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Cosmopolitan Nationalist: Alexander Moissi from the Hofburgtheater to "People's Artist of the Socialist People's Republic of Albania."

A consideration of the career of the actor Alexander Moissi, or Aleksandr Moissu, (1879-1935) is an index of the problems of "National culture." Moissi's career, his brief exchange with Albania's King Zog, and the posthumous use of his name and image by the totalitarian Hoxha regime present issues of "national" languages, institutions and how cultures make use of theatre. Claimed by Albania, Italy, and Austria--sometimes identified as Serbian, no one disputes that he was one of the greatest German-language actors of the 20th century. Yet shortly before his death, in 1934 he requested and obtained an Albanian passport. Moissi may have briefly considered the offer of the King of Albania, Zog I, to come to Albania, found a national theatre and serve as some sort of "court jester," but Moissi's death interfered with this grandiose plan. Moissi was cremated in Vienna and buried in Switzerland. With his ashes lies the "Iffland ring" which actor Albert Bassermann placed with Moissi's body. Bassermann declared that the Nazis had destroyed the German theatre and it would no longer be possible to pass the ring on to an actor of the next generation.

Moissi was discovered by Josef Kainz, began his career at the Burgtheater, became a star with the German theatre of Prague, and made his international name with Reinhardt's company. He created the role of Jedermann, played Fedya in The Living Corpse over 1400 times, and played Hamlet in German concurrently with John Gielgud's first Hamlet--the productions were mounted at adjacent theaters in the 1929-30 season. Moissi was considered the finest living speaker of the German language, and his recordings were the gold standard of Hochdeutsch. Nonetheless, though he was born in Trieste, then the major port of Austria-Hungary, he had no German "acculturation" whatsoever. At age four his family brought him back to his ancestral home in Durrës, Albania. Subsequently, the family lived in both places and Moissi grew up speaking Italian and Albanian. He did not learn German until his teens. Nonetheless, Moissi spent his life as a major cultural figure of the German-speaking world. It was not until shortly before he died that he attempted to officially reclaim his birth heritage as an Albanian.

A fascinating document in this regard is the centennial text Alexandre Moissi published by the Commission nationale de la République populaire socialiste d'Albanie auprès de l'Unesco in 1979.(The text is in French, though it was published in Tirana.) It features a dedication by Enver Hoxha. The first page highlights the Albanian "People's Artist" medal that was awarded to Moissi posthumously in 1962. The first photograph of Moissi identifies him as "People's Artist of the Socialist People's Republic of Albania." In 1959 the Hoxha

regime created a national theatre academy. "The Aleksander Moisiu College Hochschule for Actors," was opened, to become later a department of the Higher Institute of Arts. In Durrës, the theatre was named after Moissi.

Therefore considering Moissi, we can ask, is the performer essentially an empty vessel to be used by the culture? In Moissi's case, even the actor's ashes were used for political and cultural purposes. It is not so much though a quest for "the real" Moissi on stage that is the focus of this inquiry, but rather what he came to represent as a cultural and perhaps even later posthumously as an ethnic icon. The questions raised by Moissi's career remain troubling--was he just responding to the turmoil of his times? Was he like the assimilated Jews and other minorities of the Habsburg empire who eschewed their own identity in order to merge with the society around them?

This also leads us to consider Moissi's place as a part of an artistic elite--he was the leading actor of the Reinhardt troupe. Thus he was an international stage star--as we know, the last of this kind. This is what makes his decision to return to Albania particularly compelling. Was it a reaction to the rise of Hitler? If so this would put him at odds with the other cosmopolitan artists of his time such as Schildkraut the actor or Zweig the author, among many other artists, who left Europe altogether. Although Moissi died before he was completely denied the opportunity to perform, surely his attitudes could not have been markedly different from his great colleague Bassermann. Else why would Bassermann have used Moissi's bier for his grand gesture?

Why then would he have been attracted by Zog's offer? Personal security would hardly be an answer, by this time Zog's Albania was little more than a client-state of Mussolini's fascist Italy. One wonders what was going on in Zog's uneasy head when he solicited Moissi to be his royal jester. Did he honestly intend to have Moissi serve as some sort of Delphic comedian?

