

# **IATC 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Seoul Symposium, 21-26 October, 2006**

## **Table of contents**

Opening speech by president Ian Herbert	Page 2
<b>Key speakers :</b>	
Patrice Pavis	Page 4
Bang-Ock Kim	Page 9
<b>Americas :</b>	
Kerri Allen	Page 12
Halima Tahan	Page 19
Michel Vaïs	Page 24
<b>Europe :</b>	
Paulo Eduardo Carvalho	Page 25
John Elsom	Page 34
Kalina Stefanova	Page 43
Margareta Sörenson (abstract)	Page 50
Ludmila Patlanjoglu	Page 52
<b>Asia :</b>	
Manabu Noda	Page 58
Felix Tan	Page 67
Durgadas Mukhopadhyay	Page 76
Young-joo Choi	Page 81
Liu Yanjun	Page 86
<b>Thalia Prize :</b>	
Don Rubin's presentation	Page 92
Eric Bentley's acceptance speech	Page 95
Ian Herbert's letter of thanks	Page 99

# President's Opening Speech, Seoul 2006

Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends and Colleagues

As President of the International Association of Theatre Critics it gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to this, our Fiftieth Birthday Congress. According to our website, we now have members or sections in over sixty countries, and it is very gratifying indeed that so many of those countries are represented here. It is also a pleasure to welcome representatives of our sister international theatre organisations, with whom we hope to build ever firmer contacts in the future.

We have a very busy week ahead of us, with not nearly enough time to relax and enjoy the beautiful city of Seoul, whose guests we are. I hope that you will at least get a taste of Korea – which must include some kimchi – and experience some of its vibrant theatre alongside the international events we shall be seeing in the Seoul International Festival. You will be hearing shortly from our two distinguished opening speakers, Patrice Pavis and Bangock Kim, and their contribution will be followed by contributions from our members, divided geographically, on the Congress theme, *New Theatricality and Criticism*.

In these sessions we shall be looking at the impact of the new movements in theatre which have been described, notably by Germany's Hans-Thies Lehmann, as 'postdramatic'. We have moved on, thankfully, from Postmodernism's perhaps necessary dismissal of the text from its central role, to a theatre which challenges all the other functions of drama – plot, character, setting, timescale and of course the dreary unities proposed by that terrible armchair critic Aristotle.

Our 'call for papers' talks of the need for definition: my view is that much theatre criticism of recent years, at least in the academic sector of our craft, has been shackled by the search for definition, with the semioticians and postmodern theorists inventing new words to describe old ideas, and the proponents of the postdramatic going even further up obscure roads (or is it blind alleys?), baffling the common reader in their attempts to explain what we all see on stage. Lehmann, for instance, is performing a service by describing the entertainment offered by boulevard theatre, and even more film and television, in simple terms, as 'The unproblematic consumption of fables.' He is less helpful, however, when he tells us (listen carefully, translators – I wish you the best of luck here) that 'Postdramatic theatre often presents itself as an *auto-sufficient physicality* [author's italics] which is exhibited in its intensity, gestic potential, auratic "presence" and internally, as well as externally, transmitted tensions.' Perhaps it's clearer in the original German.

What is going to make the contributions in Seoul special for me, and I hope for all of you, is the very fact that they will embrace many different theatre cultures. We have for too long been a Eurocentric organisation, with the result that the dead hand of Aristotle, and the later dominance of the 'realistic' European playwrights of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, have conditioned so much of what we write about theatre, so much of what we expect theatre to be. Those of you who come from different theatre traditions, as old as or even older than those of Western Europe, may find our Western 'discovery' of postdramatic, or hybrid theatre, rather strange. Even those critics in Europe who have looked away from the picture-frame stage towards circus and clowning, joined in the shared experience of the music hall, or put down their texts to look at ballet and modern dance, may find this apparent new concern surprising.

It was TS Eliot who said (I wish I could tell you where, but I'm assured he said it) that 'anything wholly original is wholly bad'. It reminds me, to my shame, of a week spent on the distinguished jury of the Cairo International Festival of Experimental Theatre. We wasted our

week dismissing show after show as ‘not experimental’. One or other of us had seen something similar in Warsaw, or Sao Paulo, or Hackensack New Jersey, years before. In our search for the new we had forgotten to search for the good.

In the same way, much of what may seem new, postdramatic and exciting to some of us today has been seen before in other theatre times and traditions, and much of what seems wholly original today may well come to be seen as wholly bad by generations enjoying the perspective of distance. As Lehmann himself says, ‘Perhaps in the end postdramatic theatre will only have been a moment in which the exploration of a “beyond representation” could take place on all levels.’ Let us not, in our next fifty years of criticism, lose sight of the good, whatever form it may take, and let us continue trying to explain and interpret that good in language which our readers can understand.

We have other things to look forward to in our time together, notably the first awarding of our new prize, the Thalia. We are very grateful to our Romanian Section for their help in initiating the prize, and very honoured that Eric Bentley is among us to receive it. Then we have our various working parties, in which I hope you will develop some really concrete ideas on how the Association can continue to make itself useful to the world of theatre, such as the proposed journals exchange and a possible anthology for teaching criticism. We have this year created the new status of Associate Member, which I hope will enable those in other organisations, such as FIRT or ITI, who pursue criticism but are unable to join us through a national section, to take advantage of what IATC has to offer in its meetings and networking. And in parallel with our colloquium will be meetings of what I should like to think of as IATC’s Parliament, a group of recent participants in our very successful programme of seminars for young critics. We have asked them to look at the future of IATC, and come up with their ideas of what we should be doing over the next fifty years. And I promise that we shall listen attentively to what they have to offer.

I myself am proud to have been associated with IATC for almost half of its first fifty years – one of my first international activities was to make breakfast for the Young Critics on the Edinburgh seminar of 1984 – and I hope to remain part of this vibrant organisation for years to come. However, our next Congress, in Sofia in 2008, will be my last as your President, and it is time now to start looking for someone to whom I can hand over the office. My successor should be warned that the job is unpaid, and indeed has cost me, like most of its holders, a lot of money. But its rewards, in the warm companionship of critics all over the world, and the opportunity to serve their interests on the world stage, are ample compensation. In spite of the traditional argumentative nature of critics, ours is one of the friendliest organisations of its kind I have ever come across, and I want all of you here to share in that atmosphere here in Seoul. Don’t be afraid to approach any of your fellow critics – they are all eager to meet you, and you can expect to make friendships here that will last for many years.

I will save my long list of thank-yous for our final farewell dinner, but I cannot end without expressing deep gratitude to Yun-Cheol Kim and the Korean Theatre Critics’ Association, who have worked so hard to put this congress together, and will be working through the week to ensure that you have all the help you need. And thank you all, for joining us in this very special moment in IATC’s history.

Ian Herbert  
President, IATC

## DRAMATIC CRITICISM FACED WITH MISE EN SCÈNE

Patrice Pavis

From the concerned perspective of theatrical theory, the question might be put in these terms: how does dramatic criticism, that of the written and audiovisual media, help one to better appreciate (in every sense of the term) *mise en scène*. Instead of looking down on journalistic dramatic criticism, it might be preferable if subtle theory was to look up to it. In any case, dramatic criticism in the media, being almost instantaneous, is perhaps closer to the theatre event, which is also instantaneous, than to intemporal, heavy, static theatre, which, by its very nature, falsifies the visceral and emotional impressions that the spectator receives at the time.

Our theoretical hypothesis, in any case, is that ***mise en scène*** is the most useful and central notion for evaluating a spectacle, not only for analysing it, but also for judging it in aesthetic terms. The notion of *mise en scène* is nonetheless far from being universal, and the term, though internationally known, takes a specific sense in each cultural context. In France, *mise en scène* initially designated the passage of the dramatic text to the stage. Then it rapidly came to signify stage work, the spectacle, the show, specifically as opposed to the text or the written proposal for stage acting. To this empirical conception (and current) of *mise en scène* must be added the one used here, more precise and technical, theoretical and semiological, of a system of meaning, of choice of *mise en scène*. We thus make a marked distinction between **performance analysis**, which describes the various signs of the representation in an empirical and positivist way, and the **analysis of *mise en scène***, which offers a theory of its overall functioning. Dramatic criticism practices both types of analysis, but especially interesting for us is the one where *mise en scène* is considered as a more or less coherent system. In short, this type of criticism is actually in a position to describe the options of *mise en scène*, to reveal the system of it, the *Konzept* (as the Germans say), the *dramaturgy* (as the Brechtians say), the ‘*acting*’ or ‘*staging style*’, as it is put in English. The big problem is to know whether these global notions are still pertinent for shows from the last ten years. Before using the example of the 2005 Avignon festival to check this, let it be clear that the dramatic criticism envisaged here is above all that of the daily press; previews in the weekly press, radio and television programmes, as well as audience discussion groups on the internet should also be mentioned.

### Crisis of *mise en scène*, crisis of criticism

The example of Avignon demands that we rethink the role and method of dramatic criticism as well as the new *mise en scène* practices. This double perspective and double crisis is therefore helpful as once again it proves the hypothesis according to which criticism must endlessly adapt itself to changes in theatrical practice, which, in turn, allows new or unsuspected properties of *mise en scène* to be discovered.

Until the 1980s, critics were aware of the fact that their art was split between information for the general public and studies for professionals, be it industry people or artists themselves. For Thibaudet (1922), the model is a trinity: “the criticism of honest folk, the criticism of professionals and the criticism of artists”<sup>1</sup>. More often, the model is binary: thus Bernard

---

<sup>1</sup>« Physiologie de la critique », Conférences au Vieux-Colombier de 1922. *Physiologie de la critique*, Nouvelle Revue Critique, 1930, p.23-24.

Dort (1967) opposes a “consumption criticism” and “another criticism (...) both a criticism of the theatrical fact as an aesthetic fact and a criticism of the social and political conditions of the activity of theatre.” Criticism is thus “equally outside and inside<sup>2</sup>”. Later, this same Dort (1982) would attempt a delicate dialectic between two types of criticism: “traditional criticism, mainly journalistic”, of an “ideal average spectator” and the “scientific or academic” speech of “Theaterwissenschaft or teatrology.” The synthesis, the “third party”, “both outside and inside”, the “concerned spectator (...) must have theatrical knowledge, be it historical or semiological”, a knowledge that she does not “apply to the show”, but “submits to the test of theatre performance<sup>3</sup>”. Georges Banu (1983) returns to this dualism: criticism depends as much on the “enlightened *amateur*” as on the “dramaturge in the German sense of the word”, who “disposes of a theory, a certainty (...) that he stubbornly endeavours to realise<sup>4</sup>”. The continuity of this French tradition can probably be found in many other countries, in other forms. However, it is by no means universal, and the German critic Henning Rischbieter, for a long time the editor of *Theater heute*, proposes an entirely different distribution of the tasks of criticism, which responds, he claims, to three realities: 1) it is a branch of journalism and information; 2) it has an economic impact; 3) it is literary output since it requires an artistic talent of writing. The absence of reflection on dramaturgy or *mise en scène* would surprise the French, who would wonder if this absence bears witness to a certain cynicism, eclecticism or indeed whether this position shows a extreme open-mindedness.

Whatever the conceptions of dramatic criticism in these last thirty or forty years may have been, the hurricane of Avignon 2005, which was in fact partly caused by this same criticism, has tended to carry them into the storm<sup>5</sup>. That year, the difficulty was as much about evaluating the shows at the festival as measuring the deep reactions of the audience. The fire raged between the critic and the artist. In a serious crisis of confidence, each suspected the other: the artist is nothing but a charlatan, thought one; the critic is just frustrated, figured the other... Nothing new about this misunderstanding? Yes and no!

The current crisis of confidence comes notably from the fact that the theatre audience no longer consists of homogenous groups who feel represented by the critic, in particular according to clear political divides. Conversely, the critic does not constitute the echo of a given group, since there are now only mini-groups, sub-groups of fans or sworn and vocal enemies. We no longer speak, at least in France, and since Vilar of **the** theatre in general, nor of **the** *mise en scène* as a concrete, aesthetic and ideological *mise en relation* of the theatre.

Another kind of interference of which it is unclear whether we should be proud concerns the old distinction between journalistic criticism and theoretical university research, which is becoming blurred. The written press no longer plays its role of immediate riposte to the stage event, as it is beaten to first place by the other media, linked to the internet of forums and blogs. Many critics publish their accounts a week, a month, even a year after the show. These are sometimes academics who follow and support this group or that trend, seeming to almost be the accomplices of the artists. And this is understandable in fact, since the university, be it European or American, has stopped proposing theoretical models, and is

<sup>2</sup> *Théâtre réel*, Paris, Seuil, 1971, p.47.

<sup>3</sup> *Le Monde*, 1982. Text reproduced in Chantal Meyer-Plantureux's *Un siècle de critique dramatique*, Complexe, 2003, p.142.

<sup>4</sup> *Théâtre/Public*, no. 50, 1983. Article reproduced in *Un siècle de critique dramatique*, op. cit., p.146.

<sup>5</sup> A debate on the programming took place in the press, with some critics finding that the shows were often violent, incomprehensible, botched, far from the spirit of the founder Jean Vilar. See the following books: Régis Debray. *Sur le pont d'Avignon*, Paris, Flammarion, 2005. Georges Banu et Bruno Tackels. *Le cas Avignon 2005*, L'Entretemps, 2005. Carole Talon-Hugon. *Le conflit des héritages*, Du Théâtre n.16, juin 2006.

becoming the conservatory of *know-how* and of the *ready-made*, of poststructuralism and deconstruction. Its image as being scientific, impartial, rigorous and even intellectually honesty has suffered much. The good news is that the day-by-day critics and the one-year-to-the-next theoreticians are in the same boat, and they can no longer be played one against the other.

For the first time, Avignon poses the question of trust to the critic: how can readers, future or potential spectators, be helped to decipher, or simply accept, the shows? The question is as much aimed at the critical experts as at the mere mortals! The brutal good sense of the critics of yore no longer suffices. Their only response to the question “what does it mean?” is a pirouette: “what do you see in it?”. They are in no position to provide a guide to the use of *mise en scène*. The passing perplexity that according to Banu guaranteed the “regeneration of a critic”<sup>6</sup> has become the rule for everyone.

That being the case, it is not surprising that dramaturgical analysis and research on the choices of *mise en scène* are coming to an end. The mixture of genres (comic, tragic, grotesque, absurd, etc.), the multiplicity of registers cloud the issues. The critic must send out a hypothesis on the functioning of *mise en scène*, its system or its main thread, in order to help the perplexed spectator, but this hypothesis also risks misleading or losing the spectator, if it is revealed to be false or forced.

There is no doubt: a change of paradigm for *mise en scène* practice has rendered the analytic grid ineffective, at least temporarily<sup>7</sup>. The structural, functionalist, semiological conception of *mise en scène*, which conceived of the show as a spectacular text and a semiotic system, is no longer in circulation. This change is not entirely new, even if French criticism has not yet taken note. Theatre seems to discover that the important thing does not reside in the result, in the finished show, but in the process, the effect produced. *Mise en scène* has become *performance*, in the English sense of the word: it participates in an action, it is in a state of becoming. It is necessary to somehow envisage the spectacle from two extremities: its origins and its extensions, to understand from where the performative action comes and where it is going. In this spirit, Vincent Baudriller, the co-director of the festival, suggests that critics and spectators should only ask where the artist “wants to go with it”: “the important thing is that the spectator understand the meaning of the creator’s activity”<sup>8</sup>. We are thus invited to interrogate the artist’s intentions: a question that we thought we had got past and which returns with force in such biographical criticism.

As a consequence, are we once again faced with a stable, graspable, describable aesthetic object? Has the object of analysis, *mise en scène*, once again acquired something tangible, has it become, like the plastic art objects described by Yves Michaud, an “art in a gaseous state” whose works are soluble in the air, reduced to single aesthetic experience for the spectator? This aesthetic experience is the only thing that remains when one neglects the stage object in favour of its mode of reception. What is true for the plastic arts is true also for the *mise en scène*, which is made up of objects that are even more fragile and which disappear as time goes by: the works “no longer aim to represent nor to signify. They do not refer to anything beyond themselves: they no longer symbolise. They no longer even count as objects

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.149.

<sup>7</sup> We are no longer in the alternative of the critic divided between the desire to speak of the *mise en scène* (as a system) and to mention the performance of the actors. Thus, Jean-Pierre Léonardini: “I am absolutely convinced that to not speak of the actors in my own work is a blind spot. I think that, at this moment in time, the concept of *mise en scène* is to be defended, as is that of critical *mise en perspective*. Nonetheless, in talking about that, rather than about the actor, I am amputating my work from a secondary construction” ‘La critique en question’, *Théâtre/Public*, no.18, 1977, p.19.

<sup>8</sup> *La Croix*, 9-10 juillet 2005. Quoted in Carole Talon-Hugon. *Avignon 2005. Le conflit des héritages. Du Théâtre*, hors-série, no.16, 2006.

made sacred but aim to directly produce intense or specific experiences.<sup>9</sup> We are in a paradoxical situation facing, or rather inside, the work: it is material, sensitive and physical. But at the same time, what counts is no longer this materiality, rather we are plunged into experience. In this way, the work dematerialises itself, becomes virtual, prevents us from being able to distinguish its properties or significations. In the 1980s, the critic was at least guaranteed the presence of a body, one it shared with its generation<sup>10</sup>. At the moment, there is a slight sensation of losing this empirical body, as the spectacular object dematerialises itself and the spectator, recovering an imaginary body, withdraws into aesthetic experience (and it is difficult to say who is the winner in such an exchange).

This withdrawal is difficult to halt. Nonetheless, criticism, concerned with description of representation as a whole, continually returns to the stage/d system. The recent study, by Mitter and Shevtsova, of fifty theatre directors, concludes with a distancing from the term directing/mise en scène in favour of a domination of the body in movement<sup>11</sup>. This corporeal action in movement must thus become the object of criticism of mise en scène. Instead of comparing text and its stage concretisation (as criticism has been doing for a long time), it is appropriate to reveal the logic of the body in movement as well as the space-time where it is to be found. If criticism, and in turn the spectator, are preoccupied with the whole show, and not with the isolated details, they protect us from the effects of zapping between channels: if I don't like it, I switch to something else. There remains nonetheless the extreme difficulty of reading and deciphering the show in its internal logic and in its reference to our world. This is a difficulty but not an impossibility.

### **Re-evaluation of dramatic criticism for a re-evaluated theatre**

The crisis of representation, which affects mise en scène as much as dramatic criticism, leads to a re-evaluation of both. Therein lies the challenge to the very notion of mise en scène, which is perhaps no longer in a position to follow the evolution of theatrical forms. Is mise en scène a relic to which we are attached, while performance no longer requires a coherent whole, based on a directive, an idea or dramaturgical analysis? In the shows at the Avignon 'in' festival in 2005, it had become impossible to rebuild an overall discourse on mise en scène, a story or a conception of the whole<sup>12</sup>. Inside a single show no homogenous acting style, directing style or scenography could be found. The shows were neither classic, since neither harmony nor coherence reigned; nor romantic, since there was no genius like that of Wagner or Chéreau to organise the material; nor Hegelian, since no synthesis was forthcoming to conciliate and overcome the various styles. From a critical point of view, there was no "system of art", no "magic key thanks to which the work can be entered"<sup>13</sup>. What, for Jean Dutour, would have been a good thing, a sign of simplicity, appears to us now a double abdication: mise en scène is totally disorganised and it discourages all coherent methods of analysis.

But this very personal perspective does not take into account current mise en scène practice, practice that precisely goes against 'classical' mise en scène, and which leads us, or brings us back, to *performance*, in the English (and not the French) sense of the word. We have seen *performance* blowing up the fixed frontiers of mise en scène. But, from the English perspective, that is a good thing - it is a vision that renews our too narrow conception of mise

<sup>9</sup> Yves Michaud. *L'art à l'état gazeux. Essai sur le triomphe de l'esthétique*. Paris, Stock, 2003, p.100.

<sup>10</sup> Georges Banu. 'Le corps du critique n'est pas seulement le sien, mais il est aussi celui de sa génération à laquelle il appartient', *Un siècle de critique dramatique*, op.cit., p.150.

<sup>11</sup> Shomit Mitter et Maria Shevtsova. *Fifty key Theatre Directors*, London, Routledge, 2005, p.XVIII.

<sup>12</sup> See Patrice Pavis. 'Théâtre et calamité', *Théâtre/Public*, no.180, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Dutour. *Le Paradoxe du critique*, Paris, Flammarion, 1970, p.20.

en scène, at least of classical *mise en scène*: “The term ‘*mise en scène*’ has emphasized how performance’s meanings are produced not only in the performance product—the show—but also through the process of both production and audience reception.<sup>14</sup>”. This implies that dramatic criticism has two ways of thinking of *mise en scène*: 1) by imagining how the preparatory work took place, not only the reading around the table but also the directing of the actors. 2) by integrating the description of the reaction of the audience, to give readers or future spectators an idea of the way in which they too might react.

### **New tasks for dramatic criticism**

Besides this widening of perspectives, which dramatic criticism has in fact always practiced, it is necessary to venture to grant it new tasks, precisely in the domains that *Political correctness* carefully avoids. What might these tasks be? Let us list a just a few:

- 1) To take on and make explicit value judgements, which criticism, like theory, cannot avoid; to admit the enterprise of legitimization presupposed by any discourse, even a negative one, on an artist, a movement, a way of working; to nonetheless remain aware of the relativity of this judgement in giving the reader the possibility of contesting or deconstructing it.
- 2) To become aware - and make aware - of the cultural identity of whoever gives a judgement, all the while allowing them the right to talk about what does not concern them, about another culture, another milieu, another identity, another religion. To delocalise critics. To make them analyse shows that are still foreign to them. To not burden oneself with legitimacy, authenticity, fundamentalism, even of a cultural nature.
- 3) To reaffirm the importance of *mise en scène* and of the director as mediating between the work and the audience. As was said twenty years ago, when Vitez arrived at Chaillot, “we will defend the function, the very existence of *mise en scène*, once again, today contested in principle. We will not let ourselves be closed in the ineffable relationship of the actor to the text and to the audience.<sup>15</sup>”. Vitez’s lesson has not been forgotten, it is as true for criticism as for *mise en scène*. It is now our job to recognise the new functions and frontiers of *mise en scène*: an “extension of the province of the struggle<sup>16</sup>”.

The critic too is a species in danger of extinction and yet, like the director, is essential as a mediator between the stage and the auditorium. The critic and the director are old comrades, secret accomplices each obliged to hear what the other has to say for fear of becoming extinct.

*Mise en scène* thus remains in all respects the territory and the stakes of theatrical production and dramatic criticism. It is to this that we should devote the majority of our time. As Estragon, in *Waiting for Godot*, would say, “let’s go!”

<sup>14</sup> Paul Allain. *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance*, London, p.171.

<sup>15</sup> Antoine Vitez. ‘L’art du théâtre’, *L’Art du théâtre*, n.1, 1985, p.9.

<sup>16</sup> See my study in *Théâtre/Public*, ‘Extension du domaine de la lutte . La mise en scène à Avignon 2006’, 2006.



## New Theatricality and Criticism

### Keynote Address

**By Bang-Ock Kim**

**President, Korean Association of Theatre Critics; Professor, Dongguk University**

#### The Critic's Body and The Theatre of *Gyee*

Everyone wants to be happy. Even theatre critics want to be happy—though they are hardly welcomed or loved by anyone. Is it possible that we, theatre critics, can be happy? Can we relax our bodies and minds enough to communicate at a heartfelt level, and to feel we are alive in the theatre? Can we do that? Today's theatre critic is different from the critic of the past. George Banu once said he preferred his own feelings and story to precise analysis when he wrote theatre criticism. Fifty years ago, Roland Barthes insisted text could be read for pleasure rather than for knowledge. If so, the theatre critic is no exception; we can understand the given text and enjoy the free play of the theatrical signs. Still, can we also be happy in other respects?

Recently, there has been a flourishing of various kinds of discourse on the body. People are enjoying aroma spas, learning to dance at neighborhood clubs, and shaping their bodies to be more attractive. This enthusiasm for the body is the same in Seoul, Tokyo and New York. Then, too, “body” appears frequently as a key word in discussions of feminism, post-colonialism, ecology, and cultural studies.

