two

separate things. Until at some point it dawned on me that what I was doing personally, out of this personal need, was very much connected to what I was doing in the studio; that these drifts were also enacting the tortoise. For me, [it was] that sense of leaving the home behind in order to just take the road and kind of be, until you hit that climax where you feel so lost, so far, that you end up tracing your steps back. And wherever you trace your steps back ends up being your home.

So this turned into a solo performance in the end. I put all of this material together, as well as one story about the tortoise from Sevgi Soysal's *Tante Rosa* in to a solo performance called *Evde, Yolda* (At Home, On the Road). It was a solo that used very little. It had an umbrella, a ukulele, a piece of wooden board. And [I] started travelling with it. So I literally sublet my room where I felt out of place anyway. I went to Istanbul, I went to Greece, to Athens, I went to Odin, to Holstebro, I went to Bakersfield California, and then later I went to Berlin. So all of these places that might seem random as a list but places I somehow felt at home. Because there were people there or places there where I had been hosted before and felt I had been safe and in my element.

And during these travels, when I went to Odin, there was a lot going on [there], and Iben, kind of my mentor, was like, 'I don't think we can have the performance here but you are welcome to come. Let me put you in touch with somebody'. And I remembered that years before, we'd been there at international women's day and we'd done a concert and I'd met a lot of Kurdish and Turkish women who happened to be living in Hosltebro. Then they had said to me '*aaa, burda yasamiyon mu, niye geldin o zaman, n'apiyon burda, ne kadar kalcen?*' (eh, you don't live here, why have

you come then, whatcha doin' here, how long are you gonna stay?'). And they were really sweet and they were really fascinated by the fact that I had made my way to Holstebro not as a migrant, you know, they were like, 'why would you come here if you're not migrating here?'. So [I] had had these kind of really funny conversations with these women back then.

And so when I was going back with this performance, I kind of wondered, out of the blue, 'Oh, maybe I could perform for them, in Turkish!'. So instead of doing it in English for the artists that are there, why not do it in Turkish for the Turkish-Kurdish community. Of course, there was one, I guess, er - doubt, which I didn't consider when I offered it: I'd never done something like that before. I had often performed in my life. I mean mostly in the kind of setting of the studio, laboratory theatre. Not necessarily always for the artists, of course I had done public work. But this seemed much more like a community work because I was actually going to perform in a kind of leisure centre type place, at a housing estate, occupied predominantly by migrants. So I was going to their place and saying, 'Here, I've got something for you, why don't you come and see?'.

And actually, the room where I was to perform was somehow, like the size of this room [indicating small living room] and at one end there was this massive television; at the other end there was like a board with what people had been doing. So, it wasn't a room created for this purpose either. It was a really interesting experience, going in there, you know, cleaning the floor, setting up my objects, and then these women come in. And they are like, quite traditional looking women, in terms of, I don't know, their clothing, the way they hang out with each other, the body language. And

they sit down, and they kind of put their arms like this [indicating folding her arms]. I am about to start, the expression on their faces to me means, 'I don't care, you brought us all the way here, show us what you've got.'. Of course, this piece is postmodern, fragmented narrative, no kind of steady characterisation, everything done with minimal props, so shifting personas, places, stories from one to the next, and I'm like 'uh-oh!' actually. There were even a number of abstract scenes where it's just me walking very slowly on different kinds of terrains, you know.

And something shifted in me on that day, while doing that performance. Instead of performing with respect to my, kind of score, I performed solely for my audience. So as I was going through the score of physical actions, moment by moment, let's say, my attention was completely on those women. And constantly I had this double consciousness of trying to imagine what they were seeing and how they were interpreting what they were seeing as I was doing it. And normally I guess I'm taught not to think about the audience. 'The audience is a lure, you need to be authentic, you need to be true to your own score and so on; you need to be precise, disciplined.' etc. So for me, this was completely out of character. But at that point, having invited them and said to them, 'What I'm doing might be relevant and important for you.', I felt responsible to completely take care of them while doing my performance and not to alienate them in a way, I mean speak down at them...

Q: ...distance them...

A: ... exactly, exactly! Erm, so it happened. 45 minutes or 56 minutes, however long it was, [it] finished, and in the end they came up to me and they said that they loved it.

