

## Different Kinds of Togetherness

The films of Angelica Mesiti

By Jennifer Higgin

Who hasn't had their heart broken by a song sung in a language they cannot speak? Communication is a complex choreography; it involves the body as much as the voice. Words are just one strand in the web that is woven between us when we try to make ourselves understood.

In recent years, due to war and climate change 68.5 million human beings have been forced to flee their homes; around 25 million are refugees and over half are under the age of 18. Approximately one person every two seconds across the globe is displaced. The unprecedented influx of newcomers to cities around the world has also, of course, affected the social fabric of host towns. While many communities have responded with generosity and openness to recent arrivals, the crisis has sparked a backlash of racism and classism across the globe; literal and metaphorical walls have been erected in countries from Australia to Hungary, the Middle East and the US and elsewhere and the depiction of refugees has, in the main, been racist, reductive and sensational. Despite the fact that most studies show overwhelmingly that migrants enrich societies, ignorance has enflamed a right-wing rhetoric that is, at its base, born of fear: a fear of change, a fear of difference, a fear of being confronted with your own unknowing. How to bridge these cultural and social divides?

Music and dance are both very specific and very universal; they have a way of uniting those who might assume they have nothing in common. At a time when the inhabitants of this planet are more mobile than ever before, non-verbal forms of creativity can facilitate profound interactions between strangers. This is the beating heart of Angelica Mesiti's films: her work is a celebration of the fact that humans are infinitely, and often joyously, adaptable. With great sensitivity, she portrays the talent and individuality of various members of migrant communities via performances of rare beauty. She has also paid homage to non-verbal forms of exchange, some of which are dead or dying out, such as whistling, Morse code and public mourning. As the daughter of an Italo-Australian family and as someone who now lives in Paris, Mesiti is, herself, well placed to recognize the vagaries of displacement. Her work makes very clear that you can love the traditions of the past and yet still be open to the necessary innovations that globalism has wrought.

Mesiti's films never privilege a single viewpoint: like a distillation of the parallel lives that co-exist in any city, disparate scenes are shown concurrently on two or

three screens. In the 21-minute film *Citizen's Band* (2012), for example, four screens face inwards, each concentrating on a different musician. Loïs Géraldine Zongo, who is from Cameroon, her face a study in quiet joy, transforms a French swimming pool into a percussion instrument – a re-enactment of the syncopated rhythms of ‘Liquindi’ or ‘playing the river’, that is traditionally performed by women and girls in central Africa. Mohamed Lamouri, a partially blind Algerian, plays a Casio keyboard and sings a folk ballad inspired by the rhythms of Raï music – an Arab-Western musical hybrid which has been prohibited in his native country – to an unresponsive audience on the Paris metro. In Brisbane, a Sudanese migrant Asim Goreshi, lost in thought, whistles mournfully in his cab. In Sydney, a Mongolian busker Bukhchuluun Ganburged, plays a morin khuur (a horse-head fiddle) and throat sings – a recital of near otherworldly intensity that takes place on an ordinary suburban street. It is unlikely that any of these artists have met each other, yet they are inextricably joined by their shared ability to communicate something extraordinary via traditions that have adapted to contemporary life.

Throughout history and across the globe, music – a source of such joy to so many – has been often brutally censored for reasons of religion or politics. In the 20<sup>th</sup>-century alone, seemingly countless regimes have attempted to crush musical expression. Enver Hoxha, the ruler of Albania from 1944 until 1985, considered the influence of the saxophone to be so evil, he forbade it. As the transcendental power of music challenges religiofascist attempts to control minds, as well as bodies, in Afghanistan, the Taliban banned musical expression, despite the fact that for centuries song and dance have been integral to the country’s rites of passage. Similarly, Islamic rebel groups in Mali – a country with a phenomenally rich aural culture – and in Syria have inflicted musical bans on the populace. In 2010, the Al Shabab militants who controlled southern Somalia, suppressed not only music but also, bizarrely, the ringing of school bells. In China, Mao believed that love songs were *petite bourgeois*, and so outlawed them; in more recent times, pop singers in the country have been jailed for singing songs in support of Tibetan resistance.