We have known “theatre of the body”—body-focused theatre—for a long time. Artaud wrote that “cruelty is not representation of life, but life itself,” and he tried to foreground cruelty to emphasize theatrical physicality. To Grotowski and Eugenio Barba, too, the performer's body is theatre itself. Body is essential, of course, to pantomime and body art. In addition, beginning around the 1990s, theatrical materials such as soil, water and fire have seen widespread use as scenery, giving us still other kinds of theatrical “bodies.” The abundance of these materials, pouring onto the stage, suggests a striking sense of the bodies of the theatre. Korean philosopher, Yong-Ock Kim, notes the modern Western emphasis on sight and hearing, and advocates instead what he calls “Mohm(body) feeling,” insisting that visceral feeling is the basis of both life and art for Koreans. Body, for Koreans, is the source from which physical body and mind emerge and come together.

I am not sure when it started, but some theatre critics have begun to think, with audiences, that the theatre stage may really exist. Theatre may not be a mere collection of empty signs for language and meaning, as we heard from semiotics; we may need phenomenological approaches which entertain the senses and body, and open us to the object or material on the stage. On this subject, Patrice Pavis, in his recent book *Analyzing Performance* (2003, English ed.), claimed we need both semiotization and de-semiotization to understand performance, and insisted we follow multiple disciplines, such as phenomenology and anthropology, along with semiotics.

From the perspective of Merleau-Ponty, the body is perception, and a medium or a window that leads us to the world. In this sense, the audience's body is as important as the theatre's body. We may say that performance is made somewhere between the theatre's body and the audience's body. And in fact, audience members do participate in the performance with their bodies as well as with their intellects, eyes and ears. They respond keenly to the theatre space, and they breathe the smell that is particular to the theatre, they react to the boring performance with deliberate coughing, and are sometimes startled by a performer's sudden movement. They sigh, shed tears, feel faint, shout, and or even feel ill.

If so, what about the critic's body? Of course, the critic's body is part of the audience's body. He or she is only a slightly more professional audience member. Critics can feel the theatre space and time physically, tensing and relaxing their muscles with the performance, sensing their own body's interior movements and changing temperature. A director once asked me derisively, "Why don't critics breathe when they are watching a performance?" Directors and performers have peeked into the audience and found that the critics are too tense and don't breathe enough. If we do not breathe, we cannot communicate with the world, and cannot feel the energy, the materiality, the sensuality, the aura in all its vitality. Of course, the theatre may not be an ideal space in which to breathe deeply. But are we alive enough to face a performance? Don't we feel our own bodies when we feel their bodies on the stage?

Korean theatre critics are in a perfect position to conduct body-friendly criticism. Korean critics are familiar with the spiritual energy known as *gyee* ["*ki*"], that concept so much a part of Northeast Asia. *Gyee* means life, energy, and the source of power. It exists between nothingness and being. It is pure spirit as well as pure material, and it reveals itself using the human body as a vehicle. This notion of *gyee* has influenced Northeast Asian traditional life and art in fields as various as the medical arts, food, painting, calligraphy and the martial arts. These days, the Koreans have a renewed interest in this *gyee*, with their new interest in recovering Korean traditions and the nature-friendly lifestyle that went along with the traditional Korean concern for ecology. What interests us here is that the logic of *gyee* has something to do with major tendencies in the contemporary philosophies of thinkers such as Whitehead or Dleuz. For example, some Korean scholars have compared Dleuz's theory of "becoming" and "bodies without organs" with the materiality of *gyee*.

The performing arts, including theatre, allow the best conditions for *gyee* to be effectively manifested. The performing arts realize *gyee* through the body, and communicate with the audience through *gyee*. Acting itself reveals *gyee* through the body. In Oriental medicine, *gyee*, which cannot be seen or touched, is observed through the pulse, complexion, voice, or posture. Likewise, when performers act out their *gyee*, they exhibit abdominal breathing, relaxed muscles, good circulation, as well as connection to internal impulse and creative psychological process—all these are present in the voice, facial expression and movement. *Gyee* has not been cultivated systematically enough in Korean acting so far, but some performers are showing an interest in developing and practicing it. *Gyee*-based acting can also be found in Western theatre. When Eugenio Barba spoke of "scenic bios" and "scenic presence," and an unusual energy radiated by experienced performers during performance, he was talking about *gyee*. Phillip Zarrilli, who has run the Asia/ Experimental Theatre Group in America and Britain, found *gyee* while he was conducting research into traditional Asian acting. According to his understanding, *gyee* in the traditional Asian acting style meant a highly sensitive awareness of the body, breath, energy and soul.

During the performance, the performer's *gyee* is carried directly into the audience. At that moment, the performer's body and the audience's body are the medium in which *gyee* is formed and realized. When a master of martial arts sends strong *gyee* to his partner standing at a short distance, the other falls down simply from the pressure of the bodily vibration. On the other hand, audiences can return *gyee* to the performers after receiving *gyee* from them. Many performers feel they are responding to the audience's *gyee*, both physically and mentally. An audience's enthusiastic response, full of *gyee*, challenges the performer's mind and body and makes them more energetic—whereas their coughs provoke tension in the actor's throat, and shrink the body. You have strong examples of this *gyee*-filled response in Korean traditional theatre—in forms such as *pansori* and *talchum*, the Korean traditional mask dance—where members of the

audience cannot suppress their *gyee* and excitedly join the performance, shouting and dancing.

Traditional Korean aesthetics include an emotion known as *heung*, which is formed when we are happy and full of *gyee*. *Heung* is what overflows when we cannot restrain an emotionally pleasant state, and we let our bodies move to an inner rhythm. It is not simply a pleasant feeling, but also a dynamic state that joins and unifies us with others. Korean modern theatre, as well as Korean traditional performances, have these spiritual and material energies—*gyee* and *heung*— in their relationship with the audience.

It is often said that Korean actors of today are more sensitive to impulsive energy and spontaneous emotion than to logical analysis and systematic rehearsal. Modern Korean actors tend to be aware of the audience even when they are acting in a realistic style on a proscenium stage. Modern Korean audiences, in turn, are very enthusiastic about any kind of performance. Foreign performers who have ever visited Seoul will not have forgotten the welcoming and enthusiastic response of the Korean audiences. Added to this, Korean theatres tend to be small, with somewhere around 100 seats. These little theatres are ideal environments for the audience and performers to find each other on the same “wavelengths” of *gyee* and *heung*. You may experience these yourselves when you watch Yoo-Taek Lee's *The Beautiful Man*, or Sung-Nyu Kim's solo performance, or even in the production of *Waiting for Godot* done by Young-Woong Im. In these, *gyee* and *heung* have the innate energy and force to foster and share communication directly between subject and object—that is, between performer and audience. It is here we can see that, in the *gyee* and *heung* of the Korean theatre, that both the audience's and the critic's body are essential, organic elements of the response to the performance.

Today, we dream of a life free to pursue the individual's happiness rather than ideology; to preserve our ecological environment rather than to develop it; to value life and peaceful co-existence rather than the law of the jungle. In this post-modern or post-colonial context, Korean theatre has a chance to find new meaning in body-centered theatre, to be free of our tautological modern theatre. To do so, theatre critics and audiences need to feel a real connectedness, and life's warmth and energy. Of course, this kind of theatrical experience doesn't mean to exclude language and meaning on the stage. Mind and spirit are parts of body and life, energy, and *gyee*. Didn't the Greeks believe that good language raised body temperature? And didn't Stanislavsky's “inner truth” give physical pain to the hearts of his audiences?

Though the importance of language and text have begun to attract the theatre public's attention once again, it may be impossible to return to the past, dominated by abstract logical systems of signs without body. Nor can critics be devotees in the icy temples of text any longer. But critics can respond to the stage with the body, and breathe with the audience, and make the phenomenological attitude a starting point for criticism. By returning to the body, *gyee*, and by inter-connecting the adjacent fields of aesthetics, politics, sociology, ecology, science—and sometimes simply by breaking some habits—critics can explore new ways towards a more productive theatre criticism. Can we be happy, then, being connected with others' lives?

## ***The Future in Me: American Theatre and Criticism in the New Millennium***

**By Kerri Allen**

**American Theatre Critics Association**

October 2006

IATC World Congress

Seoul, Republic of Korea

When Yun-Cheol Kim invited me to speak on New Theatricality in Criticism in the United States, I was honored if not a bit overwhelmed. I do not have a doctorate in dramaturgy and I am the author of not a single book. And as you may know, I am the youngest invited speaker at this Congress.

In the interest of full disclosure, I was born in 1979. I'm sure many of you were already chief critics or full professors by that time.

I began reviewing theatre eight years ago while I was still a student at Rutgers University. During my second year, I took an advanced theatre criticism course with Dr. Eileen Blumenthal, a recipient of the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism, the highest award an American drama critic can receive. New York City was a short train ride away, and I was able to review Broadway and off-Broadway shows in addition to regional theatre and university productions.

Two years ago, I began writing—pro bono—for a New York-based website called OffOffOnline, which quite obviously covers off-off-Broadway productions. Now, my résumé of criticism and theatre writing includes *The New York Times*, *Time Out New York*, *Back Stage*, *American Theatre* magazine, an international journal *Estreno (Debut)* and others. I am young, but with this youth comes energy.

I will not insult this distinguished audience by attempting to provide a history lesson of American theatre. What I feel I can offer this Congress, however, is the honest point of view

of someone who is 27 and working in this industry in a world hub of theatre. I will try not to talk theory. I'll talk practice, since that's what I do.

When we talk of "new" theatricality, we are speaking about theatre between 2000 and today: 21st-century theatre.

My colleagues in New York and I have not seen vast changes in this new millennium. Perhaps we should have. After all, in the past six years the United States has seen 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and the war in Iraq. What are our playwrights, our alleged cultural barometers, reflecting back to the public about life in contemporary America?

Robert Brustein's answer is "nothing." The well-known scholar and chief theater critic for *The New Republic* magazine based in Washington, D.C. wrote an article last September about theatre after 9/11. He said:

"This disjunction between stage and audience may help to explain why public interest in the stage is dwindling. At the same time that Broadway, when not recycling popular movies in musical form (*The Lion King*, *The Producers*, *Monty Python's Spamalot*), is busy pondering the tribulations of gay baseball players and teenage spelling bee nerds, the rest of the country is worrying about terrorism, body counts, the environment, nuclear proliferation, poverty, the mismanagement of the economy, the futility of the Iraq war, and all the other pressing issues botched by Bush."

He goes on to assert that "a play that provokes pity and terror is not incompatible with a night on the town." I wonder.

Most people I know are not theatergoers. If and when my friends go to see a play, it's because they know someone involved. It is often done out of friendship, not curiosity. Ticket prices keep people like me—and me, in fact—away from most theatre.

Of course, this is no thing new. Julius Novick is an esteemed American critic (and also a George Jean Nathan Award winner). We were recently talking about theatre in the "post-TV" era of the last sixty years or so, and he said: "Ordinary middle-class people became less and less likely to become regular theatergoers. At this point, except for press tickets and TDF [the

Theatre Development Fund, which offers discount Broadway tickets], I wouldn't be a regular theatergoer." That's a shame and that's a problem.

At this moment in the United States, we are faced with a theatre that most deem too costly and largely irrelevant.

In my estimation, the theatre community has not had an overwhelming response to American politics of this new century, especially in light of the war in Iraq. The thirst for knowledge about the Middle East, however, has grown since 9/11 and plays with that topic are getting more attention as a result.

The New York Theatre Workshop created quite a stir last year when they pulled the play "My Name is Rachel Corrie" earlier this year for fear of a pro-Israeli backlash. It is currently playing at the Minetta Lane Theatre (and getting poor reviews).

Of course, the subject is an American activist in Palestine, but it was brought to the stage by the *British* duo Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner. Such was the case with "Stuff Happens" by British playwright David Hare.

The 2005 Lincoln Center Festival produced Arianne Mnouchkine's "The Last Caravan" about refugees from Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan. This two-hour, six-part show captivated American audiences eager to hear this story at this point in American history. But where are the American *playwrights*?

Tony Kushner's "Homebody/Kabul" talks about modern life in Afghanistan, yet the Pulitzer Prize winner penned the story before the events of 9/11. Not revised after that date, the show was mounted in New York in December 2001, again in 2004, and is now produced regularly throughout the U.S. "I assumed that people watching the play would really not know what the Northern Alliance was, or care particularly," Kushner told America's National Public Radio on December 3, 2001. "I don't think I have to worry about that any more."

"Nine Parts of Desire" by Heather Raffo, and American actress of Iraqi descent, was a popular show that opened in October 2004. It sold out for nine months at Manhattan Ensemble Theatre and Raffo continues to tour the production throughout the U.S.

In addition to keeping up with current events, theatre must also try to compete with other forms of media and entertainment. Unfortunately, much of what I have seen recently has been overstuffed—trying desperately to juggle new media but just making a mess instead.

The Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival just closed Carl Hancock Rux's multimedia production, "Mycenean." The play was based on Rux's own novel, *Asphalt*; his epic poem "Mycenean"; Racine's version of the Hippolytus myth; and 20th-century dream theory. The production itself incorporated poetry, film, movement, music, and song. To say it was overreaching would be an understatement.

Meanwhile, the famous Wooster Group has been using multimedia for decades and still does so gloriously. Their 1998 production of "House/Lights," which I saw remounted last year, was stunning, and I'm looking forward to their new interpretation of "Hamlet" in February. (Of course, those of you in Paris or Berlin will see it first later this year.) The Wooster Group calls their version of the world's most famous play an "archaeological excursion into America's cultural past, looking for archetypes that shadow forth our identity." This will take place at St. Ann's Warehouse, a hip performance space in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Currently onstage at that venue is "Hell House" by the American company with a French name: Les Freres Corbusier. The pageant-style production is based on actual "hell houses," which are staged by evangelical Christians in the Midwest and Southern United States.

Part haunted house, part morality play, the idea is to scare congregants away from Satan and back toward religion. A similar show was produced in Los Angeles in 2004 called "Hollywood Hell House" and starred some B-list celebrities and Bill Maher, the controversial host of the now-defunct talk show *Politically Incorrect* and the current host of his own HBO show, played Satan. Les Freres Corbusier created their own version to show the east coast a little of what is going in other parts of the United States.

After the 2004 election, exit polls revealed that many Americans who voted for Bush did so because of his stance on "moral values." This has since famously divided the country between red and blue states—so named for the electoral map with red representing Republican and blue, democratic.

Irony is a huge part of life for young New Yorkers and it shows in their theatre. Our defense to all of the over-advertising and deception in our culture is to mock it entirely. This is seen through the popularity of television shows like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and “joke” newspapers like *The Onion*.

Last year, the Brick Theatre Company in Brooklyn held the Moral Values Festival. The plays included “Dear Dubya: Patriotic Love Letters to WhiteHouse.Org”; Mikki Baloy’s “Eleven” about the lives of 11 people in post-9/11 New York; and “The Fourth Reich” by Danny Bowes. On the topic of criticism, another play on the Moral Values roster was Chris Harcum’s “Mahamudra (or Postconsumer Waste Recycled Paper),” in which a “loathsome theatre critic on a major power trip learns to atone for his misdeeds in front of a live audience.”

This summer, the Brick launched yet another ironic lineup of shows called the Sellout Festival. Their marketing material read:

“Are you tired of art? Bored of theatre? Revolted by modern aesthetics? Are you a jaded, cynical New Yorker, ready to turn your back on the slow death rattle of this city’s once great cultural legacy? So are we, my friend. So are we. That’s why, this summer, we at The Brick are going commercial and selling out our integrity as fast as we can.”

One of their productions brought the sprawling world of the Internet into a tiny black box theatre. “True Life Story of [Your Name Here]” a play sold on eBay. The auction was for an opportunity to have the Ensemble Studio Theatre use the winner’s life story to make a play. The highest bidder was Tom Richford, who paid \$521 for the privilege. The final production was not earth-shattering, but in this era of reality TV and instant gratification, the idea was a step in the right direction.

So what about the critics?

Michael Feingold has been the chief theatre critic at the *Village Voice* for 32 years and can offer insightful analysis into the changing role of the American critic. I recently asked him if



he thought that criticism has changed in this new millennium. He replied, “The Bush era has so discouraged criticism on all fronts and the mass media so defuse it with multiple voices that nobody is quite sure what the idea of theater or the idea of criticism means anymore.”

I cannot tell you what criticism was like in the past. I can tell you my experience in New York over the last few years. My reviews for *The New York Times* run at 500 words. My reviews for the very popular magazine *Time Out New York* run 160 to 250 words. *Back Stage* allows me up to 300 words. (Suffice it to say that the pay I receive per-review couldn’t buy me a good seat at a Broadway show.)

So why am I—a new critic—doing this? Free tickets? Absolutely. But I also care about the art form. I believe that it is important to champion great new art and continue to raise the bar in this vast and overcrowded marketplace.

I wish I could tell you about a new theatre magazine or section of a newspaper devoted to theatre, but I don’t know of any. Still, there are reviews in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The New Yorker*, and other major national publications. And to theatres, critics still matter. Especially people like Ben Brantley, the chief critic at *The New York Times*.

This was hilariously evident in Bina Sharif’s recent play “Think of Ben Brantley and Write a Happy Play.” The Pakistani playwright’s comedy had its New York premiere last month at the Theatre for the New City. The characters Mona and Robert are unhappily married, largely because of Mona’s tragic plays about Iraq that the critics deride. Her husband loves reading Ben Brantley’s reviews and advises Mona to write an entertaining, commercially successful play by thinking of the critic.

Almost every theatre I go to has a huge poster of a good review and a press packet full of the same—if applicable. Theaters notoriously pull quotes from reviews to sell their shows and emblazon them on the sides of buses, on billboards, websites and everything in between. So, in the industry, the critic’s voice still matters. It just might matter more to the box office than to the creators.

While the public might not know a critic’s name, like the character Robert, there’s still a buzz of “the critics loved this show. They panned that one.” People do listen to us. I think it helps

that we are encouraged to write conversationally and not like professors, with all due respect to professors. This, of course, is a double-edged sword. And now, I will confess something to this Congress of world theatre critics: I hate *The New Yorker* magazine. I don't have the patience, time or energy to sit down and read a tome. I would much rather pick up *Time Out* and read a pithy review in 250 words.

I'm sure some of you are revolted by my Generation Y-ness. You're thinking that MTV has clouded my mind, whittled away my attention span, robbed me of any substantive culture. Perhaps. But the truth is the culture and the era I live in demands it. I don't own a television. I go to the opera and the ballet and I sometimes speak at theatre critics conferences. If anything can speak to new theatre and new criticism, I hope I can. I *am* here, after all.

*Kerri Allen is an award-winning writer and critic. The New York Times Institute for Journalists awarded her a certificate of achievement for her work as a 2006 fellow to the Eugene O'Neill Critics Institute. In 2005, she was selected as one of three arts journalists to be a Theatre Communications Group fellow and participant in the National Theatre Criticism/Affiliated Writers Program. The New Jersey Press Association's collegiate division awarded Ms. Allen First Place in Arts & Entertainment/Critical Writing for her reviews of the Broadway musicals "Aida" and "Cabaret" (2001).*

*She is a member of the American Society of Journalists and Authors, the Freelancers Union and is Vice Chair of the international committee of the American Theatre Critics Association. Ms. Allen has been an invited speaker at event hosted by Stadttheatre New York (2006), the Latin American Theatre Today conference at the University of Connecticut (2005) and Fifth Annual Symposium on Latin American Theatre at University of Kansas (2003). She was a member of the nominating committee for the 2007 Kyoto Prize and is both a nominating and voting member for the Regional Theater Tony Award. Ms. Allen studied at the Universidad Internacional in Mexico and graduated magna cum laude from Rutgers University. She lives in New York City. More at [www.kerriallen.com](http://www.kerriallen.com).*

## From Argentina: Periferal Objects

By Halima Tahan

Although I am going to refer to the Argentine group **Periférico de Objetos** (Peripheral Objects), I want to mention that in South America there are a great many manifestations – many of which are very interesting and worthwhile– that from the aesthetic-ideological viewpoint have faced long and risky searches when it comes time to produce their words that transgress the conventional boundaries of their trade. One can mention the Colombian group **Mapa teatro** and its excellent *Proyecto Prometeo*, the Brazilian **Teatro da Vertigem** whose latest production, *Territórios do rio* was the result of a hard and long investigation.

Basically self-reflexive and interartistic, these “works” present scenic configurations of great complexity, resorting to a principle of “polyhedric composition” in the interpretation.

Faced with the shifting geography of scenic contemporaneity, I consider that **a critic’s job** is submitted to tremors and risks, to the same upsets and vicissitudes as its object of attention.

He or she also needs time to investigate and reflect in order to be able to articulate his or her own strategies to broach and respond to the challenges of “inventing” knowledge, in the perspective of keeping updated a space for conversation with the creators of the contemporary scene.

Even though it is perfectly natural that new criticism corresponds to these new theatricalities, one must corroborate in practice how this process is carried out in specific situations, where its productions come to life, and how the flow of this new “criticism” circulates: what are the factors that stimulate it and what are those that limit it. The Seoul conference is an exceptional place for us to analyze these and other questions together.

### PERIPHERAL LOCATIONS / CHANGES OF PERSPECTIVE

For Peripheral Objects –a canonical group of reference in Argentine theater– being peripheral alludes to a geography of limits, to the place of the inappropriate, to a particular way of *seeing* things that implies the decentering of view –an oblique view fighting to make visible “that which culturally can in no way or under any pretext become so.”

The initial efforts of the group were dedicated to searching for “the possibility of decentering the view in the theater of objects, of leaving behind certain established and well-travelled codes ... of taking responsibility for what what happening on stage” by showing the manipulators as “opinion agents of their own work.” Doing this they managed to make people and dolls have the same dramatic level on stage; the manipulator is not only shown, thereby making the sham obvious, but he is also pragmatically incorporated into the scene.

For those in the periphery there is a scenic task that belongs to the object “when in the role it fulfills, an actor could not do it any better.” The actor yields to the object, fiction reaches another dimension through this performance. The question is inverted when the actor executes a dramatic action because he has more possibilities than the object: thus protagonism between subject and object is shared and the dialectic between the two becomes more complex for both.<sup>1</sup>

At the heart of the creative process put into motion by this theatrical group, even from its very beginnings, there is an exploration of the link between the manipulator and his object. From the tension produced between the two tied together by an invisible cord, from a particular *entre-deux* they generate emerges the theatricality proposed by the troupe that combines two aspects which are, in principle, contradictory: the beautiful and the sinister. Here beauty is presented in a style unto Rilke as the beginning of something terrible,

“something terrible that we can still withstand” and the sinister, the bearer of mystery and incomprehensible enigmas, appears as a condition and the very limit of beauty.

Gastón Baty wonders about the limits between the work of an actor and that of the puppet –where does the limit of the actor stop and that of the object begin? It was there, in this ambiguous interregnum, this frontier zone, that *El Periférico* began to seek new procedures and strategies.

But what procedures, what kind of operations to carry out in order to obtain the their scenic task? *El Periférico* sets in motion a system of withdrawals and variations; the relationships that a traditional theater of objects proposes (for example, the stable link between the manipulator and his object, between the manipulator and the public) are all submitted by the group to a game of continuous variation whose scenic possibilities nourish each other, generally speaking, and the constructive principle of their theatrical proposals. This system of withdrawals is compensated for by an intense dramatic movement generating new scenic options.

Among this repertory of objects made by this collective we can find those that can be classified as: found, risky, inexorable ... and a recognizable hierarchy: the dolls, for example, exercise a powerful fascination in the group and occupy a preponderant place. Graceful and powerful, according to their own devotees, they possess a great dramaticity that “emerges from their anthropomorphism, making possible an instantaneous evocation of the human and the real;” associated with paradise lost of childhood, recognizable and close to us, they bring a very special charge to the scene. They are antique porcelain dolls that belonged to very old people or to those who are no longer around; “they have a particular way of transmitting time and death.” The fact that the object is found and is incorporated into the scene for its artistic use without any modification carries a fundamental importance. The real is incorporated into the space of fiction and from which stems the challenge.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Route Taken**

The trajectory of the group has recognizable phases: the first goes from '89 to '95 and can be described as concentrating on producing small format shows; the second, since '95 to 2002, can be characterized by its expansion; and the third by its international projection in which the group opens up and each one of its members begins to generate his or her own productions in addition to continuing with the group itself.\*

The appearance of *El Periférico de Objetos* with Alfred Jarry in the Buenos Aires theatrical arena was not fortuitous. Having left behind the norms and producing on the margins of the legitimate zone for the great theater of the epoch marked affinities with the iconoclastic Jarry, who they put on stage in *Ubu Rey* (1990). Although not as radically as our famous precursor, the group presented new things to the local scene: it broadened the boundaries of the theater of objects by incorporating these from a new perspective and also by opening this type of theater to adults.<sup>3</sup>

In *El hombre en la arena*, despite the identity of titles, this story by Hoffman was elaborated in a fragmented form. During rehearsals, this central reading began acquiring a peripheral reading: that of Sigmund Freud.