They were like, ‘This is me, it was my story, you were talking about me!’. And they told me about stories, gossip from the neighbourhood that they connected to, the little stories that were in the piece itself. They told me how it reminded them of nature documentaries like tortoises. They told me, ‘You smoke too much!’ – at that point I smoked – ‘You know while you were doing the dancing, it was really tiring for you’ and so on. So actually they had connected with the piece on a number of different levels and they were happy to come back to me and tell me, ‘I am also a tortoise, I recognise myself in your piece.’

For me this was very important because on the one hand I knew that my meanderings through the city were important and so on and had something to do with migrancy, something to do with being a tortoise. But [I] also realised my positionality as a kind of bourgeois, educated, artist, at the end of the day, who came to London in order to do a Ph. D. and then got a job here. So my journey as a migrant has been quite different in terms of its socio-economic factors and also political factors compared to some of these migrants. The journey I made from Istanbul to London is not as great a cultural difference than what some of these women may have experienced. And I can’t pretend to know what their experience of migration has been just based on mine.

However, even though I was aware of all of these potential problems based on my positionality, I also knew that there was something about the tortoise that connected us actually, the sense of having to leave a shell behind, and go out and the kind of balance of freedom and the loneliness or the lack of safety they’re in. So when I got such positive responses from the women in Denmark, I was like, ‘OK, so maybe this isn’t the luxurious ruminations of a bourgeois artist woman; maybe there is something

in here, there is something that I touched upon that actually connects with more people than my subjectivity. So when I came back to London, you know in Barcelona, I was already kind of grappling with these questions, saying ‘What am I going to do, what can I do, can I really do this?’.

Q: This is exactly what I wanted to say... I remember how I connected with your piece when you were doing it in Barcelona. Until that time, my experience of autobiographical performance had been limited but also not necessarily very engaging. And I had found it quite irrelevant and I used to think, ‘Why should you care about watching?’ And in fact, I think there was someone else who had performed and it was about their family or something. And I remember thinking, ‘What is this?’. But I suppose the narratives that particular performance was tapping into did not exist in my repertoire and in my vocabulary. On the other hand, your narratives had. Not knowing this, as soon as you started talking, I was amazed how powerful it was for me and how captivating it was, emotionally. So even now, when you talked about the response of these women in your audience, I thought, ‘But I had the same, or a similarly powerful experience even though perhaps my background is very similar to yours. And therefore, I think there is something very fundamental there within this project that seems to tap in to something essential in human existence. And also, being shown that in an artistic way that is very accessible - or perhaps accessible is the wrong word – but quite pure in way, quite, maybe not simple but very, erm...

A: ...basic...

Q: ...not basic! 'Plain' but in a good way. I think that's what's giving it the access. Because you are putting yourself there, in a very open way, in a very transparent way, and— even though I only watched about ten minutes of it — your performance carried that transparency with it. And I think, that's what made it so powerful.

A: Thank you! I'm still trying to grapple with it, to be honest. I still haven't quite understood what about it made it work so much. I think it has to do with dropping your own intensions and listening solely to your audience. I think there is something about that happening there. I think it also has to do with archetype. Because all along, I didn't set out to create an autobiographical story, that wasn't the starting point. Any actor who works in a, kind of, actor-based devising laboratory setting is somehow or other working with autobiography. Because you're always looking for moments of truth inside you somehow, inside your body, directly or indirectly, it'll always be autobiographical. But in a way, that wasn't the driving force of the story. That came as a response to something else. So perhaps because of that, the overarching figure was never me. It was always the tortoise I guess. So that might be one of the reasons that there was space for others to occupy in their imaginations. So it wasn't necessarily about empathising or not with my story but something that mine was just a little part of, like a tortoise shell actually, which is broken and kind of like made of many little pieces somehow, or something.

Q: So, would you say that the self was there, or not? So you were there, but you were not, almost? Because this is something I have found very difficult myself. That I never speak about being a migrant. I have never realised I was a migrant until pointed out. And when I worked within the Turkish speaking community in London between

the years 1996 and 2001, I found myself very displaced and that I wasn't part of this community so what was I doing here? And as if I had been shoe-boxed into a persona I was not because, I had integrated, in quotation marks, successfully into the British society. And I was a functioning productive member of this, so I just thought, 'Why am I in this community?'. So recently when I had to make this [devised] work - we were going to explore migration issues from our own lives - I went with my great grandmother's migration experience, rather than mine. I felt the need for a huge distancing from my own experience. So maybe, I was thinking, there's got to be something unspoken that is begging to be spoken. So maybe your performance is allowing that to come out. Even, I was thinking for your audience in Holstebro, I obviously don't know who they were, but sometimes we talk about these things all the time and it becomes over familiar. And I do wonder whether you being so different from them presented their experience to them in a different way.