The desperate situation in Austria that Moissi fled, was worse than in Albania, but Moissi's "homeland" poised between a hostile Yugoslavia and an aggressive Italy. Zog himself had ruined good relations between Albania and Yugoslavia by insisting on the term "King of the Albanians" rather than "King of Albania." This made his neighbors anxious that he schemed to create a "Greater Albania" that would incorporate the Albanian populations of Yugoslavia. These fears were groundless since Zog was just barely able to control his own realm. Yet it allowed Mussolini to "protect" Albania out of its independence in 1939.

Did Moissi, a truly international star, see accepting Zog's offer as a way of rejecting his German adulators or did he see it as an expedient for maintaining his freedom? The question whether fascism's rise inspired his turning to his own nationality is a compelling one. He not begin his career as an actor in Albania and the reasons are obvious. He could not have, there was no "Albania" when he was born, there was of course the ancient traditional Albanian language and culture, but there certainly was no Albanian "national culture." This was something that Zog was trying to foster. This was only possible when Albania became a fully independent state after The Great War. There had been an

Albania since 1912, but internecine quarrels and external warfare made its status continually uncertain. Even after it was established as a "nation," there was no cultural superstructure to support the sort of theatre in which an actor such as Moissi could flourish. After World War II, under the regime of Enver Hoxha Albania became one of the most isolated countries on earth. He created a national culture based on a mixture of myth and particularist paranoia. This example asks us: can a national culture exist in a vacuum? Is there something inherent in nationalism that requires other interaction between one national-cultural entity and another. In the late 20th century we have seen languages recreate themselves to become more exclusive. Slovakia is reworking its language so as to be unintelligible to Czechs--until quite recently both peoples could readily understand each other. There are Serbs and Croatians who refuse to acknowledge each other's language. The Macedonian language has recently re-emerged from the Bulgarian--indeed one could be vulgar and refer to the Balkanization of the languages of Southeastern Europe.

To return to Moissi, ultimately he rejected Zog's invitation and he died in Switzerland. Nevertheless, on the 50th anniversary of Moissi's death in 1985, Albanians commemorated him with statues and all kinds of public displays in honor of the "great son of the nation." The Communist regime asked the living descendants of Moissi in Germany whether they would agree to a transfer of the mortal remains to the "country of its fathers." The family let Moissi rest where he was.

It is problematic that Moissi was consciously rejecting being “German” in favor of being Albanian, for he also left himself open to Italian citizenship. Mussolini had promised to help him, but dawdled. By the time the Italian bureaucracy issued Moissi his papers he was already under morphine, and knew he was dying. His wife when Johanna Terwin described his last moments: “I whispered to him: “Sandro, a telegram from Rome came. You are Italian and have the right to live in Trieste legally.” And Moissi answered her: “Molto tardi!” [Much too late] “ (qtd in Schaper, Berlin Argon 2000. pp. 246-247).

Thus he exits the international scene. Let us recall the words of an American who profoundly admired him, Arthur Hopkins: “Moissi has no devices. He seeks no effect. He commands by pure earnestness and by an impersonal concentration that is almost uncanny. He is at all times the servant of the play and not its master” (How’s Your Second Act? 1919. p. 55). Such opinions were not unique to Hopkins. Thus we see that to many of his contemporaries, Moissi is more than a “star,” even more than a “great actor.” Hopkins asserts that he is an emblem of “Art, Temperament, and Genius.”

What are we to make of this a century later? We take for granted the daily presence in our homes of great stars so there is no comparison to be made between the last generation of purely theatrical stars and the cinematic ones of our time. Today there is almost no crossover between languages so there is no such thing as an international stage star anymore. Only cinematic stars cross borders anymore--albeit via dubbing. The identification audiences made with

Moissi--rather than by the actor himself--tells us about the nature of the actor not the man. There are not many details that are relevant to him beyond the great range of roles he performed. It is this obliteration of Moissi's own self that is ultimately most ironic. Moissi may have had no national cultural ambitions of his own; but posthumously, such ambitions have used him zealously.