It was this work by Freud on Hoffman's story, Veronese (one of the directors) says, that wound up “driving the action and moving it away from the literary event.” Finally, the theatrical production turned out to be a witches' sabbath, a ritual of interment and disinterment of characters that fought to reach the surface of a huge box of dirt that was the

---

\* Here we refer to some of the works of the first and second phases that fit what we are positing.

stage setting” while the actors-manipulators, dressed in black, mournfully marked their theatrical actions.<sup>4</sup>

In the spectators’ imaginary the association of the tragic years of repression inevitably loomed. The stage showed the ominous, *that which* had been jealously hidden during the years of terror in Argentina. The creators had no explicit intentionality in this respect, but “since the sinister was an element we lived with during those years,” the *Periféricos* state, “it is impossible for these signs to be read any other way in Argentina.”<sup>5</sup>

The indirect theatricalization of the traumatic “dirty war” during the military dictatorship hangs reality in suspension, opens a gap, and makes evident the symbolic debt associated with the inversion of the traditional funeral rites. The victims return and keep returning until they are given the dignified burial they deserve, until they find a place in historical memory, incorporating into it the traumatism of these deaths.

Their next production, *Cámara Gesell* (1994) showed a relevant change: the canonical authorial references gave way to the writing of Daniel Veronese, to a story he defines as “microsocial” comprised of “brief and cruel” scenes. In *Cámara Gesell* the modalities of evil are investigated as are their manifestations in what is familiar and in daily life. The sinister expands again. This time, the objects and the manipulators are joined by an actress who plays the role of Tomás, the child protagonist probed and experimented on through the entire piece. Up until this piece, one could speak of small format spectacles, but from here on, the group began another stage.

In the **second stage** of the road taken by *El Periférico* space, content, and the interpretative possibilities are enlarged. This was achieved by multiplying those who speak onstage, by incorporating the projection of images, and by intensifying the participation of the actors. The scene thus become more complex and gains plasticity and movement. The visual richness of the spectacle is no longer abstract, as the images do not make the scene unreal but rather accentuate its materialness.

*Máquina Hamlet* (1995) was a bursting out: space was ostensibly broadened, and in addition to the small dolls –that represent the drama of Hamlet- others, very large ones, are added that duplicate the image of the actors themselves. The theater reproduces itself, *Periférico* is included in the scene by means of a small screen with its name written on it and in which the same objects are represented over and over and over as they get smaller and smaller. The projection of images and texts in off accentuate the heterogeneity of this staging of Heiner Müller by updating it peripherally. The radical in Müller’s work is exacerbated here; for the group, staging Müller was a political decision, but, before everything else, it was a “decision of peripheral aesthetics” since the German author’s poetic and ideological seekings identify him with this.

The system of creation that *El Periférico* sets into motion from the sinister is found in *Zooedipous*, a good sample of their efficacy, since in this staging, the objects have a special intensity having to do with a “perturbing spirit.” The myth of Oedipus in a peripheral version needed a long route before coming into being; they began with Sophocles who was displaced by other readings; finally, the “Kafkain particularity pushed by Deleuze and Guattari” was what sent them “to the Oedipic place with total naturalness.” Delving into the myth meant broadening the repertory of objects and updating one of the basic questions of the team: “how will the public react to an object radically perturbed and taken out of its role and brutally exposed on stage?”. During the process of working a disquieting alternative appeared: “the possibility of manipulating organic matter.” In *Zooedipous* animals are onstage: a live chicken and a dead one (one ready to cook which the actors ate onstage) as well as blown up projections of insects which incisively contributed to the the overall anxiety.<sup>7</sup>

The barroque, now recognizable in certain recurring traits in these peripheral stagings, grew in *Máquina Hamlet* and culminated in *Monteverdi método bélico* (*M.M.B.*, for short), the last group work based on the madrigals of Monteverdi and of Segismondo D'India. In the *règ*ie of this peripheral opera, technology plays a fundamental role with regard to the objects whose repertory acknowledges the impact of this radical change. The objects have increased and demand large scenic places for their incorporation (in *M.M.B.* there is a 4-meter tall doll) and making them move requires a precise operating technique. The peripheral opera –terrain in which, this group enters for the first time- presents traits of excess and chaos, violence and provocation which generate shrill counterpoints and unexpected lapses. The second stage of *El Periférico de Objetos* culminates in this megaspectacle, encouraged on by a heretical force, the very force that many years earlier united this group in a small, peripheral theater in Buenos Aires to stage the powerful *Ubu*.

If, as we said before, the relation between subject and object is central in the aesthetic-ideological production of this group, it should be observed more closely. This relationship – with strong cultural, philosophical and psychoanalytical connotations- transcends the relationship between the manipulator and theatrical objects. This relationship, inscribed in the name of the troupe, marks its identity: *El Periférico de Objetos* (The Periphery of Objects).

The “peripheral” instance indicates, among other things, the decentered place from which one views, an oblique view that struggles to make visible what is culturally prohibited; and then there are the “objects” that, upon being named, are subjectively instituted. Object or thing viewed from a frontal perspective appears clearly in front of us, but submitted to a peripheral view that divides up and refracts into multiple shadows and reflections. The peripheral view sets into motion the machine of desire that impregnates and distorts it, making it confusing and upsetting.

Why, fundamentally, should this peripheral proposal be inscribed in the new theatricalities which are the subject of this conference?

Let us return to the object, the thing. The scenic game is not set into action by an absence (as is the paradigmatic case of Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*) but by a presence. The object is exposed in all its materiality. For example, in the opera *Monteverdi Método Bélico*, this is accentuated even more; the objects became technological and some were of gigantic proportions –the corporeal machines realizing disruptive trajectories; there is violence, chaos and pornography on stage. As a matter of fact, this piece breaks with all classic rules that stipulate the omission of the object or terrifying event. It is through exhibition itself that the object makes “visible its own indifferent and arbitrary character.”<sup>8</sup> It is the proximity not the absence of the Thing, as in *Godot*, which stirs up uneasiness, perturbation, anguish, because the *Thing in itself* materializes emptiness. The object can function charismatically or repulsively, but more than due to the properties of the object, this difference has to do with the place it holds in the symbolic order.<sup>9</sup> The obscene and ominous eminent in peripheral productions have to do with the presence of an “inert, non dialectizable dimension” to the point of being considered that the theater proposed by *El Periférico* simply dramatized the space of the inert and repulsive presence.\*

\* This text is accompanied by images of the works referred to herein.

#### Notes

1 María Castillo, “Aquí están, esto dicen”, interview, en *Teatro al Sur* N°3, Bs.As., 1995.

2 Idem.

3 Emilio García Wehbi was in charge of adapting *Ubu Rey*; the design of the dolls and direction of the staging of the work was by A. Jarry.

4 Idem.

5 Daniel Veronese, “Periférico de Objetos...” in *Teatro al Sur*, N°5, Bs.As., 1995, p.30.

6 Veronese, Op. cit., p. 31.

7 Veronese, Op. cit., p. 32.

8 Žižek, Slavoj, *Mirando al sesgo* p. 238.

9 Idem, p. 239.

**NOTE: Dr Michel Vaïs' presentation is available only in French for now. Please refer to the French section of this web site.**



**International Association of Theatre Critics  
Extraordinary Congress in Celebration of its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
Seoul, Korea, October 21-25, 2006  
In Association with the Seoul International Performing Arts Festival**

**(Colloquium 2: Papers on Europe, 23 October, 9:30-13:00)**

**Between Drama and Dramaturgy, or What Is (Really) Changing in Portuguese Contemporary Theatre, or Should We Say the Performing Arts?**

**Paulo Eduardo Carvalho (Portugal)**

[Title 1] I have to start with a confession, which is intended to work like one of those very old-fashioned prologues through which a given character appealed to the indulgence of his audience. Only some days ago, when I finally set myself to writing this presentation, I read the summary I had sent in due time to the organization of this truly “extraordinary congress” – my sincere compliments to our Korean friends – and I realised how ambitious was my initial plan: according to that abstract, now printed in the programme, I had proposed myself not only to address some of the – at least for me – key issues raised by the stimulating subject of our meeting, “New Theatricality and Criticism”, but also to do it trying to tell you something relevant about the Portuguese theatrical scene. I know now that I won’t be able to do all that, or at least not as deeply and thoughtfully as I had previously intended and I have to apologise for a title that promised more than I can offer you. And that’s where my plea for your indulgence comes in. And I’ll start, like suggested in the mentioned abstract, with a reference to a personal, albeit also collective, Portuguese “critical” experience.

[APCT 2] When back at the beginning of January 2003 a group of theatre critics, journalists and academics proposed themselves to reinvigorate the Portuguese Association of Theatre Critics – which exists since the second half of the seventies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – they confronted themselves with a heated discussion around the name of the association, particularly centred on these two alternatives: whether to keep it, maintaining the more traditional reference to “theatre”, or whether to change it into “Portuguese Association of Critics of the Performing Arts”. This discussion among those that dominantly report, criticise and study theatre practice – some of them with an equally devoted attention, for instances, to dance – proved symptomatic of the very fluid or hybrid nature of Portuguese current reality in the domain of the performing arts, thus reflecting the broader reality of the European and worldwide situation. The final decision to keep the reference to “theatre” – which was only reached after a vote, the result being taken by majority and not unanimously – had among its

strongest supporters, of which I was part, the idea that the concept of “theatre” had historically proven itself flexible enough to express a wide range of experiences and that it would be capable to keep on adapting itself to present and future developments. However the situation remains that we are increasingly dealing with very slippery objects as far as categorisation is concerned, that we are supposed to analyze and to evaluate in their own terms. As always in art and criticism, novelty and memory frequently intersect, in a way that is far from clear or sufficiently helpful to provide us with the necessary analytical and critical tools. Moreover, the global world we live in still preserves quite a good number of local, regional or national specificities that we have better be aware of, protecting our critical considerations from premature generalizations.

Let me also add some very brief notes for the benefit of a brief characterization of the Portuguese theatrical scene. As I’m sure it happens in all areas of the globe, the fact that Portugal is part of Europe doesn’t make it instantly “European” in the sense that our country would have shared the same crucial cultural and artistic developments during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Geography is seldom enough, and politics frequently play a more decisive role. Portugal lived under a repressive regime during 48 years, and not even the tremendous changes operated in the world in the aftermath of the Second World War saved it from the continuation of that experience until 1974, the year in which my country finally embraced the more attractive challenge of a democratic regime. So, from 1926 to 1974, Portugal suffered from what I would call a prolonged delay of some cultural experiences. Theatre, by the very public and collective nature of its demands, was one of the artistic forms that suffered the most from many of the repressive mechanisms used by the State like censorship. The plays by Brecht, for example, were completely forbidden on the Portuguese stage up to 1974, but also were those by Sean O’Casey.

In these last 32 years, the Portuguese theatrical scene has gone through enormous transformations, some of them so fast that what some artists regarded as “new” was already old-fashioned for many others. I’m well aware of the fact that the coexistence of many disparate expressions in a single moment of time is a phenomenon quite common to all societies, but I’m also sure that you’ll all agree that whenever a culture finally finds itself free from longstanding constricting mechanisms, the need and the will for change and renovation leads to a much more agitated succession of experiments. With some degree of historical abuse, I could say that Portugal only knew what “mise en scène” was or could be – and I’m deliberately using the French expression here to separate it from the more mechanical or ambiguous sense of “theatre directing” – in that decade of the seventies. That somehow meant

that very soon some of our most prestigious theatre directors – or “metteurs en scène” –, as well as the companies they created, started being questioned by other theatre artists that in the late eighties or beginning of the nineties were already exploring other understandings of theatre and the performing arts. Suffice to say that the Portuguese theatrical scene has come a long way in these 32 years and that it is currently characterized by a wide variety of experiences, reflecting the world-wide tendency to an expansion of boundaries and the need of theatre practitioners to meet new perceptions of themselves and the world, as well as to explore their own means of artistic expression.

This variety concerns not only models of production, but also, more importantly for the purpose of our congress, new or at least renewed understandings of theatre. As I suggested earlier, one of the most remarkable cultural developments in Portugal has been the development of the performing arts, there including not only dance in its most traditional forms and in its more audacious contemporary expressions, but also some other more hybrid experiments. These more hybrid experiments result, many times, from a more open attitude to the contributions of other artistic languages, thus alternatively using the concepts of “performance art”, “installation”, or, in a different and more popular directions, as might be the case with the techniques of stand up comedy. Above all, in some of the most radical cases, I would dare to suggest that what we get is a refusal of any remaining traces of “illusion” in theatre communication, opting for deliberate – and sometimes solipsistic – processes of what I would call, for lack of a better word, deconstruction of the very own means of expression used for those performative experiences.

**[The curtain 3]** Allow me now to lower the curtain to help us concentrate a bit more deeply on the topic of our congress. I would like now to suggest that many of the changes that have been affecting the landscape of the performing arts and most particularly of what we still call “theatre” could, perhaps be reduced to three large issues: first, the expansion or a renewed understanding of theatre’s intrinsic “interdisciplinarity”, something that concerns both the transformations in the balance and hierarchy of the many different languages or expressions traditionally used in theatre and the new, either technological or artistic, means whose expressiveness theatre has been trying to explore for its own benefit; secondly, the age old question of the permanently evolving relation between the text and the stage; and thirdly, the much more philosophical, but no less practical, problem, that is somehow the result of the previous two and that concerns both the generation of meaning and our own attitude to the perceptive experience of meaning or signification. Explored by theatre practitioners, these three dimensions concern all those involved in the activities of reviewing and studying

theatre, frequently questioning and challenging some of our most ingrained habits and convictions regarding perception and judgement. I'm well aware that the situation is much more complex than the one suggested by these three issues, but I'm also convinced that any serious discussion has to pay the necessary attention to the complex interaction of these three forces.

Hans-Thies Lehman's book titled *Postdramatic Theatre*, first published in Germany in 1999, and later translated into French in 2002 and into English in 2006, is undoubtedly the most influential source for the wide currency the expression of "postdramatic" – first suggested by Richard Schechner in 1988 – seems to be gaining in both academic and critical terms. It is, there's also no doubt about that, an informed and passionate study of many of the new theatre forms that have developed since the 1960s, capable of helping us to go through the renewed landscape of our times. However, his main argument, concentrated as it is on the way text seems to have been displaced by more ostensibly scenic experiments, is not more than a development of the insights that some other theatre theoreticians and critics have been presenting at least since the eighties. In a truly groundbreaking essay originally published in 1984, and written for a supplement of the *Enciclopedia Universalis*, the French critic and dramaturge Bernard Dort already suggested an "Einsteinian" revolution to describe the, and I quote, "generalized emancipation of all the factors of performance", insisting on the need to concentrate our critical attention on the stage, there including the texts among the other "factors of performance". And this was a "revolution" whose genealogy he persuasively traced back to many modernist visionaries like Edward Gordon Craig and Antonin Artaud who, in very different ways, already envisaged the emancipation of theatre as an art not dependent on the demands of dramatic text. Craig, for instances, in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was already very adamant on refusing the characterization of the theatre director as an "interpreter". In his essay, Dort also drew attention to the fact every kind of text, and not only the dramatic one, could have its place on the stage.

In his theoretical studies of *mise en scène*, Patrice Pavis has also always insisted both on the idea that stage directing should never be understood as "the reduction or transformation of text into performance, but rather their confrontation" and on the need to further investigate the "modalities of this confrontation". According to his informed vision, "*mise en scène*, even at its simplest and most explicit, 'displaces' the text and makes it say what a critical commentary, spoken or written, could not say: it expresses, one could almost say, the inexpressible". In his book, published in 1996, dedicated to the analysis of performances, the French theoretician already addressed what he presented as the text-centred and the stage-

centred visions on this issue, advancing some doubts on Hans-Thies Lehmann's radical vision and calling for a more balanced approach. I can't help quoting one of his most inspired formulations: "Thus, *mise en scène* is no longer today a simple passage from text to the stage; it is sometimes an installation, that is, a *mise en presence* of different stage practices (light, visual arts, improvisations), without it being possible to establish a hierarchy among them and without the text playing the role of an attracting axis for the rest of the performance". What is particularly curious about Pavis formulation is both the reference to contemporary visual experiences like "installations" and the way he stresses that issue of the disturbed hierarchies among stage's different expressions and languages.

Since the 60s that performance art has been challenging our own understanding of what theatre might be, because it has questioned the boundaries and the mechanisms of representation, introducing issues like arbitrariness, unpredictability and the simple immanence of bodies and objects was a way to interrogate and to explore new ways of generating meaning in a postmodern reality where everything is acknowledged to be a representation. The fact that "theatre", in its more institutional and traditional sense, has been somehow initially reluctant to integrate performance art in its own sphere – quite the opposite to what happened with the visual arts – should be an important reminder to the dangers of practical and critical conservatism. Curiously enough, I would dare to suggest that the most extraordinary legacy that both Brecht and Beckett, two of the most important theatre figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, left to us – much more than their dramatic fictions – was precisely the way they, in their very different ways, explored and questioned the production of meaning on the stage. The different forms each of them came up with were not more than the result of that search. And forms, like Peter Szondi already reminded us in his own groundbreaking study on the theory of modern drama, are what really determine the evolution of art. In a gross simplification, it could somehow be suggested that all the artistic history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the West is dominated by this impulse not so much to say new things, but to tell them in different ways and forms.

The question remains: how are we, as critics, supposed to deal with such a vast constellation of forms, with the widespread variety of proposals and expressions, how are we supposed to balance the descriptive imperative with the more specifically "critical" one? There are those, influenced by the philosophical dictum that the work of art has lost its aura, that recommend a reorientation of our intervention from the domain of aesthetics to the one of culture: according to this suggestion, the only legitimacy the critic would have is to speak about the way the work of art affects him or herself and his or her way of looking at the

world. The critic's only function should be the one of sharing the work of art after the personal and collective effects triggered by that same work. I have serious misgivings about this solution to deal with that vast constellation of forms and experiences. What I regard as a creative involvement in culture demands a more committed and both analytical and critical engagement in the discussion of the expressiveness of those same forms and experiences. I still subscribe to Josette Féral's suggestion that the critic is the one that "establishes connections [and] registers the interval within the aesthetic experience".

**[The eye 4]** Having lost the normative, stable and more logocentric dominance of drama in theatre, as well as the values of coherence, unity and synthesis for so long associated with the idea of artistic creation, I repeat, how are we supposed to deal with this "perpetual experimentation" that Hans-Thies Lehman so persuasively suggests to characterize the current condition of theatre once, like the other art forms, it started to reflect upon the potential of its latent means of artistic expression? There's surely no easy answer, and it will sound almost as a contradiction in terms to suggest that in such a postdramatic age the answer may lie on dramaturgy. Not on "dramaturgy" in the sense inaugurated by Lessing, in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and so actively developed in the German and French theatres during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, referring to that varied, and most of the times invisible, set of activities that, although geared to performance, developed around the text and its literary, historical, and cultural contexts and circumstances. No. I speak more of dramaturgy in the same way we can speak of the dramaturgy of a piece directed by the choreographer William Forsythe, and the same way we can still speak of the dramaturgy of a creation directed by Eimuntas Nekrosius, Romeo Castellucci or Jan Fabre, that is, the subtle and complex network that every work of art is supposed to include if it somehow wants to communicate, or to generate meaning, albeit in a radical and demanding way. We could call it differently, and speak about the "concept", the "programmatic presuppositions" or even the "architecture" of a given theatrical piece. Even if it is no longer the result of a single author, the theatre director, even if it is based on a more collective or improvisational logic of composition, even if it is deliberately engaged in the disparagement of meaning, there should always be some articulated concept graspable by the audience that would enable us both to feel, to re-construct and to convey an experience, distinguishing simple self-indulgence from a proficient and daring use of artistic forms. Even when theatre offers itself as simply eventful and energy, in an apparent denial of more codified and frequently ossified forms of signification, there's some strategy there that should enable us to participate. Although it could seem paradoxical, the fact is without the "drama" theatre needs to become more "dramaturgical", because there's an increasing need to address

the void left by that displacement of the central position of the text. Dramaturgy becomes then a much needed intervention in terms of structure, assessing and discussing the expressive potential and the articulation of the more or less numerous artistic means used in any performative creation.

Allow me now to raise the curtain – this historical expression of a certain idea of theatre, like our colleague Georges Banu has so stimulatingly explored in one of his most captivating books –, inviting you now, as if in an illustrated epilogue, to look very briefly at some other more varied images that hopefully will capture, in a still and silent way, the work developed by some Portuguese contemporary theatre practitioners.

A good example of a Portuguese theatre director that emerged just after our revolution in 1974 is **Ricardo Pais**, perhaps the most consistently questioning practitioner of his generation and the one that has had a more troubled relation with texts and their role in the construction of *mise en scène*. Back in 1988 he created one of the most extraordinary theatre experiences I've ever had the privilege of attending to out of the very fragmented poetic material that the Portuguese modernist poet Fernando Pessoa had left on the myth of Faust: the production was adequately titled ***Faust. Fernando. Fragments***. That was a remarkable example of stage or scenic dramaturgy being capable to overcome the almost inform nature of the textual material. More recently, in 2002, he directed a daring stage rewriting of Shakespeare's ***Hamlet***, titled ***one Hamlet more***, using video live projections to enhance the audience's intimacy with the troubled nature of the varied issues at stake in that play. And only last year, he combined Alfred Jarry's ***King Ubu*** with visual and musical motives inspired on a popular and almost kitschy idea of Portugal to create a proposal of extraordinary ironic power.

A quite different practice has been the one developed by a Lisbon theatre company, **Cão Solteiro** – in English “a dog that is single” – in collaboration with the director **Nuno Carinhas** in the exploration of poetic notions closer at the same to the universe of the visual arts and the theatre. The production inspired by the work and the writings of the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, called in Portuguese ***Aguantar*** – a wordplay on a verb that means something like “to hold on” –, is a remarkable example of the traditional means of theatre being used for an exercise that is out of all the constrictions of narrative and dialogue, simultaneously capable of drawing on the more contemporary logic of the “installation” or of the performative act.

A very good example among us of the “deconstructive” tendency I mentioned a bit earlier would be work of a theatre company, created in 1995, under the name of **Teatro**

**Praga**, which is intended to mean “Plague”: the productions they have presented between 2002 and 2003 based on Noel Coward’s *Private Lives* or Turgueniev’s *A Month in the Country* still revealed the massive influence of the Belgian company TG Stan, but they also very eloquently introduced in the Portuguese scene a much needed playful questioning of the formulae, models and conventions of theatrical representation. In their best works, again, it is the ensemble and the variety of the, frequently, surprising stage actions that shows itself capable of building a dramaturgy full of new perceptions on the fictional realities they both bring on to the stage and subvert.

A totally different situation, quite new in the Portuguese scene, is the powerful work developed by **Circolando**, another young company that has been trying to merge the different techniques of the circus and of puppetry with those of the traditional theatre. In this recent work, *Cavaterra* – something like “digging the earth” – inspired by the hard life of old Portuguese miners, words are not even used to convey to us lyrical expressions of both the hardship and the daily companionship of this ancient activity. Like it happens in dance, dramaturgy here is particularly important, because there are no words to give us more stable indications of the emotions and experiences at stake. This is an extraordinary example of scenic poetry at its most expressive possibilities.

A last and more problematic example is the one offered by a young actor, **Rogério Nuno Costa**, who has been exploring a project called *I’m going to your house*: as the title clearly suggests, it’s him who brings “theatre” to someone’s home, invading the privacy of his audience and inviting that same necessarily reduced audience to follow a given set of procedures. This is theatre as a performative act, using some of the concepts and strategies of site-specific art, and exploring the unpredictable nature of his audiences’ surroundings to interact with. Again, what we have in here is a plan based on the subversion of the conventional models of representation. Again, it all comes back to the way experiences are organized and the way we look at them. Let’s just hope we’ll be able to open the door to them, even if cautiously, instead of simply peering through the hole...

### Works cited

- Counsell, Colin (1996), *Signs of Performance: An Introduction to Twentieth-Century Theatre*, London & New York, Routledge, 1996.
- Dort, Bernard (1995), “Le texte et la scène: Pour une nouvelle alliance” [1984], in *Le jeu de théâtre: Le spectateur en dialogue*, Paris, P.O.L., pp. 243-275.
- Fortier, Mark (1997), *Theory/Theatre: An Introduction*, London & New York, Routledge.
- Lehman, Hans-Thies (2002), *Le Théâtre postdramatique*, trad. Philippe-Henri Ledru, Paris, L’Arche.