A: I mean there were a number of things they connected with. The story that I took from Sevgi Soysal's story *Tante Rosa*, is the one where Tante Rosa meets a tortoise and realises how she has herself become a tortoise and it's a kind of metaphor for domestication, so she's killed her actual wild animals and become a tortoise. So the tortoise in that story is quite a negative figure. And the story goes that actually she kind of gets pregnant while having beer with this boy and so on and so forth. So this kind of the wild animal, and enacting the wild animal turns her via society into the tortoise.

And one of the things they were telling me was actually stories about that. About women who had had affairs and so on. That's one of the reasons why I had invited

only women to the piece because the stories are a little bit racy, actually. And I thought the women in my audience would feel uncomfortable watching something with sexual entendre kind of connotations if there were also men around. So I thought it needed that kind of safe space to use a badly used term. So that was one of the things they told me about.

Another was I think there were a number of scenes where I, becoming a tortoise with just an umbrella on my back would just walk across the space, and then again, and so on. And they really liked that and they actually likened that to documentaries. So, they would come and say, 'I like watching documentaries on television' and that's what it was like. Because I think it was about, again, something giving them space to just watch and observe, without overloading. So I think going back to what you were saying, yes it was about stories that were a little bit outside their experience; that was actually exciting. But through that they were able to turn to themselves.

Q: I mean, I was again thinking about the self, I couldn't help it. Because I just suddenly remembered that seeing you on the stage, er, it was like a reflection of myself being shown to me. Then I thought about the next stage of your project which was, I think, called *Becoming Tortoise*. And although I kind of enjoyed being audience in that interactive project, it wasn't necessarily as powerful for me as the ten minutes of you standing in front me, 'naked' if you like, in a way that I couldn't become 'naked' myself. And then you were showing me a reflection of myself. So I just kind of suddenly thought of that and I am trying to find some exploration of the experience of your audience.

A: So you're a true lover of theatre, in that sense, because that is kind of the definition of theatre; me seeing another being 'naked', as it were, and actually experiencing that as a sort of mirror for my own self. Yes, I like that too, you know?

Q: Going back to [what] I was saying, I find it hard to embrace this migrant identity and I think it must be some kind of protection for me. And you were saying doing this piece might have made you...

A: ...realise, face actually, my migrant identity. Because I'd already gone to university in the States. So I'd been back and forth in places since I was seventeen. And I felt at home everywhere etc. etc. But during this process I realised, no, maybe I wasn't; maybe there was something about being a migrant that I needed to kind of accept. I miss the taste of my language. I miss being able to use specific idioms, I miss using even just little interjections like 'ya, yahu, aha, ohho', etc. that there's something about that literally has a taste and I think I miss that. So when I came back to London, I said, 'OK, this piece connected with people. So I need to do it.' for people. And perhaps, in fact, I don't need to do it. I need to get other people to do it. Maybe other people need to walk the streets...

Q: That's very very interesting!

A: ...other people need to fill in this empty self as we kind of talked about, this 'naked', empty self. So I did the piece in Day-Mer and I did it as an invitation. Again people came and watched. And the whole point was that after this we were going to start a process in which I was going to start taking women on walks. And then we

were going to start turning them into a performance and so on and so forth. That's how *Gocmen Adimlar* (Migrant Steps) was born... out of Barcelona, reflecting on what had happened with *Evde Yolda* (At Home, On the Road) and going, 'This isn't just about me, this is about a lot of people. And it's not even about performing. It's about getting them to go through this process. Also I was really interested in the idea of, 'do people walk, do these people go outside of Tottenham and run around, get lost, just go wherever they feel like going?'

Q: Yeah, well actually there's something very interesting there. Because I remember when I did performances in housing estates in East London in late 90s, I had noticed that at that time there seemed to be a distinct lack of communication with the city. As in, not communication but relating to the city. So there were a lot of people around me who had never been into central London and who had, you know, no connection to where they lived. So I think that kind of walking seems to be a very nice transgression from where you are. But then the city is your home as well, I suppose, isn't it? As your new home?