It’s not surprising that totalitarian regimes ban music: its power has too much potential to make us *feel* – and feeling can lead to profound change, be it personal or societal. Many of the musicians in Mesiti’s films come from countries that have repressed musical expression and been torn apart by war. Singing their songs or playing their instruments in the countries they find themselves in is both an act of rebellion – an affirmation that their culture is still flourishing – and, I imagine, one of unfathomable personal solace. For her two-screen, 18-minute film *Mother Tongue* (2017) – which was

commissioned by Aarhus 2017 European Capital of Culture – Mesiti worked with various inhabitants of the Danish city, including school children, employees of the local council, the Ramallah Boy Scouts troupe, the Jaffra Dancers, the Gellerup Circus School and the legendary Somali singer, Maryam Mursal. The result is a film that is – like so much of the artist’s work – a moving meditation on creativity and belonging that never recurs to voice-overs or explanation: the story is told via images and music. Shot across different locations in Aarhus – including the Town Hall designed by Arne Jacobsen and Eric Møller, the DOKK1 library and cultural centre and in the housing estate Gellerupparken – many of the scenes take place at moments of transition: dawn or the early twilight of a Nordic winter, which evokes a dreamy atmosphere in which time expands and retracts with the illogic of a dream. Across two screens, scenes of togetherness are played out. To the sounds of drumming, a young Syrian girl reaches her hands out; they are taken, one by one, by a small group of adults. Balancing awkwardly, she then proceeds to walk across their shoulders in a determined acting out of trust. The location then shifts to a long shot of a school playground where kids kick a football in the cold light of early morning. We then see, through a window, a group of fresh-faced students sing a utopian song from 1973 by the Danish rock musician Kim Larsen about a ‘dream country’ called Joanna where everyone lives in freedom. The left screen then segues into a scene of the Ramallah Boy Scout group – which comprises children from Lebanon and Palestine – improvising a drumming routine to the beat of ‘Joanna’. The percussion stops and the camera pans across buildings. We enter an empty conference room: a pair of elegant hands are placed firmly on a table. They belong to a young acrobat from the Gellerup Circus School, which has its headquarters in Gellerupparken, a suburb of Aarhus which is currently the poorest neighbourhood in Denmark: 88% of its residents are migrants and refugees. The screen on the right is filled with a scene of a glass-clad office; against a deep-blue back-drop of water stretching into the distance, a young Palestinian woman improvises a virtuoso piece on a drum, while, on the left screen, the acrobat does hand-stands on the furniture of the formal council chambers of the Town Hall – an awkward balancing act that echoes, perhaps, not only the difficulties faced by the city’s new inhabitants, but also the diplomacy needed by government officials and the local community in welcoming often-traumatized strangers. The scene shifts, again: workers arrive at an office. They gather in a board room, open small blue books and sing in Danish about the beauty of a winter landscape with its frosted mornings and wild birds. To the sounds of the song, the image shifts into slow motion and moves outside where four smiling, spinning young men perform a ‘Dabke’, an Arab folk dance that traditionally takes place at weddings and other festivities. The film

finishes with a song by the well-known Somali singer and composer, Maryam Mursal, who is accompanied by two musicians on guitar and keyboard. Her story is a dramatic one: after being barred from singing by the Somali government, she drove a taxi for two years before fleeing the civil war with her children to Djibouti, where she claimed asylum in the Danish embassy and subsequently moved to Denmark. She sings the rousing lament about missing her homeland, *Lei Lei* (I Feel Alone), in an apartment in a housing estate. Her voice – impassioned, anguished, longing – floats through the building, animating and affecting these apparently neutral modernist spaces with a sadness that has travelled far. Outside, the full moon, framed against wintry trees, glows like a balloon in the indigo sky.

Mesiti knows all too well that music doesn't necessarily have to be heard to be *felt*. In the three-channel digital video *The Colour of Saying* (2015), a choir performs Ralph Vaughan Williams's choral work *Serenade to Music* (1938) in sign language. The 'singers' use minimal bodily gestures to express the range and intricacy of the music. Their silence is occasionally interrupted with sounds that explodes like gun-fire. Two men, facing each other enact an elaborate clapping routine as they approach, and then circle, each other. Their performance is replaced by an elderly man and woman – two former ballet dancers, who perform the *pas de deux* from Tchaikovsky's 1876 ballet *Swan Lake* sitting on white steps, listening to the music on headphones. In this work in particular, Mesiti's back-ground as a dancer and choreographer is evident: movement here is as expressive as any sound.