- Pavis, Patrice (1992), "From Page to Stage: A Difficult Birth", in *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*, trans. Loren Kruger, London & New York, Routledge, pp. 24-47.
- – (1996), *L'analyse des spectacles*, Paris, Nathan.
- Picon-Vallin, Béatrice (1998), "Hybridation spatiale, registres de présence", in Béatrice Picon-Vallin (dir.), *Les écrans sur la scène: Tentations et résistances de la scène face aux images*, Lausanne, l'Âge d'Homme, pp. 9-35.
- – (2001), "La mise en scène: vision et images", in Béatrice Picon-Vallin (org.), *La scène et les images*, Les voies de la création théâtrale, 21, Paris, CNRS Éditions, pp. 11-31.
- Sarrazac, Jean-Pierre (dir.) (2001), *Poétique du drame moderne et contemporain: Lexique d'une recherche*, Études Théâtrales, n.º 22.
- – (2002), *O Futuro do Drama*, trad. Alexandra Moreira da Silva, Porto, Campo das Letras.
- Szondi, Peter (2001), *Teoria do Drama Moderno (1880-1950)*, trad. Luiz Sérgio Répa, São Paulo, Cosac & Naify Edições.

## **For Seoul: IATC Congress**

**John Elsom**

### The Way Ahead

I should warn you that there is more than a touch of irony about my title. I'm sorry. I can't help it. I'm English from a certain generation and irony was our native language – but not any longer, as I shall explain. I have attended so many conferences with the title of “The Way Ahead”, or something similar, and they have often been alarmingly futuristic or defiantly backward looking – and often both. That is the great advantage of the future: it is like an inkblot. You can see almost anything into it.

Last year, I was with Pavis and others at a meeting in Aberystwyth in Wales, staged by Richard Gough's excellent Centre for Performance Research, which was titled “Towards Tomorrow”. I have rarely been at a more nostalgic gathering in my life. Apart from the fact that it was in Wales, like Ireland, “a land of memories”, its centrepiece was a retrospective of Richard's career. It's always comforting to have a future that you can look back upon.

Many conferences about the future of the theatre start with the ancient Greeks - and where did we all go wrong? - but not all. Some are determined to be futuristic. In London, as in other cosmopolitan cities, it can be hard to escape from those large hotel suites where architects and planners hibernate for much of the year to produce their models of new skylines in the spring, rather like fashion houses. In Hong Kong, there has been much talk about the West Kowloon Cultural District, which is to be built on reclaimed land. It claims to be the largest arts development project in the world with three new theatres, an amphitheatre, seating ten thousand people, and several unplanned spaces for happenings. It will be many times larger than our ill-fated Millennium Dome in London, but that's progress.

Norman Foster, the architect who designed one proposal for West Kowloon, plans to cover this whole district, which includes shopping arcades and towers blocks, in a canopy – to keep out the raw elements of the sun and the rain, and to prevent the smells of humanity from polluting the atmosphere. It will be, according to its mission statement, a “model for a sustainable, socio-economic, cultural, eco-system”.

This may need some translation. It will be an eco-system, because the climate under the canopy will be strictly controlled. It will be “sustainable” in socio-economic terms, because there will be offices and shops to employ the workers, who provide the money, to support the cultural events, to attract the workers, to fill the offices, and so on. The main theatres, subsidised, will present companies of the highest international standard – and we, as critics, can all provide lists as to which these might be - but, at the other end of the scale, there will be spaces for unsubsidised, community groups - so that’s all right.

The Millennium Dome was also supposed to have theatre and culture at its core in the shape of an aerial ballet, depicting the struggle between Good and Evil. Good won. Something else connected the Dome with West Kowloon’s Cultural District. They both had mission statements. “For centuries,” it ran, “the Dome has been the architecture of reverence and awe and Greenwich’s Dome will be the biggest of them all”. It was in visual competition with St. Paul’s Cathedral across the river, that great symbol of the Christian Enlightenment, and, like two boys in a playground, it claimed that “mine is bigger than yours”, but bigger in what? Size? Vision? Vanity?

Or perhaps it was just bigger in confidence. It justified this claim by pointing out that, in the past, when a Millennium came along, the people were so ignorant that they feared that the world might end, but now “in a more confident age, we face a future that we can and must control”. Those were its words, written in 1999, about two years before 9/11, four years

before the illegal invasion of Iraq, months before it was even known what the Dome itself might contain - and without a trace of irony.

When they were written, only eight years ago, the country was basking in the glow of New Labour's election victory in 1997, a landslide victory, which now seems to have come from a remotely distant age. In some quarters, it was considered to be unpatriotic to question Tony Blair's project, and the promise of honest government and national renewal that came with it. Irony was out of fashion. Peter Mandelson, the Minister for the Dome and Blair's close colleague, denounced the Dome's sceptics as if they were the scum of the earth. It was meant to be an icon, the World according to New Labour, showing the glories of science and technology, how the market works, and what makes us laugh, and cry. The whole caboodle!

The way ahead again! And yet no sceptic would have been cynical enough to predict its most probable future- as a giant casino on a desolate stretch of land, from which the poison from a disused chemical factory has not been fully removed. But nobody can pull it down, because it is said to be an "iconic" building; and the fact that this is still the opinion of the Deputy Prime Minister indicates what I mean by the loss of irony! But the greater loss is that the British electorate still seems to see no irony.

I have a secret addiction. I read political manifestos. I have a private collection of them, guiltily hidden from the eyes of the family, pocketbook orgies of bile, vanity and promises, promises. *The Blair Revolution*, written by Peter Mandelson and Roger Liddle, is a good example. One of the excuses for having such a library is that it helps you to track the history of the propaganda. In the case of New Labour, the thinking came from several sources: Christian socialism, sociology and from a large number of big mad books that were published in the West in the 1990s, at the end of the Cold War, such as Fukiyama's *The End of History* and Samuel Huntingdon's *The Clash of Civilizations*. The Dome was a theme park version of this visionary twaddle.

These books were big, in that they contained a lot of pages, and bigger in their ambitions. They were building the New World Order, no less, and had the statistics to prove it. They contained a vast range of data from every part of the world, but if these facts connected with an area of which you had personal knowledge, they might seem well informed, but still curiously out of touch. It was as if all this information, masses of it, had been gathered from browsing the Web. Was it accurate to say that China and India *really* the world's new economic Power Houses, when so many of their citizens were struggling to survive?

They shared the same Modernist beliefs – in measurement systems, in science, in “objectivity” as opposed to “subjectivity”, which was considered be a lesser state of mind, and in evolutionary progress, in which Western liberal democracy, according to Fukiyama, would triumph over other systems of government. We sometimes believe that we are living in a post-modernist age, and some of us may, but Anthony Giddens, Blair's *guru*, may have been closer to the mark when he wrote that we really live in an age of High Modernity, where world governments take the assumptions of Modernity for granted. We don't question them. It's waste of time. He described High Modernity as a Juggernaut, an irresistible drive towards the future, and we either climb aboard or get crushed beneath its tank-like caterpillar treads. There's no arguing with it.

High Modernity has no sense of irony. It may like satire, mischievous pranks or the ambiguities of cross-dressing; but true irony implies a social complicity. Satire ridicules the foolish: irony cross-examines the intelligent. We know that our friends will not take everything that we say at its face value. Irony is often hard to translate, because the meaning does not lie in the strict dictionary definition of words, but in the social context in which they are spoken. It thrives in fairly small groups of people, where you can read the body language, catch the intonations of the voice and take part in the improvised tennis match that takes place

between the speakers and the listeners. This kind of intimacy troubles High Modernity. It undermines its faith in the precise meaning of words. It elevates subjectivity above objectivity; and confuses fact with intuition. It comes over badly on television as sarcasm or as the jargon of the in-set.

But the most worrying thought, for High Modernists as for the High Priests in any other religion, is that perhaps people can communicate in no other way. Remove irony and the social context, and you are left not so much with a lesser language but with a kind of instruction manual that you can obey but not question - a one way, not a two way, process. Just as you can never question it, so you can never fully agree with it. You cannot show your approval of something that has been said by clapping, laughing or listening more carefully. This makes life more difficult for the speaker as well as the listener, because he/she does not know what the audience has understood – which leads to exaggeration, hyperbole and the use of statistics as if they were a kind of battering ram on the doors of ignorance and indifference.

I don't want to moralise. I don't want solemnly to point out the dangers of this "mass-speak" – speaking to the masses but not the individual – in terms of alienation or something like that. My aims are more modest. I want to understand things better. I want to know why stuff happens. I still do not know what is meant by the War against Terror. I thought I knew what was at stake during the Cold War. My parents thought that they understood what was meant by the War against fascism. There were issues at stake. There were questions to be addressed.

But the question that is presented to us in the War Against Terror is whether we want to be blown up in tower blocks and metros, and the answer has to be "No", but it's not the sort of question that you need to ask. I still do not understand why in a supposedly information-rich age, it took us so long to find out that there were no Weapons of Mass Destruction and why our Prime Minister was so inadequately cross-examined at the time. It was as if our

defence mechanisms against lying and cheating had collapsed. As a nation, we sat there, our mouths dumbly open, while we were being told that we could be bombed by WMD within forty-five minutes... and irony was nowhere.

But what has all this to do with the theatre? The theatre was a place, where, as a child, I learnt about the power of irony, from the beginning, in family pantomimes. “Oh, no it wasn’t!” from the stage, “Oh yes it was!” from the house. We learnt how to check the probability of what was said on the stage from our experience of real life; and we knew, since these were actors, that we could not take what they said at its face value. We did not need a Bertolt Brecht to explain the Estrangement Effect to us. It was a natural part of the theatre-going experience. Shakespeare wrote with layers upon layers of irony. Who is being teased and exposed in *The Taming of the Shrew*? Katherine, Bianca, Petruchio or Christopher Sly? Even music hall comics knew about irony, which is why someone like the late Max Wall suited the plays of Sam Beckett.

Irony has been the stock-in-trade of British dramatists from John Skelton to Tom Stoppard. It is sometimes called “subversive”, but that is not a good description. It is only subversive, if you want to believe in the absolute authority of the text, but it would be better to say that irony opens out the text to multiple interpretations, so that through an accumulation of possibilities, we can begin to sort out the probable from the merely fanciful; and start to ask better questions. Form is the guiding hand in these deliberations – narrative, syntax, the juxtaposition of ideas, and music. We can do nothing without form and the structure of the English language once favoured irony.

One British critic, Coleridge, described the art of literature as that of inducing “a willing suspension of disbelief”, which makes it sound like a drug. In the case of the theatre, the opposite may be more truthful. We start out with a “willing suspension of belief” and are drawn towards faith, because there is no other alternative. It may be no coincidence that the

most ironic play of all, filled with doubts and ambiguities, is the world's most famous play, "Hamlet". We know that what we are seeing is not real life and nothing that happens on the stage is to be taken literally. Because the social limits of what is true and what is false have not been marked out, so we can explore the options and decide what would be the right thing to do - in short, the way ahead.

I do not necessarily mean religious faith but rather all those assumptions that we have to make, if we are to continue living in relative peace with each other – and on a fragile planet. We call them assumptions because many of them are un-provable; but we need to believe in such things as justice and fair play, because otherwise our societies would fall apart. The ancient Greeks called them myths. But how do we learn about such abstractions except through making models? And questioning those models, and double-questioning them, until what filters through these layers of irony is something that we can all accept, a communal faith, a myth.

This is what I call the "myth-making process". The theatre is part of it and I hope that you will not make too much fun of me if I say with conviction (but also with a dollop of irony) that it is essential to what we call "liberal democracy". If we accept what our leaders say, and just do what they tell us, we are not living in a democracy, but in a Modernist Management System, under the heading of Human Resources. And yet I agree that we should live in a responsible way, and not break too many windows, which means that we should be orderly in our dissent, and act out our disagreements, before taking to the streets. The theatre is an orderly compromise, a solution.

But I have to admit that if I were to say something like this in modern Britain, it would sound ridiculous. "The theatre? Essential to democracy? What rubbish!" The theatre is entertainment, something to bundle with casinos, football and licensing hours in our Department of Culture, Media and Sport. To those without irony, all fiction is mere



entertainment and there is no other truth than fact; and we in Britain seem to have forgotten the lesson that our forefathers drilled into us. Even objectivity is a myth. There are no facts without prior assumptions.

Of course, I do not wish to suggest that the theatre is the only place where the myth-making process goes on; or that every form of theatre relies as much upon irony as the theatre with which I first became friendly, and drew me into its arms. Indeed, some kinds of theatre are little more than crowd control. In Britain, as in other parts of Europe, there is the disparity between the grand theatres and the little ones, often with very little in between. Both can be equally intimidating. In the grand theatres, you can be blasted out of your seats by the amplification, the spectacle, the stars, the hype and the expense of it all. Even classic repertoire can be a tyranny. “This is Culture”, it proclaims, “Trust no imitations!” “In war,” ran the poster for Peter Stein’s “Troilus and Cressida”, a production in ghastly good taste at the Edinburgh Festival, which went on to the RSC’s Complete Works of William Shakespeare at Stratford, “there are no winners!” Well, yes, perhaps, but watch the deathly lack of irony!

But little theatres can also be daunting. There is no room to escape. If an actor tells you at close quarters that eating people is wrong, you can’t back away and say, “Well, perhaps under some circumstances...” You have to agree or stand up and fight. And the poverty of these places may also be daunting. You don’t want to offend those who have gone to such lengths to amuse. Some stand-up comics are so unfunny that they thrive on the way in which people laugh out of sheer embarrassment.

In my ideal theatre, the audience has space, by which I do not simply mean more legroom, although that is desirable too. Rather, I mean a space to think, a space to occupy, a private territory from which you can observe and exchange glances with your friends and neighbours, and actors on the stage. Cramped seats in huge theatres are not only uncomfortable: they confine the mind. The play emerges from the way in which thoughts are

exchanged through the medium of a performance. Anything less is mere television, a video game or, worse, a political rally.

And so I am breaking the code of the critics. I am here under false pretences, because I have already started to dabble in a small way in theatre management and production, and am impatient to launch a new theatre, a dinner theatre in Bucharest. And for me that is the way ahead. I don't know where it will lead, but I know how it will start, and what it should look like, and the kind of plays that it will present. It is a personal gamble, but what is the alternative?

Our friend in the IATC, Ramamoorthi Parasuram, once told me that critics have a special flower, the lotus, because the lotus floats on the top of the water and never gets wet. It is very beautiful, like a delicate piece of ceramic. You cannot even see the veins that bring the life and colour to its petals. We know what perfection is like, we critics. We know how it has been done in the past.

But I am too old for perfection. I want to have irony and conspiracy. I want to have audiences that can think for themselves.

I want to get wet.

\*

They might differ in their opinions, but share the same assumptions, or myths, for the ancient word, *mythos*, from which the modern word, myth, is derived, meant an un-provable assumption or revelation, not something that was necessarily false or untrue. The myths that they shared were those of Modernity: in measurement systems, the separation of objectivity from subjectivity, and evolution - not to mention all those beliefs and faiths, which came from them, such as in democracy, the free market and Progress.

## COULD THEATRE CRITICISM BE “POST-DRAMATIC”?

(a deliberately provocative view-point  
on the role of definitions)

Kalina Stefanova, Ph.D.

### *In defense of theatre-makers*

I fully understand the vast majority of theatre-makers who want to free themselves from critical definitions. The most obvious reason they have is that definitions are generally constricting—they simply “feel tight”. What’s more, definitions can be like uniforms—and how could we expect that a great director, for instance, would settle for being simply, say, “a post-modernist”, when there are so many others labeled in the same way?! Then, definitions—especially when they consist of one or two words—tend to be quite flat, that is, strikingly incongruous with the three-dimensional nature of theatre.

Above all, though, I’m ready to get into the shoes of theatre-makers for one reason which is usually not pointed out. And it’s not pointed out because it doesn’t belong to the sphere of rationality, therefore it’s quite vulnerable. Yet, I believe, it underlies—consciously or subconsciously—theatre-makers’ opposition against definitions. Here it is:

The unsuccessful shows, the middle-of-the-road ones and especially the temporary fashionable and the theatre with a limited-range appeal are more likely to be susceptible to definitions because they could easily be subjected to rational analysis. They, so to speak, remain on the stage and let us look at them and observe them cold-mindedly, as if through a showcase, and judge them with our brain only. Could the really great, first-class theatre be handled the same way too? This mysterious creature that dwells in the territory of the irrational and sneers at every attempt of theory to explain and put order in the realm of beauty and magic!? Of course, not! Because the really great Theatre never remains just on stage. It uses the stage as a springboard, in order to reach out over the lime-lights and kiss the Audience and become one with it and then, when the show is over, it leaves with the Audience into the night. And what this great Theatre— and who would not like to count for being one of its creators?!—want from us, critics, is to catch these moments of happiness and preserve their three-dimensionality on a two-dimensional piece of paper. Which, sure, can not be done merely through definitions.

In other words, since theatre on the whole depends on, and fulfils itself through, the rapport between the stage and the hall, it’s like in love: when things do not work, it’s much easier to be definite about why is that. (No wonder contemporary theory is more interested in that kind of art where harmony doesn’t reign supreme: disharmony propitiates dissection and deconstruction. It’s much easier to analyze disharmony.) Whereas it’s next to impossible to fully define why we do love someone. The mystery of the miracle—both of love and of the theatre—can be described but not pinned down by definitions.

Not only am I by the side of theatre-makers in their resistance to being labeled. I’d even go so far as saying that the fascination of part of critics with theory has gone to such an extreme that it has created a whole phenomenon:

## *Theory-VS-Theatre*

Arthur Miller had a very interesting and quite famous view-point on what academic criticism meant for the development of the theatre in the '60s of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. Namely: academic criticism took away the breathless quality of criticism, brought to it pretension, and all that backfired to theatre itself. Moreover, "the academic critics, he said, suspected popular theatre while at the same time they wanted to be part of it. It was very ironical. A few of them wanted to be directors, even actors, writers. So critics came to be in competition with the artist for public recognition. On the whole, it was bad for the theatre."<sup>17</sup>

Howard Kissel, the long-time *New York Daily News* critic, is in the same line: "During the '60s, when there was a lot of experimental garbage, he says, the audience was encouraged to see this or that because it would broaden or instruct them... Mainly these plays bored them and they stopped going to the theatre."<sup>18</sup> Kissel says that "we are still living with the legacy of that criticism".<sup>19</sup> I'd add that this legacy has been considerably "enriched" over the course of the next decades till nowadays exactly due to the characteristic disdain of academic criticism towards popular theatre and, at the same time, the unconditional backing-up of theatre with a limited-range appeal—all of which has put many people off the theatre on the whole.

The impact of the Theory-VS-Theatre phenomenon is very clearly demonstrated in, and exercised via, education. A good example is Bulgaria. Students studying theatre studies and criticism there are generally taught that writing in a readable, accessible language is not up to the profession of the critic; accessibility is an attribute of the looked-down-upon "plebian" profession of journalism. They are taught all possible kinds of theory about analysis of the performance rather than how to communicate the theatre-experience to the audience. As a result of which many of them end up talking and writing about theatre in a kind of "foreign" language, full of terminology and appropriate only for the few specialized editions. Small wonder then that the daily papers have literally expelled criticism from their pages and that no publication has a theatre critic on staff as a theatre critic only. All that resulting in the fact that theatre is not reviewed on a regular basis as in the rest of the civilized world. (Of course, there are other factors behind this absurd situation too.) Anyway, it undoubtedly has its dire consequences on theatre itself: without criticism theatre is like a person living in a flat without a mirror; about his appearances he can judge only by what his beloved ones tell him; and we all know how the eyes of love could be sometimes blind!

You may say, "At least in Bulgaria you have a solid education for critics whereas in so many other countries, where critics make or break theatre, the problem is exactly the opposite: criticism lacks depth and critics do not possess profound knowledge of the theatre." And this is true. Yet, even in the US, where that kind of complaints are the loudest, oddly enough, it is again theory and its ubiquity that's partly at the bottom of the problem.

Here's what Michael Fiengold, the first-string critic of *Village Voice*, had to say in that respect, "... saddest of all are the youngsters who've been poisoned by the universities into thinking art is a theoretical exercise for the intelligentsia. Jonathan Kalb [a younger critic],

---

<sup>17</sup> "Who Calls the Shots on the New York Stages?", Kalina Stefanova-Peteva, Harwood Academic Publishers, 1993

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

who's very bright, is to me a classic example of a good theater mind ruined by academia. I just can't see what he writes as having anything to do with the reality of the art; to me it's dead from the outset and so irrelevant. The pedantry in our colleges has spoiled so many young artists and critics in the last few years that I've come to regard theory—any theory—as essentially totalitarian and inimical to art.”<sup>20</sup>

### ***Not a U Turn***

All that said, I'd like to underline that it would never cross my mind to deny that theory has had and has a very positive role too. There are great theoreticians of theatre and their contribution to the development of theatre studies has been immense. Without Stanislavsky, Grotowsky, and Peter Brook, for instance, theatre wouldn't have been the one we know today. And without critics-theoreticians, like Erik Bentley, for instance, our perception of the theatre would have been different—certainly poorer.

However, there's a huge difference between them and the likes, on the one hand, and those who just coin up new and new formulas while dissecting and labeling theatre, and also those who just transmit and paraphrase other people's theories and stop right there. That is the difference between real great theory and its pseudo-scientific substitute which is frequently used as a “screen” behind which there's no talent, neither a distinct own artistic face. This, I dare call it, “fake” theory has nothing to do with originality and creativity but just with memorizing.

The best encapsulation of that type of approach to culture belongs to Antoine St.-Exupery. “There's a pitiable notion of what culture is”, he says, “and this notion is based on memorizing formulas. Every bad student in maths knows all the formulas—more than Descartes and Pascal. Is he able to reach the same spiritual heights?... Life always makes formulas fall apart.”<sup>21</sup>

The same way as there's theory *and* theory—one which is a great point of departure and great equipment for the theatre journey, and another one which is a rather stifling factor, having nothing to do with life—there are also:

### ***Definitions and Definitions***

Which is to say that I may align with theatre-makers in their general opposition to definitions but I still think that it's our duty as critics to identify and name the new developments in the life of this oldest and yet ever-changing art—the theatre. (And this is not a U turn either!) The question is how we do that. I believe that if we do it in a, so to speak, “closed language”, understandable and of interest to few people only, we can hardly do any great service to the theatre. Because then we assume a position of an elite, of the “initiated few”, which is at odds with the innate nature of theatre as the most democratic art form.

What is this “other” type of definitions then?

---

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> “Terre des homes” and “Pilote de guerre” Antoine De Saint-Exupery, Gallimard

“Descriptions are more accurate than definitions,” says Matti Linnavuori<sup>22</sup>, our Finnish colleague, and I think he zeroes in on the best way we as critics could be helpful to the theatre. Namely: when we manage to define tendencies, shows, artists’ body of work, etc. via descriptions.

Because by employing description we invite life, we use its language and build bridges between what’s on stage and what’s outside of the theatre halls. Which means that we create conditions for communication, not for oppositions—communications between life and theatre. Finally, by employing description we also create images. And without images there’s no memory. Memory, on the other hand, too is part of communication—between the past, the present and the future. And criticism is the memory of theatre. It could become so, though, when it speaks the language of life and defines theatre by describing it. As British critic Irving Wardle very accurately puts it: “If criticism survives at all it will be for the descriptive content.”<sup>23</sup>

“This doesn’t mean abandoning argument, continues Wardle. Description only comes to life when it is being used to make a point... When fact and comment coincide, words acquire power. They become thicker than the ink on the page.”<sup>24</sup>

Here are two brilliant examples of that kind of “descriptive definitions”:

William Hazlit on actors and acting: “Players are ‘the abstract and brief chronicles of the time’; the motley representatives of human nature. They are the only honest hypocrites. Their life is a voluntary dream; a studied madness. The height of their ambition is to be *beside themselves*. Today kings, tomorrow beggars, it is only when they are themselves that they are nothing. Made up of mimic laughter and tears, passing from the extremes of joy and woe at the prompter’s call, they wear the livery of other men’s fortunes; their very thoughts are not their own. They are, as it were, train-bearers in the pageant of life; and hold a glass up to humanity; frailer than itself. We see ourselves at second-hand in them: they show us all that we are, all that we wish to be, and all that we dread to be. The stage is an epitome, a bettered likeness of the world, with the dull part left out.. What brings the resemblance nearer is that, as *they* imitate us, we, in our turn, imitate them. How many fine gentlemen do we owe to the stage? How many romantic lovers are mere Romeos in masquerade! How many soft bosoms have heaved with Juliet’s sighs! They teach us when to laugh and when to weep, when to love and when to hate, upon principle and with a good grace! Whenever there’s a playhouse, the world will not go on amiss.”<sup>25</sup>

Kenneth Tynan on *Waiting for Godot*: “[It] frankly jettisons everything by which we recognize theatre. It arrives at the custom-house, as it were, with no luggage, no passport, and nothing to declare; yet it gets through, as might a pilgrim from Marc. It does this, I believe, by appealing to a definition of drama much more fundamental than any in the books. A play, it asserts and proves, is basically a means of spending two hours in the dark without being bored.”<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> “Arrogance Abroad”, Matti Linnavuori, “National Theatres and the Nationalistic Theatre”, Symposium 2006, Sterijno Pozorje Festival, Serbia

<sup>23</sup> “Theatre Criticism” Irving Wardle, Routledge, 1992

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> “Drama Criticism: Developments since Ibsen”, ed. Arnold P.Hinchliffe, Macmillan, 1979

<sup>26</sup> “View of the English Stage”, Kenneth Tynan, Paladin, 1976

Hardly is it disputable, I think, that the above two definitions, and the likes, are not only precise, but they also provoke excitement, they inspire, they ignite the imagination, finally, they manage to communicate with both theatre-makers and the audience what they are saying. There's beauty in them along with precision. There's creativity.