A: Exactly. So really, it's a double entendre of sorts. Because on the one hand it's about remembering and recognising your outsidership every time you go into a place where you're not familiar. It reminds you of your position as an outsider. At the same time, you're embedded with its own little memories. You create a relationship by just navigating that space. And then it becomes yours. So it's just like, there's two sides of that coin of walking around and it's a beautiful position to be both insider and outsider at the same time. And I think this is why the migrant actually is potentially a lucky kind of being. Because you are free from certain cultural habitual actions and

behaviours that govern that particular space because you're outside it and you're also possibly free from the ones that you left behind. But within that freedom, you also have the chance to create your own relations and choose your attitudes. So I think it's a really nice position actually, especially in relation to space.

After what happened in Denmark and when I came to London I didn't know what organisations existed. So I googled and I found a couple of Turkish sociologists who had done work here. And I emailed them saying, 'Hello, my name is such and such and I've done this and this experience changed my life. I would like to do something like this in London. And one person, Samiye Dedeoglu, wrote back and said, 'I know exactly who to introduce you to, go ahead, this sounds brilliant' or something. So she has been extremely influential in the whole process because she's the one who literally sent me towards Day-Mer and said, 'These guys will take care of you and you can do this'. And also her research on labour patterns of migrant women in London was actually very interestingly responding to the project as well. Because again it was about women but there was a context to who those women were, when they had come, which generation had come when, why. And so, she gave me her book and gave me a better understanding of what was here as well.

So suddenly that again made me realise, 'OK, there's a migrant population here and there's a million fascinating stories. And actually very diverse set of stories as well, based on the different generations and the different time lines. When I actually met the people we would have breakfasts together, you know, Turkish eggs and *sucuk*, and Turkish type of tea. And it would suddenly feel very much like home for me.

Although we came from different backgrounds in many ways, just being able to speak

my language, and be silly and make jokes in my language and use my body in my language's way with a bunch of women who shared with me this experience of migration in London made me feel utterly at home. And oddly enough, at that point, I was also pregnant. It was really interesting, because I was growing in the sheltering arms of a group of women I was leading through this project and they were taking such good care of me. But they were also, kind of being very Turkishly motherly somehow, or sisterly. So there was a really odd experience of this womenhood coming together in the embodiment of this growing belly as well.

There were a number of things again, corresponding in [my] personal life, artistic life and in their lives too. Some of the women I worked with were going through serious life issues at that point: coming close to divorce, one going through divorce, another considering remarriage, going back to work. One actually tried to get her driver's licence. So there were things going on, as it is. And there were loads of stories. And somehow this ability to take a Sunday fortnightly, to go somewhere, start walking round, like, 'Seriously? I just choose like where to go? Walk? Get lost? Are you sure?'. It was brilliant because as one of the participants said, it's coming to a crossroads and deciding based totally on your whim and nothing else is such a luxury.

Q: I can also see the reflection of the migration experience there as well. Because I think especially if migrating is your choice, then it's a pretty big decision I think, to change the course of your life and displace yourself on purpose in search of something and willingly getting lost. And I think that sense of being lost but then finding something else so then you're not lost any more seems to be at the heart of the

migration experience. And maybe we have some kind of inclination towards that, call it whatever.

A: Yes, I mean it was really interesting. Because not everybody came to every walk. And once we started walking, it wasn't necessarily all of the people who then took part in the project either. It was open to everybody. When we were walking, we would walk silently, and we would walk with these notebooks and every once in a while we would take notes in those notebooks and so on. It's very interesting to go back and read them again and again to see the associations and at which point and on which walk do these associations come. And you realise that actually the Turkish community is quite closed, actually. As you said, they don't go out so much. So that going out was a return to the self in many ways. Because actually, they felt that there was a little Turkey [here] that operated just like Turkey itself. So that experience of the migrant to displace oneself in order to find that freedom and re-placement was perhaps no longer because the environment was just like another little Turkey.

Q: I was also just thinking about these journals you've talked about. It really made me think of the parallel between the journey outwards and the journey inwards. So then through these walks, there is this discovery of the city and your surroundings maybe and building a relationship with where you are but also looking inwards as well.