The power of the body to filter music and express abstract concepts is also personified in the single-screen video *Nakh Removed* (2015), which explores how dance has been used ritualistically by some traditional cultures to induce heightened spiritual states at times of transition. *Nakh* is a Berber hair dance from the Algerian/Tunisian border that is usually performed at weddings. In Mesiti's slow-motion, silent film it is performed by four long-haired, Paris-based women from different generations who are of Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian heritage (Karima Aouraghe, Akila Boutaleb, Mariem Guellouz and Saâdia Souyah). All dressed simply in black, the women move wildly and repetitively; yet, despite their exuberance, the impression is one of introspection. Again, the film reiterates: music does not always have to be heard – it's power can be witnessed in the effect it has on the listener. It can be both a social form of expression, one that is understood by the community at large, and a deeply personal experience.

Similarly, *In the Ear of the Tyrant* (2013–14) focuses on a musical tradition that is dying out: the southern Italian women known as *Prefiche*, who sang songs of mourning on behalf of a village after the death of one of its members. Here, a bone-chillingly beautiful

song of lamentation is performed by Enza Pagliara in the Ear of Dionysius, an ancient limestone cave in the Temenites Hill in the Sicilian city of Syracuse. At first, the singer is dwarfed by the historic weight of her surrounds but the power of the song – transcending centuries and cultures – transforms her voice into something more powerful than stone. Her performance has a very specific social function, but I cannot imagine that even the most hard-hearted person would be unmoved by it – even if they had no understanding of the words the song is sung in. What is being mourned here is ambiguous: perhaps it's not only the fact that someone has died but also a grief expressed at the possible loss of a rich tradition.

Fascinated by the life-cycles of languages, Mesiti explored another form of expression threatened with extinction – in this case, whistling – in her three-channel, 36-minute film *The Calling* (2014). To research the film, she travelled to Kuskoy, a village in Turkey, La Gomera in the Canary Islands and the island of Evia in Greece, where, for centuries, whistling has been used to communicate across distances. Mesiti makes clear how precise an idiom it is: it can travel across valleys, communicate complex thoughts, is free, and has no impact on the environment. A woman working in a field whistles across to another worker to bring the loads up; another woman milking a goat hears via a whistle from a neighbour home that there's a letter waiting for her. A shepherd tending his flock whistles to someone unseen that he's going to town and would he like anything? A grandfather whistles to his grandson who, although he understands the message, replies with a shout. By the end of the film, this astonishing language's imminent disappearance, purely for the sake of so-called progress, seems frustratingly pointless.

*Relay League* (2017) – a three-channel video installation – is a delicate rumination on death, resurrection and translation. It takes as its starting point the startlingly elegiac message issued by the French navy on 31 January 1997 to mark the end of Morse code: '*Appel à tous. Ceci est notre dernier cri avant notre silence éternel.*' (Calling all. This is our final cry before our eternal silence.) Yet, Mesiti has stubbornly, intriguingly, refused to let Morse die. She commissioned the jazz drummer Uriel Barthélémi to improvise a piece in response to the code's final message, which is juxtaposed with an enigmatic duet. A dancer, Sindri Runudde, who is partially sighted, is guided by Emilia Wibron Vesterlund; they have developed a system using touch and whispers so that Runudde can 'see' the performance of another dancer, Filipe Lourenço, who, it gradually becomes clear, is improvising a response to Barthélémi's percussion.

Every life is, in many ways, an act of translation. The starting point for Mesiti's latest work, *Assembly* – which at time of writing is still evolving – is a stenographic

machine still in use in the Italian senate. Called a 'Michela', it was invented in the 1880s and, although a typewriter of sorts, looks like a piano keyboard. The artist became fascinated by the idea of transposing a text transcribed on the machine into a piece of music that will, in turn, inspire a 20-minute performance. Mesiti told me that she hopes the work will grow into a 'melodious, harmonious, dissonant, polyphonic eruption of knowledge' – in other words, into a reflection of how most lives are lived.