Being all that, they are a brilliant proof that criticism could be an art form in its own right. Because writing about theatre is not only an intellectual endeavor, it's an endeavor of the soul and the spirit as well, as theatre itself. By saying "No trespassing" to emotions, the other type of definitions—the strictly theoretical ones—dry up the knowledge of the theatre; what's more, they detach theatre from life. While descriptive definitions, when at their best, capture the life of the human spirit and communicate it to the audience. And isn't that what great theatre is all about?!

### ***Do New Theatricalities Necessarily Need New Criticism?***

Recently I read the following statement: "... new drama requires new critique—we need to break free from the critique that observes and evaluates productions and create a new type of critics—participators, interpreters and organizers, who create the play together with the actors."<sup>27</sup> The author, Ana Vujanovic, was writing about a tendency in the contemporary Serbian drama and the reception of its productions. However, what she was saying in a way reminded me of the campaigns demanding that gay drama be covered by gay critics, feminist plays by feminist critics, black theatre by black critics, etc. Having had an extensive professional experience in South Africa, I'm very well aware of how sensitive these issues could be. Yet, I think, that the best answer to these campaigns belongs to none other but an African-American playwright, the late August Wilson:

"...since I'm a black playwright, he said, black critics feel, 'I don't care if he's good or bad, I'm going to give him a good review.' That doesn't serve anyone. You can read in the black newspapers about every black play I've ever seen, 'It's the greatest thing in the world!' That's not going to help the playwright. Someone needs to say, 'You didn't develop your characters. Go back and try again!' Unless you have done that, that playwright will never grow as a playwright, because he thinks he's already where he wants to go...[This] lowers the common denominator!"<sup>28</sup>

Likewise, what the new theatricalities need in the first place, I think, is honest criticism. Criticism that tells their creators very frankly whether what they have done has substance and is of merit, whether it is relevant to the world we live in, and if it's relevant only to a fraction of the audience, which this fraction is and why the rest of the audience can or can not be expected to get interested. Part of this criticism's honesty, I believe, is to make a distinction between the new—that is, what profoundly enriches theatre and enhances its borders—and the fashionable; and to be bold enough to say when the "new clothes of the emperor" are just an unfulfilled ambition or a mere pretension, and he's simply naked.

I'm afraid, more and more we have the propensity of diluting our critical judgment, of being rather vague in our evaluation of what we see, or of easily congratulating something or

---

<sup>27</sup> "Stageless Drama" Ana Vujanovic, in "Scena", English issue 19

<sup>28</sup> "Who Calls the Shots on the New York Stages?" Kalina Stefanova-Peteva, Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000

somebody on being genius, when there's not so much substance behind the façade of that something or somebody.

I think all this is a result of two phenomena. First, the fact that our world is driven largely by the myth of youth and the constant demands of fashion to always be “up to date”, which in the end of the day encourage disposability of everything, human beings and basic codes of humanity including. Second, there's the devastating impact of political correctness on our lives on the whole and particularly on us as critics. (Frankly, having lived my first 27 years before 1989 in Eastern Europe, I still can not believe my eyes when I encounter this phenomenon in any of its expressions—it's like a *deja-vu*!).

The British critic Alastair Macaulay very precisely summarizes this problem of criticism and its relation to society: “I sometimes suspect, he says, that we are moving into the next dark age. Our cultural criteria are getting blurred in all kinds of ways. Classicism, which flourished up to Stravinsky and Balanchine, has become an endangered species. New forms of cultural Stalinism—notably, political correctness—prevail. Our sense of humanity and our sense of rhythm are getting coarse... I think culture's at stake. If you don't stick up for what you think is a part of civilization, barbarism of one form or another will creep in... And when I look at some ironic post-modern productions, I feel the next dark age has already begun.”<sup>29</sup>

Apart from total honesty and integrity, there's a second thing which the really new theatricalities need from us, critics. And I think, it's not so much that we speak in a new criticism's language, as it's usually implied, but that we master the new languages these new theatricalities talk in and manage to transmit them to the audience in the language of the audience. Because ours is, so to speak, a “translator's job”. Criticism translates the different languages of theatre into the language of life. We have to learn and be fluent in the new languages that theatre invents all the time but our “mother language” is the language of our readers. It's in that language that we have to bring to life the new faces of the theatre and not only make them recognizable and understandable, but also appealing to the audiences.

Theatre has a lot of means of expression and constantly employs more and newer ones. Criticism's only means of expression remains the words. It can never be post-textual—that's for sure. And, I believe, it's not a question of being old or new but of talking via words woven in a talented and artistic way—as opposed to boring and uninspiring—in order for criticism to live up to the Theatre's infinite inventiveness. Does Kenneth Tynan words of the above text sound old? Or Hazlit's—which were written in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century? Not to me!

It's that kind of criticism that the creators of the distinct new theatricalities deserve. The likes of the Latvian director Alvis Hermanis, for instance, who managed, without having his actors utter a single word in his show *Long Life*, to create an extraordinary powerful outcry against the tacit “genocide” of old people which has been carried out in several Eastern European countries in the last decade. Or the young Hungarian director Arpad Schilling whose *Black Land*—another piece of very bold political theatre—sounds like an editorial written by a rap singer with a hilarious sense of humor and a not so seemly language, and yet produces in the end an utterly purifying effect. Or the Slovenian Tomi Yanejich, who, with the company of the Serbian National Theatre in Novi Sad, has recently created an amazing sample of a sensuous epic theatre—a real development of that trademark of Eastern European stages!—

---

<sup>29</sup> “Who Keeps the Score of the London Stages?”, Kalina Stefanova, Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000



theatre that soaks in us, as if we ourselves live it, and yet makes us feel like Gods having the world on our palm and following from up above the unfolding destinies of people. Or a dozen Bulgarian directors and actors who, in the middle of the '90s, created a new symbiosis of drama and puppetry, earlier than it became *the* fashion on Broadway, and managed to change the whole face of Bulgarian theatre. The list can go on and on.

These theatre-makers have risen the bar so high that we, critics, can not live up to it by responding to their works just with one-word or two-word definitions and with critical theories only, if we do want to make their wonderful new worlds part of the life of as many people as possible.

In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. George J. Nathan, the American arch-critic wrote: "Theatre criticism is an attempt to formulate the rules of behavior of this beloved, capricious, charming vagabond—the drama. Because the drama is an art form with a feather on its hat and with an ironic smile on its face; an art form that strolls unceremoniously along forbidden lawns and alleys, so that it could enter the hearts of those of us—children of the world—who'll never grow up."<sup>30</sup>

If we manage to define the new faces of the nowadays theatre in that kind of an extraordinary artistic prose—call it old-fashioned if you will—only then, I believe, we will be of really indispensable service to, and on a par with, the Theatre, our love.

---

<sup>30</sup> "The Critic and the Drama", George J. Nathan, 1922

**ABSTRACT/ Paper Extra congress Seoul**  
**Margareta Sörenson**

Theatre is permanently changing; so does the world

Going to the theatre 1806, 1906 and 2006 is not the same. Going to the theatre 1506, certainly not. Going to the theatre today in Stockholm, Sweden - where I come from - or Seoul, Korea or Johannesburg South Africa is not the same. Going to the theatre for the first time in your life being a child, quite different.

Trivial to point out, but necessary. Theatre always changed and still does, living close to the political or religious changes and conventions, quickly reflecting the interests of kings, courts or nations as well as wide audiences. The drama playwrights often formed an avantgarde, pushing forward in public burning questions on freedom, democracy, individual rights the meaning of our lives from Molière to Ibsen to Sarah Kane. The art form, the performing arts, embrace and have in a historical perspective always embraced a multidisciplinary tradition, a glimmering and fascinating toy box of music and pictures, opera and drama, dance and acrobats, shadowtheatre and projections and puppets. What we call cross-over theatre today, could also be seen as a basic characteristic of theatre since, at least, the ancient Greeks.

Sad to say, in this pattern of a kaleidoscopic artform, the least moving actor to be seen is, very often, the critic. When Isadora Duncan turned the concept of dance up side down and changed the attitude toward an exposed human body, the critics were suspicious. The audience came immediately to watch the sensation, the critics only gradually turned interested. The ambition of being critical, reflecting, sceptical could also can show to be a trap, where the critic is unable to see important new steps in the art form.

Change is not a moral quality, it is a fact

Theatre is an instantly quick artform, not only close to profound intellectual thinking but also to fashion, trends, the most superficial aspects as star cult, gossip, extravagance. Every new aspect of theatre, every change is not in itself good, beautiful, important, high quality. The audience might be thrilled by the sensation of having a famous star actor live in front of you, the critic is supposed to look a bit further. Is this artistically high quality? It is an impossible position to a critic to be for or against modernism as well as romanticism, psychological realism or post-modernism, new-circus or site specific happenings. The critic as an individual might prefer Strindberg to Ibsen, but he or she can not be against one of them or promoting the other.

The critic, with all capacity, knowledge, sensibility he or she can mobilise is there to describe, discuss and evaluate. The critic should, at least try to, follow the balance between tradition and renewal. The research being made on theatricality and the boundaries of theatre is also reflecting the climate within the university and scholar's world, where disciplines are crossing each other and ethnology, sociology and statistics is melting into the studies of the performing arts.

Media and the acceleration of change

Since the middle of the 19th century the printed press in the western world has looked similar to the tabloid or broad sheet newspapers we still see daily. Proportions has changed, but looking to theatre criticism the similarities between today and hundred years ago are

strucking. Very often rather short and journalistic texts, covering every public event locally or nationally. The international outlook is often impressing. The steam engine meant a lot to tour theatre companies as well as make journalists move to watch the world.

The fast speed change of the medias in the late 20th century took everyone by surprise, even the media managers, owners, technicians and, not the least, the journalists. As little as we knew around the 1990-ies about what the media situation would be in fifteen years, as little do we know now when we try to figure out what would happen with the web-site editions of daily papers, the new tv-stations of the daily paper, nowadays becoming one of the different editions of a media factory. The former national broadcasting system of radio and television, public service, is more and more questioned, and a spread of individual blogs are popping up.

To "cover" all public theatrical events is simply not possible. Cultural life is richer, more spread, more varied, more split into many more genres than it used to be for centuries. Music, cinema, television are all over all the time, theatre and performing art today is a thin slice of a big loaf and medias are, and has to be, selective. The general tempi in the medias is presto; printed medias compete with broadcasted and text are shorter, more personal, less judging more guiding.

#### Towards a new criticism

When we recently in the Swedish Association of critics were planning a seminar we wanted to give it the title - towards a new criticism. But when we overlooked the situation we realised that we still see and count the critics in the traditional medias and often are unaware of a parallell world of free papers, independent magazines, websites and blogs, commercial radio channels as well as criticism in weekly papers and other publications. A new criticism is already here, and it is normally performed by young critics. Most of the young theatre critics are women, normally they have long and qualified studies behind them in literature, theatre, art and journalism.

Looked upon this way you can see a flat structure of non prestige writers reaching wide audiences of readers. Prestige is still (for how long?) kept within the printed daily papers, even if the most prestigious names among the critics have difficulties to keep up with the new realities of theatre and new aspects of theatricaty. Theatre criticism, as other forms of criticism, always were a part of media and a genre of journalism. It still is. But both medias and the performing arts have changed quicker than the theatre critics; this is our problem.

**Ludmila PATLANJOGLU – Romania**

**President of the IATC – Romanian Section**

**FAUST DIRECTOR - BETWEEN „THE MOMENT“ AND THE NEW THEATRICALITY**

*„We now live in a state of chaos and plague and these are constantly producing art and play“* declared the Romanian director Silviu Purcarete. Phenomena like globalization, invasion of mass media, cloning, terrorism, obsession of Apocalypse determined the *theatricality* to be stronger. This fact led to the reborn power of the directing. In the hypostasis of Faustus, the director followed by the „moment“ in order to find and master the world offers three models: the model of *remix* – the total deconstruction of the classical text and its transformation into a post modern script, mainly visual; the model *royal court* – the design of the performance in terms of theatre team building; and the model *theatre doc* – the lecture of the every day life, conflicts and human behaviour of the contemporary mankind viewed in a theatrical key.

In the nowadays Romanian theatre we find these three models having major and solid results besides other models which are superficial, confusing, baffling. From the category of the successful ones I would like to mention some examples of national and international value which entered in a dialogue with the theatre of the world. The director and the school of stage directing have a privileged place within the Romanian culture and this has been noticed by the masters like Giorgio Strehler (*„The Romanian theatre is especially a directing theatre“*), Antoine Vitez (*„You have a strong directing school“*), Peter Brook (*„The Romanian directing has got a privileged place in the Romanian Theatre.“*)

The tradition, the tours, the trophies, the spectacular performances are to give confirmation to the appreciations of these patriarchs of the theatre. Even after the fall of the Wall, after '89, the noble blazon of recognition remained the directing. Today, the Romanian theatre offered a core of personalities, where four generations of directors from the country and outside it, meet and communicate.

The most brilliant director of the '80th generation, **Silviu Purcărete**, imposed his signature by transforming the Theatre „Radu Stanca“ of Sibiu in a *Royal Court* of the Romanian theatre. After the experience of the National Theatre of Craiova where he created scenic masterpieces like: *Ubu Rex With Scenes of Macbeth*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Phaedra*, *The Danaïdes*, *Orestia* – which authorised him as a big stage director „a very strong and original personality within the family of the big European directors“ – as it appears in the international press), **Purcărete** achieved two anthological settings in the hypostasis of Director-Dramaturge. In *Pilaffs and Mule Perfume* exercises on texts from the book of *One Thousand and One Nights* illustrates at its best the searching and the nature of the *new theatricality*. His preference for an archetypal theatre leads him towards „an excessive visualisation which helps me to express myself the best. I think it is a way of perceiving the world“ – as the artist shows. Sherezada's stories, full of violent and delicate sensations, rudeness and refinement inspire him with a saga about our time disturbed by concerns and crises. The picaresque elements, the opulent feasts, and the colossal fabulous, the free and licentious manners make up a chaotically setting, fruit of a feverish fantasy: „excessive travel without aim and without rigour, a travel of luxury and melancholia“, named expressively by the author. He proposes deliberately to maintain the contingent nature of the performance: „Like Sheherezada, I wanted to break the ongoing history and let pass a tale, a song, an image, a word, a poem. “ **Silviu Purcărete** builds a rich visual, acoustic and olfactive performance where food is prepared and we are attracted by luring smells of cooking. A donkey and two sheep are walking undisturbed. The theatrical means are very varied: farces, shadows, masks, videos, cinema, and circus: „we do not exclude any technique“ – declares the director. A world of flesh puppets with painted faces, violently outlined eyes and lips, tyrannically dominated by erotic and gastronomic phantoms. Finally, we are invited to a big feast where a young girl is brought on a tray which is garnished with pilaff and sausages devoured on the spot by the actors. **Silviu Purcărete** alternates the grace with the grotesque; he creates a dream full of games where the madness of the play abolishes spaces, intensifying the feelings. You feel the mysterious power of the theatre: the stage becomes mystery, religious ceremony, but also a factory of illusions. A style exercise where the director uses all the scenic means working on a script of which he is totally responsible. *Pantagruel's Sister in Law*, a co-production France-Germany-Romania-Hungary continues this experience illustrating its poetry. But this time his radicalism linked to the *new theatricality* is total. He inspired himself from Rabelais; he takes out motives from the author's writings without a previous script. The performance becomes a group creation

implying the actors, the scene designer, and the composer. „*A Rabelais without words*“ speaking about a monstrous vitality, a vampirical way of living. The Realistic signs (reminding the naturalism) have an explosive energy in this oniric, poetical performance – getting out of another time, but still so much contemporary, speaking about our every day dreams and nightmares. Visual and acoustic seduction, rich arsenal: dance, singing, multimedia, set of table linen and forks of one meter length, giant pots, a bell – are some of the ingredients of this performance which ends with a chocking image: human bread devoured by the characters. The searching of the new forms is ingenuously made assuming the risk, but permanently taking into consideration the polymorph actor’s resources. The joy of inventing is performing freely, with vigour and rigour.

The preference for classical literature where he is searching the deep reality of the mankind is to be found also at **Radu Afrim** – „*the terrible child of the young directing generation*“. His performances break conventions provoking the critics and the audience by an insolate non-convention in using the theatrical language. Fan of the *remix* technique, he is offered two original settings: *Algae (Bernarda’s House Remix)* after Lorca and *Three Sisters* after Chekhov, the last one presented to the participants at the IATC Congress in Bucharest (2003). **Afrim**’s vision determined polemical reactions. Famous critics leave after a few minutes the theatre hall and Michael Bellington contested it in **The Guardian**. This attitude produces a controversial debate pro-Afrim in the Romanian press, many Romanian and foreign critics participating at the Congress appreciating *the new theatricality* of the performance, important directors of international festivals inviting him to perform. **Afrim** brings on the stage „*an unusually free script*“ – as he says. In this re-adaptation of Chekhov – in his quality of director, script writer, scene designer and musical illustrator – **Afrim** is doing a „profanation“ of the Slavic soul as well as the famous characters’ feelings. In an austere space, coldly illuminated, the immediate reality, the pedestrian every day life creates chocking images. So, Irina wears trainers and a body on which is written „*I Love Moskba*“. The scene is invaded by a caricatured, sadist-masochist world driven by primary instincts and forcing back obsessions which shamelessly shows an excessive sexuality. From this suite the suicides Missis Vershinin doesn’t fail, she appears with a rope around the neck. The human suffering receives tunes of a buffoon requiem. Masters of this ceremony are the old Anfisa and the alcoholic doctor Tcebutikin – bizarre creatures, physically and psychologically degenerated, carrying a samovar used at the same time like a surprise box and a funeral pot for the sisters’ father.

**Radu Afrim** demystifies, he violently usurps the illusions and the ideals of the heroes. The tirade about the shiny future (*„in three hundred years the life on this earth will be unbelievable beautiful, mysterious“*) will turn into a talk-show moderated by Vershinin, an old and vulgar bachelor. In the show The Time is an unseen character, a malefic, funeral force floating over the people and things.

The representation begins with a surrealist image: Tchebutikin eating a watch, surrounded by pots and bottles which conserve the relics of the past, old photos got out from an ancient album of remembers. **Radu Afrim**'s setting has got a hallucinate visual dynamics. A game of intriguing, catching *puzzle* rigorously controlled. The autocratic spirit of the director is shining. The atrocious and macabre comedy of the Chekhovian characters stigmatised our time so confused, deprived of love and faith. For **Radu Afrim** and his partners, Chekhov is *„a colder author than the Devil“*. The end makes you trembling: for surviving, for defending themselves of the interior and exterior emptiness, the sisters wear gas masks and get dancing in a delirant dance. We leave the theatre hall chocked, followed by Chekhov's words: *„You live so ugly, Sir! “*

The *doc* model gave birth to a new very important group movement in a Romanian theatre: **dramAcum / dramNow**. *„We are tired to complain each other how bad, stiff and old fashioned one conceives, one writes, and one chooses a text for a theatre performance now. We ask ourselves and we want to find out from you how would have write Caragiale, Shakespeare, Tchekov a text after watching **Pulp Fiction** or **Todo sobre mi madre**. Ask yourself why, how and for whom do we need to write theatre now, and the answer comes from the best young drama writers, directors, scene designers, choreographers and musicians who work **Acum / Now**. Write a piece of theatre for a contest. We will produce the performance! “* This is the appeal of an exemplary dedicated to the Romanian nowadays dramaturgy, built up on two conceptions: *the relation Drama writer - Director and the Reality as a Source* owned by the Chair of Directing within the National University for Theatre and Cinema „I.L. Caragiale“ from Bucharest. Its initiators are students and graduates of this prestigious institution of artistic education: **Andreea Vălean, Gianina Cărbunariu, Radu Apostol, and Alexandru Berceanu**. *Spiritus Rector* of this group is university lecturer PhD. **Nicolae Manda**, who declared: *„dramAcum / DramNow are part of a today necessary working strategy in a school of arts. It aimed to develop the creativity throughout individual or collective projects assumed like artistic experiences, not like examination topics. As a start, the model has been the famous Royal Court whose activity is dedicated exclusively for almost*

*half a century to promote the contemporary English play and where Andreea Vălean, Gianina Cărbunariu attended courses.“*

Launched in January 2002, within colloquies in the press and on internet, the results of the project **dramAcum / dramNow** have been much appreciated. Hundreds of plays have been sent at the contest. The best ones have been selected and presented in performances – lecture or representations. In addition to the contest, **dramAcum / dramNow** developed also a program of translations with contemporary plays. The revelation was that the young Romanian authors found co-partners of their spirit on other parts of the world being of the same attitudes and having the same topics. The leaders of **dramAcum / dramNow**, top artists of the young stage directing, succeeded to impose themselves, their productions giving personality to some spaces of alternative theatre and initiating international cooperation programs.

This anxious and alarming group succeeded to promote him even on other meridians, in their texts and performances live the existentialist crises of Romania today and other western capitals. A recent example is **Gianina Cărbunariu**. Her text ***Stop the Tempo***, considered by the theatre critics like „*an identity mark of The Cool Generation*“, „*a generation of idles*“ has been successfully at the Biennale of Wiesbaden, Paris, Berlin, Dublin, New York. Heroes are three youngsters unhappy and alone, frustrated, belonging to the category of those transformed in productive and consummate machines. They meet in the Evil of a bar and are decided to shock a world stigmatized by the cross of lovenesness. By an act of „urban terrorism“ – the characters are cutting off the electricity in public spaces. It performances very close to the audience, in the dark, with a minimalist stage set: lanterns handled by actors, which flashes burn inquisitional the heroes and the audience's faces. The violence of the language is shocking in Romania and conquered the West and by the proposed *theatricality*, an intriguing manner of doing theatre „*centered on the voice, on the brutal word, on the interior dialogue, on the poetical insert which is covering the story and transcends the vulgar reality*“.

Gianina Cărbunariu recidivists with a new play, ***madybaby.edu***, elaborated in a scholarship at the Royal Court and represented successfully at the Biennale of Wiesbaden, in Romania and on several European stages from Berlin, Milan, Moscow, and Paris. The moral and physical misery, the ugliness has a metaphysical dimension. *The Director - Drama writer* uses creatively from the writing the means of video, altering the reality with the virtual. Archetypes of our time – the prostitute, the procurer, the administrator of a porno site – evolutes in a decomposed time. God is dead; the world is empty of sense and the man of



values in a performance which overwhelms the naturalism of the story by the directing creativity. The **Award of the Critics** given of the International Association of the Theatre Critics – Romanian Section to the **dramAcum / dramNow** was a sign of recognizing the value of these artists. These young directors are the ace of diamonds for the today's Romanian stage and for tomorrow, too.

The way towards the *new theatricality* is not without any danger of a theatre without traditions and spirit, of the danger of a language without feeling, without spirit especially when the logic of the modern world implies the total lack of sacredness in all our life, the brutal changing of the traditional relation with God and the world. As lot of his contemporaries, in order to obtain the power, Faust - Director sign sometimes a pact with Mefisto. Blind and overwhelmed by its time, he did not perceive the eternity. He wants to achieve his human condition, not to overpass it. A **S.O.S.** launched by the critic George Banu, fine expert of the contemporary theatrical phenomenon, who quoted: *„At the end of the '90 the appetite for revolt reappeared and the principle of disorder came again for capturing the spirit of the time and to transform the chaos into the essence of the modernity. The scene becomes a territory of a present without landmarks and borders. What is the solution: to register the stream of the epoch or to resist to it; to listen to the breath of the present or to move your eyes elsewhere? To adapt or to capitulate? These two positions how can one ally them, how can one save him?*

Faust, famous character of Goethe, discovers finally that what is important is that *„The Heaven and the Earth should be together“*. Theatre needs today a spiritual missionary. The faces of the new theatricality impose a theological reflection. Life as well as the Scene non-connected to God is deserts where the characters are lost. Their time is without eternity. Their existence is a pretext for evasions and exhibitionisms.