A: While starting the project connecting walking as a practice into the artistic journey, I started reading more about psychogeography, the Situationist International and so on. What I realised is that the city is always an archetypal space and so I will take it one step further towards my theoretical framework of archetype. And the city, not as

'city' city but urban environment, has its own literal metaphors that it's enacting. Its atmospheres, its little associative, suggestive nooks and crannies. So walking in Bethnal Green is ultimately a completely different experience to walking in Lewisham or walking in Soho or walking Finsbury Park. And these places have their 'feels' and those 'feels' are somehow intangible. And I think, as you journey, if you are listening literally to where you want to go, what is calling you and what is pushing you away, actually listening to the city is analogous to listening to yourself. Because what is calling you, perhaps, is an experience, unique.

Q: That sounds absolutely wonderful! And it really makes me want to go out and do this...

A: ...it is quite therapeutic as well because the city speaks to you, it says things, it makes you realise things, it makes you have thoughts you never knew you were going to have...

Q: But it again made me think of the tortoise. When I was involved, observing the *Becoming Tortois*, exhibition, I thought, 'Oh, actually, it's good to be a tortoise because your home is with you at all times and you can take it wherever you want.'. I know that in London my sense of displacement was huge and I could not relate to the city because I didn't know what the identity of the city was and each part was different. I think that made me feel even more lost. But it makes me understand why various people we've talked about wouldn't perhaps leave the Hackney kind of environment because, you know, it's the home. And then the sense of loss and displacement perhaps would be much greater.

A: Yes, and also, I think there's a policy in London and most of the United Kingdom actually, to let the migrant communities or the multiculturals be, without integrating but without also creating any inter-connections between them either. So even Tottenham is very mixed and not necessarily all Turkish and Kurdish, the Turkish-Kurdish community, apart from the efforts of Day-Mer to a certain extent, don't really mix with the other cultures there. And I think there's something about that that's problematic actually. Because this, 'live and let live, as long as...', there's something very individualistic, so 'each man for his family' type thing or 'for his culture' if you just grow that circle a little bit more. So I thought actually going to other places that aren't necessarily nice, you know what I mean, so not necessarily going to Soho always but also going to Finsbury Park or whatever and seeing other lived neighbourhoods was perhaps a good thing to realise that, while it might not be me, it might be the Bengali community near Brick Lane.

Q: So, could you talk a bit about the notebooks, the journals that you kept for everyone to write in during the walks?

So once the project here happened and it led to the performance and the documentary, etc etc, we realised that actually we want this to happen everywhere. So that's how the *Becoming Tortoise* happened. Because we were like, 'We want to go and say to Turkish-Kurdish women living in other places, you need to also walk and go places, get lost and so on. And we started doing workshops. And we did these workshops in a number of places: Amsterdam, Bunde, Berlin, York, Tourin. What I wanted to say was, the experiences of the women in Berlin were totally different from the

experiences of the women in London. So I think there's another research project there, lurking somewhere perhaps, continuing this walking with migrants in different cities around Europe because the ones in Berlin were much more integrated and actually the walking had less to do with familiarity and unfamiliarity but more to do with memories. Because actually, the city had already been part of people's lives much more. So the women there were like, 'Oh, I remember my ex husband in this square, you know, because this is where we first kissed.' and so on and so forth. So that's why the notebooks are really interesting because the notebooks travelled to all of these places, with different women from different places who wrote their associations, thoughts and so on. There's something about the possibility [that] through these notebooks and through this process of getting lost, connecting different migrant women in different places with each other, that really excites me actually.

Q: Did you use the same journals? So people wrote inside the same...

A: ...yes. Because it doesn't come with you, it comes with the project. So the same journals have been travelling to all of these places. And when I was in Tourin, I didn't work with Turkish-Kurdish women. I worked with Italian and or migrant Italian speaking women so there are different languages in there as well. That's what I wanted to talk about. The fact that these kind of little books are kind of created by the interconnected stories of migrant women from different parts of the world.

Q: To me, what sounds so interesting while listening to you is... the city identity became very prominent for me and I was thinking of different migrant women

relating to the same city. And then, perhaps, what comes out from that... It sounds absolutely fascinating... Thank you very much for leaving me with that idea!