(Paper presented at The Extraordinary Congress of International Association of Theatre Critics - IATC, Seoul, Korea, October 21-25, 2006)

## The Body Ill at Ease in Post-War Japanese Theatre

Manabu Noda

29 October 2006

### 1. Introduction

In receiving the influence of the Western civilization, whether in the form of critical reception, enthusiastic absorption, or bric-a-brac appropriation, Japan has always felt a sort of uneasiness. In 20th century Japan, the process of modernization meant Westernization, and Japanese artists were amazed, overwhelmed, and enthusiastic when they encountered the Western theatre, or theatres. When it came to actually incorporating the influences into their own drama and theatre, however, there was always the sense that something was wrong. And that seems to me to be quite a natural feeling.

The case in point is Kaoru Osanai, who was born in 1881 and died in 1928, and during his lifetime led the modernization of theatre. Suppose you go back in time to 1924. You are an aspiring Japanese theatre artist, already recognized in your own country as one of the initiators of modernization in your field. You have visited Moscow and seen Chekhov performed by the Moscow Art Theatre, felt admiration for it, and wanted to do the same when you come back. In fact your admiration not only for Chekhov but also other European playwrights has gone so far as to make you declare that you will stage only non-Japanese plays despite the furore of anger from domestic theatre people. Anyway, you build a small theatre of the then state-of-the-art equipment in Tokyo after the disastrous earthquake, and go on to direct Chekhov. But your actors do not look like Russians. You have your actors wear Western costume, you have them wear wigs of different colours, but you still cannot help feeling uneasy with the way you perform Chekhov, Ibsen or Gorky. Voice, manners, behaviours, and so many other directly perceptible aspects of theatre tell you that the reproduction of the Moscow Art Theatre is impossible no matter how you may try to get close to it. I believe that was the case, even if only partially, for Osanai. Later, I will also examine his contemporary, Kunio Kishida, born in 1890 and died in 1954.

A sense of uneasiness, even incongruity, lingers on. First this paper will see the body ill at ease under the Koizumi administration (2001-06). Then we go back along the timeline to discuss the collective political sensibility and the erasure of political agency as is evinced in Minoru Betsuyaku's *Kowareta Fukei*, or 'The Broken Landscape' in 1976. Further back in time this paper will try to show the sense of unease over modernization in post-WWII Japan, focusing Kunio Kishida and the two faces of Japanese westernized ego. The order, therefore, is anti-chronological, starting from the beginning of this century, through the middle of the 1970s, to the period right after the war. After that I would like to discuss some of the cases in which physical intensity is reclaimed when West meets East, East meets East, and East meets West. In this final section I will examine Simon McBurney's *The Elephant Vanishes* (2003), and the three version of Hideki Noda's *Red Demon*.

### 2. The body ill at ease under the Koizumi administration

#### 2.1 The Koizumi Administration

The emaciated physical presence on the stage is symptomatic of Japan's status quo after its political right shift. The shift has become evident under the administration by Jun'ichirō Koizumi, which started in 2001 and has just been succeeded by Shinzō Abe. Koizumi's political style was dubbed theatre politics. In terms of domestic politics he was a deregulationist. He tried to cut the age-old interest lines and reduce the number of overprotected quangos. He advocated for small government and the promotion of freer competition and entrepreneurship. In the political agenda for the Lower House election last year, Koizumi foregrounded his long-cherished idea of privatizing the national mail service

and its banking function, which, for decades, has served as the second, sort of politician-friendly financial resource for the government. In carrying out his political agenda Koizumi created a great rift within his Liberal Democratic Party, but he did not hesitate to use party whips to crush and oust opposing sects. The way he drew a melodramatic line between ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’ clearly appealed to the public. He even declared that if all talks fail he would not mind demolishing his party. His firm stance clearly had a populist appeal, which was proved by the landslide victory of the LDP last year. This populist appeal was helped by the media, too, which he often fed with soundbites. His one-liners were not particularly witty but rather sounded simple-minded, but they were media-friendly at least. Success came only partially on the domestic front, numerous compromises have been made, and clearly there remains a heap of mess yet to be cleared, but in Japan he was broadly deemed as a radical reformer. His domestic policy is not friendly to people with low income, but still economy began to pick up after the long years of depression which was named the Ten Lost Years.

In contrast, his foreign policy was much more controversial and in many cases downright damaging. The names of A-class war criminals are included in the list of the war-dead enshrined by the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo. Koizumi’s repeated visits to Yasukuni caused furore of opposition and anger not only among neighbouring countries but also in Japan, and put heavy strains upon Japan’s international relations in Asia. His staunch pro-US policy after 9.11 resulted in passing the legislation for special measures against terrorism, further stretching the interpretation of Japan’s Constitution, especially its Article 9 which explicitly stipulates the renouncement of war and armed forces. The situation is heavily caricatured in Yōji Sakate’s play, *Darumasan-ga Koronda*, which received critical acclaim and many theatre awards in Japan in the year 2004. Koizumi reinvigorated the nationalist wing of the LDP and moved the balance of power to the right. His stance marked a breaking point from Japan’s traditional pacifist disengagement.

Survival of the fittest has become the norm in the competitive market economy, while hard-line politics is gaining ground in terms of foreign affairs, especially concerning North Korea. The emaciated theatrical presence of the body, it seems to me, is a result of these macho pressures from outside. Long gone are the late 1960s in which artists began to emphasize intense physicality to counter the heavily westernized, logocentric old guard called *shingeki*. Physicality in Japan’s current theatrical scene, on the contrary, presents itself more as a sort of misfit under heavy external macho pressure. There are exceptions. We have Tadashi Suzuki and Saburō Teshigawara, who are both included in Hans-Thies Lehmann’s name-dropping in his *Postdramatic Theatre* (1999). Besides, we have Shinjin Shimizu’s company Kaitai-sha and Satoshi Miyagi’s Ku’ Nauka, to name but a few. However, regardless of whether ostensibly postdramatic or not, many theatre pieces in Japan now focus on a certain type of physicality which results from the sense of unease present in Japanese society today. The sense of estrangement, distrust, apathy, helplessness, and incongruity in our supposedly democratic country comes partly from the onslaught of melodramatized political coverage by the mass media. The body is ill at ease, perceiving itself as something irrevocably left behind.

Drawing upon Lehmann’s view that the politics of theatre should be the politics of perception, here I would like to examine a few examples from the current Japanese theatrical scene which I think call for a change in the perception of the body.

## 2.2 Yōji Sakate

The first example is a play entitled *Darumasan ga Koronda*, written and directed by Yōji Sakate and first performed in 2004 by the Rinkogun Theatre Company. Born in 1962, Sakate started his company in 1983. The name of his troupe Rinkogun can be translated as ‘grouping phosphorescence’. He has written and directed almost all the plays performed by

his troupe, and now writes and directs outside his company as well. His plays indicate the broadness of his interest, but many of his plays explore the conflicts between individuals and the social collective from the leftist point of view. The strength of theatre as he believes lies in its mobility which enables quick responses to the political agenda which he thinks calls for urgent attention. The topics he has taken up include Okinawa, where we still have a domineering presence of the US Forces, the Japanese monarchy, and the Tokyo Trials. His style ranges from political realism to Noh-like dream play in which reality and reminiscence intersect.

His award-winning play, *Darumasan-ga Koronda*, with the subtitle ‘Danger!! Mines!!’ is a political satire consisting of several episodes which all revolve around the subject of landmines. You have an ordinary looking Japanese salaried man living a happy ordinary life. It turns out that he works for the only landmine manufacturing company in Japan. You also have a *yakuza* who has been ordered by his gang boss to procure landmines. Other characters on the dramatis personae include two landmine dealers, villagers living in a mine field, and a giant lizard which feeds upon landmines. In one scene we have two soldiers of the Self Defence Forces who have wandered into a minefield in Iraq after their vehicle was burgled. They come to a standstill, totally unable to move. The bodies of the two soldiers are presented as paralyzed bodies. This is the direct consequence of the limbo they are in: they cannot kill Iraqi civilians even if they are burglars. The special-measure legislation aroused strong suspicion of violating the constitution, but it was passed anyway to enable the dispatch of the SDF to Samawa in Iraq. Koizumi had to come up with a meek excuse and insist that Samawa was not a battlefield and that the deployment was solely for humanitarian assistance. This put the SDF troops in Iraq in a farcical absurd, tragical comical, maniacal hysterical situation that would beat Polonius’s imagination. They are essentially not authorized to use arms even to defend themselves. There were so many legal conditions on the use of force which had to be met that they had to abandon their humanitarian aid activities and run back to their barracks at the slightest sign of inimical attack.

Another scene from the same play depicts a woman whose dedication to landmine removal activities slowly divests her of limbs and organs, even her brain, until she is finally turned into a cyborg. She calls herself a cyborg with most of her internal organs, even a part of her brain, being replaced by synthetic tissue, while her partner likens her to a *daruma*, a doll without arms and legs. It would be possible to read this cruel presentation of the body to be the metaphor of the Japanese political consciousness which is desensitized and amnesiac, but the cyborg woman vows to continue her landmine-removal activities — in fact, she thinks a cyborg like her is more suitable for the job. We should perhaps see it, therefore, also as the flip side of the immobile SDF soldiers that we saw before. This is the ironical reality of war. The real is evinced by the absence of the real, in this case the cyborg woman’s replaced and supplanted limbs and organs. The absence is made more theatrically conspicuous to denote the sense of psychological as well as political distance of Japan towards what is happening in Iraq and other war zones.

The metaphor of physical emaciation is also evident in Sakate’s *Yaneura*, or ‘The Attic’, premiered in 2002. This play, again, is made of a chain of independent short episodes, with actors acting in an extremely confined space. The play alludes, no doubt, to reclusive adolescents and young adults who have willingly confined themselves in their own rooms and withdrawn from social life, seeking total isolation. It was then a social phenomenon broadly reported and discussed by the mass media. Their cloistered bodies, however, can also be interpreted as another metaphor of political suffocation and stagnation.

### 2.3 Toshiki Okada

The way Sakate presents the emaciated body is by and large symbolic or conceptual, while Toshiki Okada's theatricalization is more on the representational side. His *Five Days in March*, which was first performed in 2004, presents the body under stress in the way very symptomatic of Japan under the Koizumi government and in the post-9.11 world order.

Okada was born in 1973. The name of his company Chelfitsch, which he started in 1997, comes from the motherese or baby-talk pronunciation of the English word 'selfish.' The name goes very well with his language, which seems to indicate a sort of psycho-somatic regression into the stage of inarticulateness: fragmentary, disconnected, abbreviated, full of meanders and sidetrackings, and laden with functional words and phrases which come from the youth-culture vocabulary but are in themselves void of meaning. This is his so-called 'super-real' Japanese which he resorted to after 2001, when he released *Karera-no Kibō-ni Mihare*, literally meaning 'Open your Eyes Wide at their Hope'.

His *Five Days in March* is much along the same line. It is March 2003. The episodes in the play are about what some young people in Tokyo did during the five days before and after the day the US Air Force began dropping bombs in Iraq in 2003. The narrator tells and enacts, or rather retells and reenacts, the story he heard from Minobe. Minobe and Yookie get to know each other at a gig. After the gig, they go to a so-called 'love hotel' in Shibuya, a district in downtown Tokyo which is popular among the young in particular. It is not, however, a love-at-first-sight story. They spend most of the five days having sex. After more than two full days doing the same thing, they were overcome by hunger. The love hotel being totally purpose-specific, and dozens of condoms being in dire need, they decide to go out for some food and shopping. Out there in the town of Shibuya, which they thought they knew much about, having frequented the place, they discover many things they did not notice before. It is during one of these brief outings that they saw on the giant screen above the scramble crossing just in front of Shibuya station that war had started in Iraq.

Just like the narrator in the scene above, most of the actors we see in the play declare that the scenes they are going to reenact are based on what they have heard from someone else. Obviously we detect Brechtian influences, but what Okada is trying to do, it seems to me, is not to keep the right distance between the stage and the audience. Rather, the distance that matters here is the psychological distance in the retellers cum reenactors from those who actually experienced what is told in the episodes.

This psychological distance becomes more evident in the scene which presents two young men, Yasui and Ishihara, who join a peace rally. Being fully aware that their enthusiasm for the cause is not up to that of the more politically committed, they end up talking about a Japanese pop song which is totally irrelevant. What characterizes the scene, and in fact the whole play, is the extremely low tension level not only in terms of the language but also the body. Half-heartedness, indecision, a sense of incongruity, and again and above all psychological distance are evident in this scene. In one interview, Okada gives a comment upon this:

Let me tell you what I was thinking when I was making *Five Days in March*. I wanted to say something about the war — that's for sure — but I felt participating in the anti-war rally was really not for us. Yet it was not that we were totally apathetic about it. We had a certain sense of looking at it from a distance, but that doesn't mean we were not thinking about it. And I wanted to present all this, including this psychological distance. Some say that the play is simply about young people having sex, being totally apathetic about the War in Iraq, but I think of it as an anti-war play in its own right.<sup>1</sup>

Some may criticize this attitude as being simply complacent, wishy-washy, even irresponsibly non-committal. This, however, is the prevalent attitude not only among the young but also

among many of the other generations. The government's tactics has always been to play down the very existence of the SDF as a war machine. Therefore, it always insisted that Samawa was a non-combat region. Most Japanese did not believe it, but since no deaths or casualties on either side in direct connection with the SDF's activities were reported, most Japanese simply lost it to amnesia. They were ill at ease, but they simply tried to let things pass.

The physical unease can go as far as to develop spasms. In another scene in the play, two young people happen to meet at a cinema and strike up a casual conversation about whether they should go and see a concert by the band who did the soundtrack of the movie they have just seen. The girl, while trying to make a pass at the boy, is taken over, as it were, by the onslaught of incessant mannerisms, so much so that her movements border on pathological spasms. We can see the frustration in her about being so inept in communication. After this scene we see her at home, disgusted with herself and writing in her blog about her dream of escaping to Mars. The body ill at ease goes together with escapism here.

## 2.4 Hitsujiya Shirotama

In *Rhapsody Maebashi* in 2004 by the theatre company Yubiwa Hotel, written and directed by Shirotama Hitsujiya born in 1967, this representational theatricalization of the body leads to total psycho-somatic regression into infancy. Engaged in a territorial mock-battle, the girls pick on one girl. The girl who gets picked on fetches a mop and tries to erase the boundaries drawn by the other girls. In terms of psychological development, the boundaries between me and non-me are drawn and erased over and over again, which perhaps means using Lacan's terminology that they are in the transitional state of the Imaginary, where images remain inarticulate from one another, to the Symbolic, where articulation — or boundaries — are introduced to make the formation of subjectivity possible. On the one hand you have the tendency to confirm belongingness by blending into others and thereby erasing the ego, while on the other hand you have aggression towards the excluded. The co-mingling of blending into the surroundings and aggression towards others clearly forms one aspect of Japanese political sensibility under the Koizumi administration.

## 3. Collective political sensibility and the erasure of political agency in the post-WWII framework

### 3.1 Introversion and aggression

The symptoms so far examined — symptoms of what may be called the Physical Emaciation Syndrome under the Koizumi government — include immobility and paralysis, desensitization, low tension level, spasms, and total regression to infancy. On the one hand we have the encouragement of freer competition in the market economy, which jeopardizes the sense of economic homogeneity that was shared by the majority of the Japanese people after WWII, no matter how illusory it may actually have been. On the other hand we have the further erosion of Article 9, the centrepiece of Japan's pacifist constitution, and the right shift in the balance of power which seems to aspire towards the 'good-old' pre-war ethics. Jun'ichirō Koizumi maintained a relatively high rate of approval up until the end of his ministry, but the lurking danger — a very macho danger — was always sensible under his populist façade. The plays are the good examples of how the body under this macho pressure is weakened, cloistered, desensitized, and made ill.

### 3.2 Minoru Betsuyaku

It is of course unfair to blame everything upon Koizumi, though. Complacency, ignorance, and apathy on the part of the Japanese people themselves in general have equally

contributed to the erosion of effective political agency. And for that matter no Japanese playwright has been so eloquent as Minoru Betsuyaku. His *Kowareta Fukei*, or 'The Broken Landscape' in 1976 will help put the discussion into the broader framework of Japan after WWII.

Strongly influenced by Samuel Beckett as he openly admits, Betsuyaku is the most representative dramatist of the absurd theatre in Japan. Born in 1937 in former Manchuria, he repatriated in 1946, the year following the end of WWII. He attended Waseda University in Tokyo, and became a fervent student political activist. It was there that he met Tadashi Suzuki of Suzuki Method fame, and with him he launched the Waseda Shō-Gekijō, or Waseda Little Theatre, but eventually they parted their ways. His first public acclaim came with his *Zō*, or 'The Elephant' in 1962. The play's central character is a hospitalized man who fondly reminisces the day he attracted people's sympathy and money by showing the scars which he got in Hiroshima.

On the stage of *The Broken Landscape* you see a full picnic spreadout with loads of baskets filled with food, fruits, wine, and phonogram records. But they look totally untouched. The picnic obviously has not started. No one is there, but a portable record player is playing the same tune over and over again because of the scratch on the record. There come a mother and daughter. They stop to consult their map, wondering the choice they made at a fork in the road was the right one. A salesman passes by, so they ask him where they are on the map, but despite having taken this route many times before, the salesman also seems uncertain. It is about 15 minutes into the play and the irritating music has been playing over and over again. They agree that lifting the phonograph needle would do no harm, but when it comes to who should do it, they cannot seem to decide. Finally, a marathon runner comes and abruptly lifts the needle. He expects to be thanked by those who are around, but when he finds out that they were not the rightful owners, he starts to accuse them of not having told him that before.

After blackout, we see a couple opening the baskets. They are not the rightful owners either, but simply looking into them out of curiosity. Those who were there in Act I come back. After evasions, excuses and hesitation, they end up eating and drinking the content of the baskets. Initially they think one cookie missing would not leave a noticeable trace, but they end up eating as much as they want, however, although they make an agreement that the consumption should be based on the principle of equality. Their substantial consumption makes some of them feel uneasy about it, but they reach the consensus again that they should all compensate the rightful owners. In the ending detective arrives to their fright, and tells them that they have found six bodies in a car nearby, apparently a family suicide. He says that they committed suicide without any apparent reason, having looked like happiness itself.

In the ending it is also made clear to the audience for the first time that the route they took at the fork in the road beyond the bridge was the one on the right. It would be easy to find the political allegory in this play which has a feel similar to Friedrich Dürrenmatt's 1956 play *The Visit of the Old Lady*. *The Broken Landscape* clearly portrays the nullification and desensitization of political agency in Japan. The play was first performed in 1976. Those who had been politically active students in the late 60s were by then the core labour force to

sustain and expand the rapid economic development. People were not quite sure if they were following the right track, but that did not stop them from working hard to build the basis for Japan's increasing affluence. We can, therefore, link the play directly with the then current euphoria combined with political amnesia and complacency. The allegorical relevance of this play, however, will not diminish at all if we go further back on the timeline and see the play as questioning Japan's democracy and its treatment of war responsibility since the end of World War II, characterized by political amnesia and complacency.

Here I agree with a Japanese theatre critic Tadashi Uchino, who says that the Japanese theatre almost invariably poses an ego which tries to erase itself by blending into the surrounding collective sensibility. In other words this idiosyncratic mode of representation, both in the sense of self-representation and political representation, calls back the ego into the generalized ideal of Japan at the cost of nullifying political agency. Consequently the centre of representation, just like the Japanese emperor, aspires to the state of void. The emaciated body, the body ill at ease, bears the trace of the political reality in Japan.

4. Pre- and post-WWII: Kunio Kishida and the two faces of Japanese westernized ego.

The question here is this: How did it all begin? Kunio Kishida is a good example for examining this question. In 1921 and 22 he was in Paris and studied under Jacques Copeau in his Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier. After coming back to Japan he also led the modernization of Japanese theatre mainly as a playwright, but he was also active as a theatre director, theatre theoretician, novelist, translator, and critic of his times. Yoshio Ōzasa is a theatre critic and historian who chronicled the history of Japanese theatre since the 1868 Meiji Restoration, and his comment on Kishida will summarize the general view of Kishida's importance in modernization of Japanese theatre. Ōzasa says, 'It is not too much to say that in the person of Kunio Kishida we can see the epitome of the modern in Japan.'<sup>ii</sup> I shall try to show you how the sense of unease in receiving and appropriating western influences manifested itself in Kishida's case.

In his book, *What is Being Japanese?* which is a collection of essays on the Japanese mentality and spirituality he published over the years 1947-48, we can find the following passage which describes the unhealthy body as early as right after WWII. It is a rather long passage but worth quoting in full:

It was in fact inevitable for the modernization of the East to start with the transplantation and imitation of Western civilization. We, however, either sought for a sort of divine salvation in the Western civilization, or overoptimistically attempted to adopt only the good points while discarding the others. That was the point where the great mistake began.

Even when we realized the overpowering nature of the Western civilization, the resistance our Oriental mentality made was a limited one, falling short of the true grappling battle between two spiritualities. In other words, we lacked the self-confidence and courage which enables the discipline of our own spirituality through its encounters with the West.

Our naïve and inflexible mentality was overwhelmed by the Western civilization. Consequently we have let the West shape our mentality at their will. We have tried to keep up our appearances, turned our eyes away from the things which do not serve this goal, and became introvert.

As a result many of us have come to own a spirituality with two faces. Some have one masked face and one real face. Others have two faces which are both real.

This kind of spirituality cannot be called healthy by any standard.<sup>iii</sup>



We can clearly detect Kishida's own sense of unease under pressure from Westernization. Everything is here: surprise, dismay, complacency, botched-up appearances, introversion, ego split, and unhealthy spirituality.

Kishida was not a leftist dramatist, but a liberal one nonetheless. It was a tragedy that he was persuaded into accepting the position of the Head of Cultural Department in 1940, the year the militarist all-party coalition was formed in Japan. His inauguration was at the behest of many writers and thinkers of the time who wanted Kishida to fend off the repressive pressures from the government, and although he left the position in less than a year, his writings during this period, especially those for official propaganda, include passages which cannot avoid censure of the modern eye. After the war he was declared ineligible for any official position. He made no attempts to justify his deeds under the militarist regime, but it seems to me that the passage I have just quoted shows the flip side of the introverted and emaciated face the post-war Japanese body had: aggression. In another of his post-WWII article entitled 'Can the so-called "soul-searching" really help us?' in 1949, Kishida clearly named one symptom of this unhealthy body:

Some people seem to think that the source of our misfortune lies in the nature of our own nationality. This, however, is a totally unfounded and unjustifiable presumption. The disaster we are now suffering is a consequence of our social and psychological spasms. We imposed upon ourselves the spasms which developed inevitably as a symptom of our history.<sup>iv</sup>

## 5. Physical intensity reclaimed: West meets East, East meets East, and East meets West

### 5.1 Simon McBurney

There are some cases, however, in which physical intensity is reclaimed. The cases in point are *The Elephant Vanishes* (2003) directed by the British theatre director Simon McBurney and performed by Japanese actors, *The Red Demon* by Hideki Noda and performed in three versions since it was premiered in Japan in 1996: in Japanese, in Thai, and in English, so in this case East meets East as well as East meets West. All the three versions were directed by Noda himself. In this concluding section I shall discuss why in these two cases physical intensity is reclaimed despite the fact that both plays touch upon the subject of the Japanese ego in crisis.

McBurney's *The Elephant Vanishes* is a collaboration between his Complicite in London and the Setagaya Public Theatre in Tokyo. The cast was all Japanese, seven in all, and the text was based on Haruki Murakami's stories included in his anthology in English. McBurney held a two-week workshop for this in 2002 and spent a total of eleven weeks constructing and rehearsing the play, 5 weeks in London and the rest in Tokyo where it was premiered. In London the team explored the theatrical possibilities of more than ten stories included in the anthology, decided on actually staging three of them, which were 'The Elephant Vanishes', 'Sleep', and 'The Second Bakery Attack'.

What McBurney introduced into his multimedial staging of the three stories was the visualization of the splitting ego, because all the stories, as he saw them, portrayed the split ego in the modernized Japan after the 1970s. Therefore in the title-piece episode 'The Elephant Vanishes,' a slick, efficient salesman witnesses an elephant growing smaller and smaller until it vanishes in the air. When the salesman attempts to explain the strange experience to a female journalist, we see his ego split into two: you have the salesman who is happy to go on with his everyday life on the one hand and the elephant loving self who still dwells on the absurd phenomenon. In 'The Second Bakery Attack' a man who recounts his experience of attacking a McDonald's with his wife is divided into a narrator and the reenactor. We see the narrating alter ego looking down on what he and his wife experienced

ten years ago. The split ego is again visually evident. Also in 'Sleep,' the ego is split into the narrator and the reenactor. A housewife is vaguely uncomfortable with her daily life. One night she has a violent nightmare, and after awakening suddenly discovers that she cannot sleep at all. Initial anxiety over this, however, is gradually taken over by a sense of empowerment, because now she can read *Anna Karenina* all night long to her full enjoyment and appreciation, and can go swimming in the daytime to keep herself as fit as ever. There the woman splits into several selves into ones which keep on doing her daily routines as a housewife and others which enjoy her intellectual as well as physical life to the full. The physical intensity of the Japanese actors is reclaimed in all three sections — the kind of intensity in stark contrast to *The Five Days in March*, and *Rhapsody Maebashi*. In this production where McBurney works with the Japanese actors — so West meets East — the physical intensity, it seems to me, comes from the West's strong assumption of individuality. The ego crisis, therefore, is presented as a split instead of the emaciated body resulting from the loss of demarcation by way of blending and merging into the surrounding.

## 5.2 Hideki Noda

Hideki Noda's *Red Demon* appeared in three different versions in the following order.

- 1996 Premiered in Japan in Japanese.
- 1997 Thai version premiered in Japan.
- 1998 Thai version premiered in Bangkok, Thailand
- 2003 English version premiered in London
- 2004 Three versions performed in Tokyo

Noda was born in 1955. In 1976 he formed his own company Yume-no Yuminsha. His ingenious, flamboyant word plays, free-wheeling philosophical choice of themes, and his troupe's physical agility and playfulness matched the euphoric Japan during the years of the bubble economy, and Noda soon became the most representative figure of the new wave in the Japanese theatrical scene. He disbanded his troupe in 1992 and went to London for a year, during which he formed an association with McBurney and Complicite-affiliated actors. He returned to Japan in 1993 and formed a new unit called Noda Map. His style has moved towards more socially conscious subjects, but he is still widely deemed to be the forerunner of modern Japanese theatre.

*The Red Demon* is a story of a young woman who is looked down upon by her fellow villagers as a semi-outcaste. She encounters a total stranger, *the Red Demon*, with a totally different language, cultural background, customs, and code of behaviour, but after overcoming her initial fright and aversion, she somehow manages to learn the Demon's language. The villagers' attitude changes from rejection, through curiosity and commodification, to total expulsion, but the protagonist woman tries to protect the demon all along. They make an escape but their escape leads to her unwitting act of cannibalism on the Demon whom she strived to protect from the insular-minded aggression of the villagers.

Physical intensity is reclaimed again in all three versions, perhaps even stronger in the East than in the West. The play is clearly an allegorical portrayal of political insularity, where the introversion goes side by side with fierce aggression against the Other. The subject, therefore, is much the same as in the examples that have been discussed in terms of the emaciated body. The reason why strong physical intensity is reclaimed in *The Red Demon* in spite of this, I think, is because it comes from the ostensible presence of the Other. *The Red Demon* depicts the brutal flip side of the assumed collective sensibility in terms of politics. When the majority feel their collective sensibility is threatened, physical intensity comes in the form of aggression. On the other hand when minorities have no collective political sensibility to blend themselves into, physical intensity comes in the form of resilience. And as for this resilience, Kishida would not call it unhealthy.

## **FINDING AN IDENTITY: “HYBRID THEATRE” IN SINGAPORE**

Ian Herbert, President of the International Association of Theatre Critics

Felix Tan

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

A very good morning,

---

Singapore’s most expensive theatre venue – the Esplanade: Theatres By The Bay, opened on the 12<sup>th</sup> of October 2002 to much pomp and pageantry. Dignitaries from around the world, ministers and theatre practitioners were present to watch the launched of, most probably, Asia’s most advanced performance venue. Nestled at the heart of Singapore’s city, this iconic architecture, claims that it *“aims to be a performing arts centre for everyone, and its programmes cater to its diverse audiences... Its programme line-up spans all genres to encompass music, dance, theatre and visual arts, with a special emphasis on Asian culture”*<sup>31</sup>. Besides being the most expensive theatre structure ever built in Singapore, the Esplanade also has one of the best support system, acoustics and in-house facilities. There are two main venues – the Concert Hall, which can sit up to 1,600 people; and a 2,000-seat Theatre, which is basically, *“an adaptation of traditional European Opera houses in horseshoe form”*<sup>32</sup>. And this is one of the most baffling phenomenon – whilst it emphasise that there will be a special focus on the Asian culture and performing art forms, it has a stage that is built solely from a perspective of traditional European Opera houses. However, that said, the number of visitors have been steadily increasing since its inception and the Esplanade has since seen more than 1,800 performances. This is, by any means, a small feat for a country like Singapore and a society, which has only in recent years begin to open up its arts scene.

---

<sup>31</sup> [http://www.esplanade.com/SOPApp/espsop/portal\\_proxy?uri=CCgMo4WE!ZGXoyWB\\_s1uHhFf99Szq=YGopSj3OO00=1KQjjusJFM](http://www.esplanade.com/SOPApp/espsop/portal_proxy?uri=CCgMo4WE!ZGXoyWB_s1uHhFf99Szq=YGopSj3OO00=1KQjjusJFM)

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

Ever since people like Victor Turner and Richard Schechner began to explore how cultural performances can become a performance of theatricality, many artists have since attempted to blend the two together. Different traditional cultural performances have since been grouped together to apparently create a new kind of theatre or even performance theory. Some called it intercultural performances; others label them ‘hybrid theatre’. And whilst some have been performed to much success, others – mere disappointments. It has, however, reached a point where more and more theatre groups – at least in Singapore – are beginning to utilise such cultural performances as a means to explore new grounds in theatricality. So, what are some of the difficulties in these attempts to merge the vastly different cultural performances together?

In Singapore, attempts have been made by various theatre groups, such as TheatreWorks (Singapore) Pte Ltd, which have unabashedly deconstructed dramatic texts and performed them using inter-cultural performative style. Established in 1985, TheatreWorks (Singapore) is probably amongst one of the most renowned theatre companies that deals with the construction and exposition of intercultural performances. Its productions explore the “*reinvention of traditional performance through a juxtaposition of cultures*”<sup>33</sup>. Many of its performances, therefore, are able to reflect the interplay between various traditional cultural performances. This certainly, in a way, shows the efforts that it has put into its performances to echo this sort of “*cultural negotiation and artistic exchanges*”<sup>34</sup> amongst the different artists, especially from around the Asian region. Furthermore, TheatreWorks (Singapore) also has its own projects such as the “Flying Circus Project” as well as “Continuum Asia Project”, which aim to engage with this constant cultural exchange between the various Asian performative identities and traditional structures. One is, thus, able to see the development of these projects coming to fruition in its performances, such as the most recent *Geisha* and

---

<sup>33</sup> [http://theatreworks.org.sg/the\\_company/index.htm](http://theatreworks.org.sg/the_company/index.htm)

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

*Diaspora*, which was shown to delegates at the IMF/World Bank summit in Singapore. But why do they want to do what they do? How much of the cultural performances that it engage in retains its identity and how much of this identity is lost, or even transformed through the process? What is the possibility that in order for the different cultural performances to collaborate in such a production, inevitably, some of the cultural sub-texts will be lost? Some of TheatreWorks' previous productions have so far been utilising Shakespearean texts, which, in a way, allow for these cultural identities found in the various Asian traditional art forms employed in these productions, to maintain its overall structure. Hence, while the characters from the text used and the occasional sub-text remains the same, such as Shakespeare's King Lear, Othello or Hamlet, these characters are now represented by the various cultural performative icons, such as a Kabuki dancer, a Chinese Opera actor and even scenes that has the traditional Malay martial arts forms. But how much of such performances really adhere strictly to its dramatic texts or are they merely a mishmash of traditional, or cultural performances? Unfortunately, to some, the combination of such traditional cultural performances becomes just that – a desperate attempt to showcase the different cultural identities and to find a link between them. The problem remains that these performances, on the surface, demonstrates the different cultural identities, but yet, the text is not structurally related to the traditional identities that it sets out to portray and use.

Singaporeans are finicky – or at least some of the local members of the audience that attend such intercultural performances, are. On the one hand, while the audience expects to be treated to a visually stunning and textually motivating piece of modern theatrical performance, it also, on the other hand, expects these sort of intercultural performances to retain the very essence of the cultural identity it represents. And, this, in a way, give birth to a dilemma between the demand and the expectations of such performances. Thereby leading to some members of the audience calling such performances an act of attrition to the traditional

art forms that it has employed. In some segment of Singapore society, such “hybrid theatre” or intercultural performances have been labelled as a “*collision of cultures*”. Others have accused them of being purely “*self-indulgent*”. Others still, have claimed that such performances have bastardised the very sanctity of the traditional art forms, which has taken hundred of years to developed. And there have been some among the avid theatre-goers, who were very much frustrated with such audacity, who have consequently stormed out of the theatre in the middle of the performance – slamming the doors behind them no least. So, does that mean that Singaporeans are not receptive to these performances? After all, these shows were performed to fully packed theatres in Europe and had garnered rave reviews. Or could there be a cultural divide between the Asian/Singaporean audiences as compared to the Western/European audiences?

In addition, how much of these performances really do justice to such traditional art forms? In a globalised world where one cultural identity can cross the borderless world into another community, who can truly say that a cultural identity can only specifically represent a certain segment of a community? These are just some of the questions many Singaporeans are beginning to ask themselves since the advent of inter-cultural, or hybrid, theatre there. Moreover, Singapore is a country still searching for an acceptable cultural identity in a multi-ethnic/multi-cultural/multi-religious society that is able to satisfy all and that one can truly claim to be a “Singaporean identity”. Given that this place is a meeting point where cultures meet, is it, then, easier to accept such an amalgamation of cultural identities and icons in just one performance? Can ‘hybrid theatre’ ever exist in Singapore or will it only face more rejection? There are definitely lots of burning questions surrounding the issue of ‘hybrid theatre’ in Singapore. However, what is more important is that Singapore will need to overcome its immediate challenges that “hybrid theatre” in Singapore faces.

Firstly, Singapore is a society that is having an identity crisis. The question remains really of who are Singaporeans? Singapore is not a homogenous society, and in fact, besides being multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-cultural, Singapore is also very much an immigrant society, where our forefathers came from all corners of the world and from all walks of life. Therefore, caught in a conundrum of being Chinese, Indian, Malay or Eurasians, Singaporeans are also, at the same time finding it difficult to balance these identities with its national identity and aspirations. Singapore's nation-building exercise, has over the past 41 years, been about finding that 'one-ness' among Singaporeans, yet being able to separate our distinct racial and religious identity all at the same time. The clash of identities has resulted in this crisis that many are still trying very hard to grapple with. As a society, which is at its penultimate moment of economic success, it has only in recent years begun to search for this Singapore-ness within itself. Besides being identified as a nation of Singaporeans, many still retain their identity as being Chinese, Indians, Malays or Eurasians. Furthermore, Singaporeans are also, to a great extent, trapped by its colonial underpinnings. Being a British colony in its early days before independence, many Singaporeans are very much influenced by a Westernised system, which has since been used in all aspects of life. This has resulted in a society whereby Western notions of identity are inbuilt into our community as well as all its cultural manifestations. So, where does that leave us? One has to strike a balance between a Chinese, for example, while straddling this Westernised form of identity, and if possible, a national identity. And in such a manner, there becomes some sort of alienation between the self and the other – and another. There is this constant battle waging about being inwardly; one who encompasses the traditional Chinese characteristics, for example, and also outwardly, one who embraces a Western lifestyle and Western thoughts. And this is the same for the theatre scene in Singapore, this sort of catch-22 occurs as well. At the end of the day, it becomes very difficult to achieve all these identities without losing out on this notion of who

we truly are and who do we represent. Hence, should theatre in Singapore be only a contemporise Western notion of theatre, or should it be tied to the Asian traditional theatre structure? This has therefore resulted in a “hybrid theatre” that tries very hard to appeal to the masses, while maintaining its sense and sensibilities of being able to inculcate a range of cultural art forms within its production. So, the question is whom do we perform it for then? How can the society understand this interplay between identities when we can’t even find one that we can uniquely call our own? The challenge of “hybrid theatre”, then, is to overcome this problem of identity.

Secondly, there is also a challenge of understanding and acknowledging one’s cultural identity. As the society becomes more affluent, there are some within the community that begin to lose touch with their cultural identity. And this is seen in Singapore where the traditional cultural performance practices are beginning to lose its fight against modernity. With the lack of better understanding of what these traditional art forms entail, many have only a narrow awareness and appreciation of such cultural performances. For some, especially among the older generations, who are still very much guarded over the importance of the performative styles – the meanings and the structures – it becomes very significant when “hybrid theatre” practitioners chose to merely ‘cut and paste’ chunks of details from within the performative structure and simply piece them together. To them, this is an insult to the tradition; especially given the characteristics that have develop within such art forms over the years. The disagreement comes when such audiences refuse to let go of their egos, and thereby creating this tension between tradition and modernity. Therefore, for “hybrid theatre” to coexists within this framework, it would need to have a better understanding of the cultural contexts to get a better feel of the sensitivities involved in the crafting a “hybrid theatre” performance. Nevertheless, “hybrid theatre” will also need to inform the viewers of its intention to bridge this gap between what is cultural and what is modernity.



The third challenge facing Singapore theatre has to do with education. Very few in Singapore society have had the opportunity to be educated on the intricacies of their own cultural performances or even their own traditions. But it is not a case of less, but rather, a case of too much. In a multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious society like Singapore, there is always a stress on learning everyone's culture in order to prevent a possible myopic view of one culture over the other. This creates a problem as it dilutes one cultural identity in order to adapt it to the sensitivities of the larger community. However, seen positively, this also brings about an opportunity for many to try and find a balance between the many cultural contexts that the society rests on. This has resulted in the sort of interplay between cultures and identities, which have, at times, been successful, while others not so. For example, we have seen an Indian text – the Ramayana – performed in an authentic traditional Chinese Opera. Nevertheless, many of these cultural performances rest on one's understanding of the language that they are performed in. And with such a huge range of dialects and languages meeting in just one place, it gets a bit schizophrenic. This is a major problem as the Singapore government has made an effort to completely eradicate the use of dialects in public, and even at homes. This, ultimately, led to the end of an understanding of the traditional performances and cultural identity that these performances rely on. In a recent Straits Times (a local newspaper) article, it is noted that *"in Singapore, where theatre is splintered into different languages and shaped by diverse artistic philosophies, practitioners have developed different strategies to deal with the complex reality of Singapore's cultural contexts"*<sup>35</sup>. Unfortunately, sometimes these strategies do not translate into the performances that they find themselves producing. This, thus, leads to a disjunction between the performance and the audience watching the production. Furthermore, there is this constant 'try and try again' attitude among

---

<sup>35</sup> Hong, Xingyi, "Whose Play Is It Anyway?", *Life! The Straits Times* (Thursday, June 15, 2006).

‘hybrid theatre’ so as to be able to better cater to this diverse taste that has developed in the Singapore arts scene.

Last, but certainly not least, the next challenge is the process versus the outcome. So, is theatre then meant only for the elites or is it meant for the masses? The theatre scene in Singapore is ever changing and fluid – to better cater to the needs and the tastes of the theatre-goer. Theatre in Singapore has a very small following – although it is growing; but more importantly, there are many theatre groups in Singapore that only performs to a very small niche market. There is, thus, a constant tussle over the limited resources that is available. Hence, if it is for the elites, then the focus is more on the process, but if there is a demand to cater to the masses, then the outcome will be more crucial. But given the increasing standards of theatre in Singapore, “hybrid theatre” will need to ensure that there is this balance between the process and outcome. As Singapore society grows up in such a diverse community, many begin to experience and appreciate the kinds of cultural multiplicity and traditional art forms that it has cultivated. Thereby more are beginning to be tolerant to the kinds of theatre experimentation to produce this sort of intercultural performances. “Hybrid theatre” is now undergoing a transformation. Its focus is now more on the process rather than the outcome. It is starting to formulate a set of relationships whereby there is constant interaction between the cultural performers and the desires of the modern theatre. However, this will take a fair bit of time as given the kind of structures that traditional performances have been built upon, it will be quite a while before it can meet at the ‘center-point’ where the two forms can coexist. There needs to be an attempt to understand the sensitivities involved. Moreover, given that “hybrid theatre” consists of not only one culture, but a range of other different and distinct cultural identities, it will need to slowly draw them together to meet at the center. And only if this process is clearly demonstrated, only then will the audience be able to appreciate this effort. So, it is no longer about what is performed, but rather, how it is performed.

In conclusion, there are many challenges to Singapore theatre, especially in ‘hybrid theatre’. Intercultural performances will be appreciated only in as much as the audience is able to digest and value the process. With the changing taste of the Singaporean audiences to such performances and gauging from how receptive they are to such performances, “hybrid theatre” is here to stay. Although the acceptance of such ‘hybrid theatre’ will take time, eventually, the audience will come to understand this new kind of theatre through the opportunity theatre practitioners create to bridge the gap that now exists. Besides merely educating Singaporeans, not only in the various traditional cultural theatrical performances of the masses, but also to inculcate a sense of the changing face of theatre in Singapore, it also needs to bring about an awareness that “hybrid theatre” is also about its ‘processes rather than its outcomes’. And in the recent piece “Geisha” produced by Singapore’s foremost intercultural theatre practitioner Mr Ong Keng Sen, the artistic director of TheatreWorks Pte Ltd, it has finally managed to do just that. That said, these challenges will still continue to play itself out in the Singapore theatre scene, but the process will be a two-way thing – in as much as “hybrid theatre” attempts to mend this gap between modernity and culture, there will be more tolerant behaviour from the masses. There’s a Sanskrit saying: *“Yesterday is but a dream, tomorrow but a vision. But today well-lived makes every yesterday a dream of happiness, and every tomorrow a vision of hope. Look well, therefore, to this day”*<sup>36</sup>.

Thank You.

---

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.worldofquotes.com/proverb/Sanskrit/1/index.html>

## CONTEMPORARY AND HYBRID THEATRE IN THE ERA OF GLOBALISATION-- NEW THEATRICALITY IN INDIA

Durgadas Mukhopadhyay

The urge to express, to communicate, and share something beautiful, gave birth to performing arts. In this process, the living progressive impulse to the timeless universal gets a coherent shape in creative designs. The folk and traditional theatre is changing its structure continuously over centuries, modifying itself to the needs of the changing situations, making it functionally relevant to the society. In India contemporary theatre is being written and produced by using the structure and characterization of traditional theatre like Jatra, Tamasha and Veethinatakam. The contemporary plays like “Tiner Talwar” of Utpal Dutta and “Sakharam Binder” of Vijay Tendulkar and “Nagamandalam of “Girish Karnad are running to full houses in Kolkata, Mumbai and Bangalore for months and years.

The Bengali playwright Utpal Dutta was active primarily in Bengali theatre, but did tour several times with the Shakespearean Theatre Company. Dutt wrote and directed what he called "Epic Theatre" (a term he borrowed from Bertolt Brecht to bring about discussion and change in Bengal. He was one of the most influential personalities in the Group Theater movement. He was also a lifelong Marxist and an active supporter of the Communist Party. He staged many street theatres in favour of the Communist Party. He was also jailed for his views. His famous plays include Tiner Talwar (the Tin Sword, partially based on Pygmalion and Mausher Adhikare (Human Rights, based on the Scottsboro Boys case).

For the past four decades Vijay Tendulkar the Marathi playwright has been the most influential dramatist and theater personality in Marathi the principal language of the state of Maharashtra which has had a continuous literary history since the end of the classical period in India and has nearly seventy-five million speakers today.

A lifelong resident of the city of, Mumbai, Mr Tendulkar is the author of thirty full-length plays and twenty-three one-act plays, several of which have become classics of modern Indian theatre. *Ghashiram kotwal (Ghashiram the Constable)* (1972), a musical combining Marathi folk performance styles and contemporary theatrical techniques, is one of the longest-running plays in the world, with over six thousand performances in India and abroad, in the original and in translation. Mr Tendulkar's output in Marathi also includes eleven plays for children, four collections of short stories, one novel, and five volumes of literary essays and social criticism,

Unesco has endorsed the Convention of the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions in October 2005. The futuristic goals should be to create patronage, audience, economic security for contemporary hybrid theatre in India. Hybrid contemporary theatre based on Jatra, Tamasha, Swang, mask theatres in India has become a weapon in the fight against cultural neo-imperialism. The hybrid theatre in India has wonderful and progressive future.

After India gained political independence in 1947, a number of playwrights felt the need to develop a theatre that did not follow British models, but was in some way Indian. Kavalam Narayana Panikkar, along with Habib Tanvir, Vijay Tendulkar, and Girish Karnad, members of what is often referred to as the "Theatre of Roots" movement, began to study Kathakali, Yakshagana, Chhau, and other traditional Indian performance forms to see what could be used in the creation of a modern *Indian* drama. As Karnad very clearly states, however, the attempt "was not to find and reuse forms that had worked successfully in some other cultural context. The hope, rather, was to discover whether there was a structure of expectations--and conventions--about entertainment underlying these forms from which one could learn."

Modern Theatre in India is created by & primarily for the middle class & upper middle class. The plays run the gamut from serious to comic, political to frivolous. Before the establishment of Left- Front in Bengal, Calcutta playwrights seemed obsessed with political issues. Corruption & mismanagement of resources have been common themes with the Calcutta playwrights. Here even comedy has a barbed, bitter edge. Playwrights by western standards, most contemporary Indian plays are long, taking anywhere from two to three hours to perform. Realism seems to dominate the settings & dialogue of most plays. Occasionally a playwright introduces a novel twist, such as narrator or dialogue spoken by groups of characters. Occasionally songs & segment of dance is also introduced, which suspend the flow of the dramatic action and provide variety to the proceedings.

Vijay Tendulkar is one of the best-known playwrights in modern Indian theatre—his *Ghashiram Kotwal* is one of the most successful of contemporary Indian plays. He has also written notably for the screen and the television, being an important part of the new wave cinema, but plays like *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe*, *Sakharam Binder*, *Kamala*, and *Kanyadaan* are his important contributions. He has always been controversial, because he has always been contemporary in his concerns, both social/political and theatrical.. The *Cyclist* (*Safar*, 1991) was meant to be his last play, and is an allegorical statement on one's travel through life,

There are a number of hybrid plays based on folk narratives that have a rural setting, incorporate music and dance, and follow antirealist performance conventions, including a rejection of the proscenium stage. In terms of form, plays such as Karnad's *Hayavadana* (*Horse Head*, 1971), Chandrashekhar Kambar's *Jokumaraswami* (1972), and Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor* (*Charandas the Thief*, 1974) exemplify the neotraditionalist movement in post-Independence Indian theatre.

In its canvas and treatment, Girish Karnad's play *Tughlaq* is both huge and contemporary. It is a tale of the crumbling to ashes of the dreams and aspirations of an over-ambitious, yet considerably virtuous king. Contemporary in the sense that one can see flashes of Tughlaqi (almost a proverb now in the Hindi) attitude – callous yet well-meaning – in contemporary political structures too. Despite the foolishness of deciding to shift the capital of India from Delhi to Daulatabad to 'centralize administration,' despite the highhandedness of making copper coins equal in value to silver dinars, despite the shamelessness of designing a conspiracy to kill his own brother and father at prayer hour, what is remarkable, and relatively unknown, in the much-infamous character of Tughlaq is the willingness to work for his people and to ensure their happiness, the courage to take initiative in the direction of communal-equality; and a keenly observing and ever-diligent mind. The disappointment in the end when he is not understood by his people and followers is obvious. And Karnad captures it all in his play.

Naga-Mandala (Play with a Cobra) by Girish Karnad combines two traditional Indian oral tales, but also touches on issues of women's lives in the context of contemporary Indian culture, as well as the continuing significance of storytelling in the society.

In the history of post independence Indian theatre, Utpal Dutt's re-creation on stage, and through the dialectics of trans-cultural theatre, of four of Shakespeare's plays, *Romeo & Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Othello* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is significant. These are the plays in which Verona and Mantua, Rome, Sardis and Phillipi, Venice and Cyprus, Athens and a wood near Athens appear with all their socio-historical and magical attributes. Utpal Dutt was the first to enter Bengali mainstream drama through translations of Shakespeare.. But by making Shakespeare accessible in a regional Indian language Dutt also decolonized Shakespeare. He never quite gave up producing Shakespeare, specially *Othello*. By taking the Mediterranean into the open air setting of backward Indian villages, Dutt was not only dislocating the locale but also disclaiming the proscenium stage and Victorian realistic presentation which he so disapproved. This kind of open staging also linked him with the work of the mid-century travelling companies (of which his mentor Geoffrey Kendal was one) which performed in pubs and halls and barns, meadows and trucks.

Utpal Dutt, of course, borrowed the expression "Epic Theatre" from Bertolt Brecht, though his own praxis of "Epic Theatre" was poles apart from, indeed explicitly opposed to, Brecht's concept of the same. "Utpal Dutt's Epic Theatre, unlike Brecht's Epic Theatre for class struggle, is first and foremost a nationalist theatre with an added on rather than intrinsic socialist agenda" When one elaborates this basic difference one concludes that whereas Utpal Dutt, closer to his own theatrical tradition and Stanislavsky (the Russian theatre director and actor), aspired to raise his Epic Theatre based on the reinvigorating power of myths, the wily Brecht formulated his vision by subjecting this very myth to question. One was anchored in his rich and vibrant epic-mythic mode, and the other delighted in sabotaging the myths from inside. Utpal Dutt needed colourful heroes, Brecht longed for a society which did not need heroes.

Experimental theatre in India may be considered a branch of the amateur theatre , but in some instances the objectives of the groups and their approach to producing plays are quite different from that of the general run of amateur groups . Calcutta has the reputation of being the foremost center of experimental theatre in the country. They choose different perspectives to critique the contradictions that surfaced in the violent confrontations between the right, the parliamentary left and the radical left, and raised issues like the role of the intellectuals, the role of the arts, and the meanings of violence in such a situation. Famous playwright, actor , director, Badal Sircar is the unofficial leader of experimental theatre of Calcutta. His Satabdi group performs generally every Friday evening at any place found suitable , such as simple, open, unfinished hall with no lighting equipment.

Political theatre has often relied upon farce and satire to make a veiled but effective critique of political trends. In contemporary India, however, political theatre is facing a new challenge in trying to find ways to "out-farce" a political arena that already has become inherently farcical. The first comes from the state of Kerala in southwestern India, where a self-styled progressive state government in the hands of the Communist Party has come under attack by critical playwrights for ossifying into orthodoxy and complacency. The second challenge centers on the difficulties faced by playwrights who have turned toward so-called indigenous or folk models of theatre to voice their critiques.

Tradition is the process of the transmission of age-old values and the contextual manifestation and interpretation of the universal. It is also an assertion of an identity, a revival and regeneration of the life-force of the community. Unless there is a strong parameter like religion or social consciousness, the whole process of continuity of culture becomes chaotic. The essential human element gets lost in the age of the machine and industrialization imposing limitation on the spontaneity, freedom of design and the imagination of the creative artist in theatre. In India, peasants, agricultural labourers, women, tribals, bonded labourers and other oppressed groups are rediscovering the potential of contemporary hybrid theatre as a weapon in their struggle for land, water, forest, better working and living conditions, human rights. Increasing number of people in modern times are turning to theatre by the people for the people and of the people as a means of mobilizing people for action. Tradition is the process of the transmission of age-old values and the contextual manifestation and interpretation of the universal. It is also an assertion of an identity, a revival and regeneration of the life-force of the community. Unless there is a strong parameter like religion or social consciousness, the whole process of continuity of culture becomes chaotic. The essential human element gets lost in the age of the machine and industrialization imposing limitation on the spontaneity, freedom of design and the imagination of the creative artist in theatre.. In India, peasants, agricultural labourers, women, tribals, bonded labourers and other oppressed groups are rediscovering the potential of contemporary hybrid theatre as a weapon in their struggle for land, water, forest, better working and living conditions, human rights. Increasing number of people in modern times are turning to theatre by the people for the people and of the people as a means of mobilizing people for action.

Predominantly leftwing open-air theatre, described by Safdar Hashmi as ‘a militant political theatre of protest [whose] function is to agitate the people and to mobilize them behind fighting organizations.’ *Chargesheet* (1951) is among the earliest known street plays. Utpal Dutt recalls that this play was done at the instance of Panu Pal, who interrupted an IPTA rehearsal one day and urged those present to do a quick, short, improvised play on the imprisonment of Communist leaders. The very next day *Chargesheet* was performed at Hazra Park in Calcutta to an audience of thousands of workers. It was then performed many times.

The *Chargesheet* experience left an impression on the young Utpal Dutt. He was obviously impressed by the robust, rough theatricality of the street play, its immediacy and its political sharpness. He continued doing street plays, mostly during election campaigns, till nearly the end of his life. In terms of form though, the early street theatre seems to have mimicked the proscenium theatre, with the action often taking place in the open in front of a wall or some other backdrop, and actors entering from and exiting into improvised wings. The history of street theatre in India coincides with periods of political upheaval. Contemporary street theatre began in the turbulent 1970s. Calcutta saw hundreds of street performances by radical groups. With the Emergency, the semi-fascist terror against communists, and the Naxalbari upheaval, street theatre entered a new and potentially dangerous phase. Street theatre activists were attacked, often by the police, and this resulted in the death of at least two activists, Ashis Chatterjee of Theatre Unit in 1972, and Prabir Datta of *Silhouette* in 1974. Many others were arrested, beaten up, tortured.

.In north India, street theatre was pioneered by Jana Natya Manch (Janam, formed 1973, and led by Safder Hashmi till his murder in 1989) and in south India by Samudaya (formed 1975), Janam’s first street play *Machine* (1978) is a classic of the genre. Janam has had about 7,000 performances of 58 street plays till October 2002, and many of these have been extensively

translated/adapted. *Aurat* (Woman, 1979), *Halla Bol* (Attack!, 1988), and *Aartanaad* (on child sexual abuse, 1996) are fine examples of a popular political theatre that combines a directness of address with aesthetic vigour.

. The other street theatre group in Delhi is Nishant, led by Shamsul Islam and his wife Neelima. In Punjab, the grand old man of Punjabi theatre, Gursharan Singh, has continued doing street theatre for over two decades, right through the years of militancy, braving threats to his life and inspiring a whole generation of young theatre artists. 1989 was a high-point for street theatre, when, after Hashmi's murder, 30,000 performances marked his birthday, 12 April. This day is observed all over the country as National Street Theatre Day

Unesco has endorsed the Convention of the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions in October 2005. The futuristic goals should be to create patronage, audience, economic security for contemporary hybrid theatre in India. Hybrid contemporary theatre based on Jatra, Tamasha, Swang, mask theatres in India has become a weapon in the fight against cultural neo-imperialism. The hybrid theatre in India has wonderful and progressive future.



## From Representation to Presentation

Young-joo Choi

\*

When a topic, "New theatricality in Korean Theatre" was given to me, I questioned myself on what was new and what was theatricality. The word new could be relatively determined to the old. For the convenience to develop my presentation, I would like to confine 'new' into a period from the mid-1990s until now. Also I will limit the word theatricality to mean a director's methodology to articulate a playwright's play with other theatrical expressions. So, are there any new tendency related with theatricality in present Korean theatre? Yes. There are some delicate shades of changes in theatricality in recent Korean theatre different from past one. The newly evolving theatricality can be explained in many ways. Among them I want to focus on a discernable attitude moving away from representation to presentation or embracing both, which can be found at the border of theatre and performance.

Because I just want to catch a more concrete contour of the progress of new theatricality, I would not explicate the floating academic theories about these two terms. To do this, I would rather like to use these terms in following narrow sense. Representation is a key concept belonging to theatre practice. So, it implies a dramatic reality. Presentation is an act of de-dramatization of dramatic reality which can be found in performance area. Theatricality contrasts with representational activity. And it is created as a surplus beyond representation embedded in theatrical form and expression. Because current Korean theatre have two distinguishable strata according to the generation and to the conspicuous style, my presentation would consider both of these aspects too.

\*\*

One of the crucial characteristics in modern Korean theatre from the 1970s until the early 1990s was found in a tendency to center director's forms of expression onto the stage. During this period directors' theatrical style contributed to this tendency greatly like as Gyu Huh, Duk-hyung Yoo, Min-soo Ahn, Tae-sok Oh, Jong-ok Kim, Yoon-taek Lee did. Their theatricality at that time shared a grand cultural agenda of 're-adaption of Korean folk culture into modern Korean theatre and establishment of national identity'. The increased interests in Goot(means shaman's exorcism rite), Pansori(means vocal performance sung by a solo which continued more than six and seven hours usually), and Talchum(Korean mask dance) were saturated into their theatrical form and expressive style. With them, they could break out the fourth wall of conventional realism play and interfere with audience's fantasy. Though the materiality of the fertile folk culture of unique color, sound, rhythm were foregrounded, they were controlled by director's choreography. Theatre became a place to confirm the cultural idiosyncrasy to bind people all together.

From the mid-1990s, there appeared a little different directorial inclinations as in A-ra Kim, Tae-sook Han, Jung-woong Yang, and Young-oh Won's cases. They staged conventional dramatic texts mixing traditional Korean folk culture in a way of stylized artifacts. Different from the earlier decades, they modified the traditional culture radically according to each one's style. They staged theatre but did so blurring theatre and performance in such a way that de-dramatization occurred intermittently during the production. They preferred the skeleton plot with abstracted words and plethora of scenic images to provoke and explore a new territory of a metaphorical landscape. Among them I

will choose Jung-woong Yang and Young-oh Won to explore the present new theatricality. They started their theatrical career at the same international theatre group Lansencan. They cultivated the traditional folk culture to create their own expressionistic style but in an opposite way.

After a serial of earlier experiments, Jung-woong Yang found his genuine style with his fourth work, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Following acculturational venture, he completely transposed Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into a Korean version. What he changed was not only about the narratives. The scenic images reminded the audience of the aboriginal cultural fantasy of fairies. Though the plot based on the narrative, it was deconstructed by the segmented words. Then they liberated the sound from the semantic potential of the narrative, and the representation function receded in favour of the play of sounds and images. Also the performers' corporeal movements were predominant in communication between stage and audience. As the stylized movements got closer to the dance, it also emancipated the semantic signification from action into theatrical expressiveness through the performers' movement. Also the traditional live music, which was played at the conner of studio, got rid of narrative dominance and provokes the emotional contact of between stage and the audience.

While Jung-woong Yang cultivated traditional culture into his theatrical form, Young-oh Won created a third space of hybridity. He didn't insist national culture and identity, rather he seemed to prefer western theatrical images. But, in his earlier work *Hamlet from the East* he successfully mingled the western images with the oriental discursive speculation. This piece could be regarded as a sophisticated artifact. The theatrical process totally depended on scenic images rather than words. Especially, the sparse words conjoining dramatic reality of theatre disappeared into the middle of the performance. Then the flow of images replaced the words. But the images didn't correspond to the original plot rather it buoyed the potential up. Between the abstraction and the surplus, the images evoked an unanticipated lack out of the original plot. Focusing on Hamlet's psychology, the images unfolded the dream of his childhood unto the stage over ten minutes. The performers' silent look and the choreography emphasized the past happiness and harmony in this family. Another 10 minutes continued without words featuring Hamlet's disillusion against his mother and uncle's stylized dance. Hamlet's stasis and the couple's sensual ecstasy contrasted strikingly in this scene. In this way *Hamlet from the East* developed its own theatrical idioms to the director's interpretation, reinterpretation, reconstruction. What stage meant exactly was not clear but it suggested a mental-lyrical psychology charged with images.

Along with young directors' burgeoning theatricality, Tae-sok Oh, Yoon-taek Lee, and Jin-chaek Sohn also quickened their style in this atmosphere. In the 80s, these senior directors experimented with the traditional culture to create their own style and got to settle the aesthetic core in the mid 90s. The materiality from performers' physical movement, the playful play of props, and the condensed images built the autonomy in their theatres.

Tae-sok Oh and his theatre group Mok-hwa have established their own aesthetics with 'sandae' structure and 'nondurung' acting. With them, they intentionally took leave of the self-contained dramatic reality. The plot was composed with episodes as in 'sandanori'. 'Nondurung' acting style pulled apart the language and action and turned its signifying function into audience's understanding. The predominant atmosphere was the playfulness widespread in the narratives full of colloquial words, regional dialects, and fantasy. Besides the vivid colour or artificial texture of clothes, the music, the frequent appearance of dance, and the unanticipated use of props, all contributed to their playfulness which was hiding biting satires. To summarize Tae-sok Oh and Mok-hwa's theatricality, their theatre preserve the double binds of representation and presentation that the narrative construct the dramatic reality but the theatrical materiality exceeded its semantic function. As a result, the final

communication was made in audience's sensory experience not through the message.

Since mid 1990s, Yoon-taek Lee and Street Theatre Troupe have concentrated their interests on re-vitalizing popular theatre. Especially when they settled down at Mil-yang in 1999, they also could find a route to get closer to the populace through the whole process of production. This environmental condition influenced their theatricality greatly. The whole performers aimed to place their theatre in an open-air market atmosphere which was full of excitement, energy, and the merriments. The performer at the front of the stage broke the barrier of theatrical illusion and bantered the audience like a trickster. The frequent dance and music appealed to the audience almost being equivalent to the words. These days the stylized acting style borrowed from 'talchum'(Korean mask dance) also attracted the audiences' gaze. The performer's dynamic movement was itself musical and allure the audience's desire.

Jinchaek Sohn and his company Mychoo have explored traditional culture and succeeded in modifying and popularizing the Korean musical performance 'madangnori'. As an open theatre, 'madangnori' is composed of songs and dances based on the popular story. So, the dramatic reality was not what the theatre aimed to produce on the stage. How to show the well-known story is more important. In this, the performers who shared the 30 year history with Meechu were the main source the theatricality originated. Most of them are experts in Korean traditional dance and music. (Also, the exhilarating of 'heung' was spontaneously made in the moment of contact between audience and performers.) Especially the live traditional music orchestrated by Bumhoon Park and the traditional dance choreographed by Gooksu Ho, they are the first rate artists, added the grandeur and dynamic spectacles onto the stage.(In a word, Madangnori is a dramatic performance.) Recently Sohn intended to elaborate the legitimate indoor theatre imbued with sensitive traditional aesthetics also. Needless to say, the performers' disciplined movement through madangnori exactly touch the delicate route of gyee in communication.

The growing numbers of playwright-directors today rendered a new tendency of theatricality also. Because they were representing for the theatre group, they were aware of the members' characteristics in their character and acting style when they wrote the play. From the start, the play embeded potential to be performed in itself. One of the tendencies was found in common peoples' everyday reality as the subject matter and the expressive style. Some of them share the universal current of hyper-realism which were proliferating in Japan and Europe. The shabby people's corporeal body, female character's pregnancy, the people's ordinary behaviour without makeup, the destitute environment which was embodied by symbolic props, presented its striking materiality and embodied an anonymity of universal existential condition.

Among them, Geun-hyung Park and Golmokgyl achieved an originality to mix hyper-realistic approach with theatricality. With hyper-realistic style the stage detailed the common people's everyday life. While laconic narrative with omission and jump thickened poetic atmosphere, the colloquial dialogues and performer's unartificial acting style enlivened the whole scene with theatricality. Especially in recent production of *Gyungsook and Gyungsook's Father* they explored another territory embracing performance method. When Gyungsook's father shouted Gyungsook to disappear in his face, she went into a small wooden box covering a blanket over herself. In this scene the words didn't correspond to the movement but pulled apart. But this abrupt action implied whole relationship between father and child of this family. Later Gyungsook's father brought a young woman into her house and introduced her to Gyungsook as his mistress. This abnormal situation went to extremes when he ordered Gyungsook to hold an iron washbasin for them to beat the time with their song. His clothing of female Korean costume intensified a grotesque humor against his patriarchal authority. In these two scenes, the meaning was not stable to decipher. The audience's response came from a certain sense of discomfort at first and explosive laughter later.

On the other hand, the professional directors' experimental theatricality provoked the audience's attention. Among them Jung-hee Park's *Pyungsim*(means peaceful mind) and Hyun-jong Song's *Family Lear* came into the spotlight for the degree that theatre and performance invigorated each one's expressive effects.

Jung-hee Park has been pioneering to include performance style into the theatre production. From the original source of *Peaceful Mind*, which was notorious novel for its abstruseness, she has chosen basic image and characters from the original play. Replacing word with corporeal movement, she successfully deciphered the esoteric quality. The words were heard from the performers occasionally, though they couldn't compose any semantic quality. Instead of the plot or the narrative, the performer's corporeal body and its movement contoured an emotional landscape. What pulled and pushed the audience into the stage was the penetrating rhythm accompanying this movements. By this way, Park changed original philosophical novel into an aesthetic experience. In this production, Park achieved her own theatricality with an exceptional degree of concentration, embracing rhythm and stillness, sound and silence, light and darkness.

Hyun-jong Song has chosen Yoo-gyung Oh's adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. In this revised version, the whole actions were unfolded following Lear's memory. He was a paralyzed inpatient and looking down his past life from the balcony stage. As the mind didn't move in linear process but fragmented, the narrative reflected his psychological state. This state meant also dismembering logical plot structure, building up scenes groping for the expressive medium. For this Song especially maximized Lear's two daughters and Edmund's unnatural behaviors. Repugnance against their outrageous and brutal actions was what Song exactly wanted to stir up in audience's reception. To provoke this, Song featured a scene in which the performers cannibalized Gloucester's body. The blood ran down into Gloucester's body and the performers like beasts ate Gloucester's internal organs exaggeratingly. While this scene continued almost for 20 minutes without words, the audience got awakened for the dark side of human nature. It was deadly funny but shocking lesson too. With this the final signification was not made in the stage but in the audience's mind. Presentation rather than representation was the way he intended to sharpen the reality.

\*\*\*

When we restricted theatricality to the style of representation and expression rather than in the narrative message, it was found in the way to construct *mise-en-scene* in each of the theatrical productions. So, the result was individual, different from theatre to theatre, and from scene to scene. At the same time theatricality has been used to reveal the reality the conventional play could not portray in its representative method. The above mentioned Korean directors were searching new theatricality to construct *mise-en-scene* and to unveil the repressed reality with the method of performance. The senior directors tended to pursue theatricality to create their own aesthetics using traditional culture, while junior directors sharpened their expressive style to construct reality in original and provocative way. In their productions theatricality included aesthetics, conception, social values of the society, and expressive strategy about reality.

Which way the directors follow, they were conscious of a widespread tendency to move from representation into presentation blurring dialectics of theatre and performance. In this, they tended to present the materiality of stage, performer's body, lighting and sound effect, and props. New amalgamation of different genres and media also contributed to create new theatricality. By these, the theatre was able to realize the inexpressible of the narrative quality as intensely as that which expressed and represented by the language or scenic images. Instead language and scenic images withdrawn or reduced its representational function and

were included into a whole metaphorical landscape of theatrical practices. In this the plethora or deprivation and the resultant elevation or abstraction of the landscape did not admit the audience to pick up the logical plot structure but provoked them to contact the reality and participate in the signification process as in Geun-hyung Park, Jung-hee Park, and Hyunjong Song's theatre. For these, the theatricality could be used as a practical application to transcend barrier of national languages and bridged them as in Tae-sok Oh, Yoon-taek Lee, Jin-chaek Sohn, and Jung-woong Yang's theatre.

## The New Drama and Contemporary Dramatic Criticism

Liu Yanjun

### A. The New Drama

In recent years, with the social and economic re-structuring of Chinese society, the middle class has increased drastically, gradually forming a group for cultural consumption. Therefore, popular culture is penetrating every corner of people's lives in society. This popularization of culture has had a direct impact on the development of Chinese drama, resulting in an emphasis on the entertainment factor.

From a careful examination of developments in contemporary drama, we see more and more new plays, very different from the traditional dramas—different in terms of content, form and style. These new plays that are emerging seem to have a promising future.

Plays that are representative of this new drama are: *Add Some Leek Sauce If It Tastes Too Sweet*, *Twist Some Fries Right Away If You Want*, *An Only Child Joins the Army*, *A Family Photo*, *Finding My Father*, *Hi, Cutie!*, *Open for Business*, *The Last Night for Jin Da Ban*. All of these have surprised us by their abundance, their excellent box office returns and their huge popularity with audiences.

From a theoretical perspective, we can determine the following prominent characteristics: all of the plays have entertainment as their function, they are concerned with the lives of ordinary people, they tend towards comical effect, and aim for commercial success.

#### 1. Popularization: The Perspectives of the New Drama

Since the 1980s, dramas that develop purely political subject matter have gradually withdrawn from the platform of our theatre history; since the 1990s, they have been replaced by plays that reveal the lives of ordinary people, seen from their own perspectives. They focus on issues such as problems with work, money, housing and love—that is, expressing the popular experience.

*Add Some Leek Sauce If It Tastes Too Sweet* is a kaleidoscope of the lives of the so-called “Beijing wanderers,” who come from the farthest regions of China to seek a better life in Beijing. There are six main characters, all young people who serve to represent the characteristics of a generation that is both striving to fulfill their dreams, and bound by the awkward problems of real life. Ma Jian, who comes to Beijing dreaming of becoming a star, fails to be admitted to the Academy of Traditional Chinese Opera and has to make a living playing supporting roles. Li Xiang, who strives to buy his own house, loses his job trying overly-hard to impress his boss, and ends up in the embarrassing situation of not being able to pay his rent. The play also includes Lucy, a mentally-ill orphan, and Xin Xin, who is immersed in her troubles with love. By focusing on the lives of these “nobodies,” audiences see the lives of “regular people” caught up in the process of urbanization. These stories, told from this popular perspective reflect the daily lives of the audience members themselves, and are thus more likely to resonate with them.

Similar to *Add Some Leek Sauce If It Tastes Too Sweet*, *An Only Child Joins the Army* aims to examine the deeper social and familial causes that form the habits of only children—habits such as “throwing their socks” and “talking back.” *Open for Business* expresses the playwright’s concerns and aspirations through seemingly ridiculous plots and absurd characters. Works such as *Add Some Leek Sauce If It Tastes Too Sweet*, which tells of the bitterness and hardships of its six central characters, and *The Last Night for Jin Da Ban*, which looks penetratingly at the degrading life of a dance girl, are thought-provoking. They provide enough room for people to think, thus building a substantial foundation for the new drama.

The new drama, then, builds on the values and life attitudes of ordinary people. Real estate salesman Wang Dong, in *Twist Some Fries Right Away If You Want*, is dying of love for his colleague, Yi Lin. Again and again he prays to be magically changed into a wealthy man, a celebrity, an esteemed scholar, or even a powerful ruler. All such efforts fail to win the heart of Yi Lin. In the end, he comes to realize that life is real, not magical—and once he comes down to earth in his attitudes, and learns to carry on in life positively and honestly, he wins the true love of his Yi Lin. The tone of the drama is comically absurd, in spite of the content’s being so real. After their laughter ends, audiences are left to consider: a life full of exciting twists and turns is not the only life that holds meaning, and that the lives of everyday people also have value.

The subject matter and contents of the new drama are aligned with their contemporary social and cultural context, and the new drama’s message is reflected in its popularized artistic style. Pressing ever closer to the lives of the audience members, it emphasizes their standing in life, their puzzlements, and achieves the dual purpose of offering a practical meaning of life, and winning box office approval, as well.

## 2. Comical Effect: The Style of the New Drama

Today, China has truly entered the consumer age. Entertainment has replaced probing the human spirit and the meaning of history. The new drama is consistent with this developing trend. In its emphasis on entertainment value, it negates the previous necessity to obey the political authorities, and to ignore the power of the people. In the meantime, it also serves as relief from the mental tensions of previous years, and provides audiences with a spirit of comfort. Here, comedy has come to replace tragedy in response to audience demand, and become the dominant form for the new drama.

One comic theme that appears again and again in the new comic drama is that of the “grand reunion.” Wang Dong and Yi Lin in *Twist Some Fries Right Away if You Want*, Da Lu and Xin Xin in *Add Some Leek Sauce If It Tastes Too Sweet*, Li Huan and Xiao Zi in *Twist Two; Love Flu* all have happy endings after hardships in life. For the Chinese, a grand reunion means happiness. A traveling son, no matter how far he travels, will not forego the happiness of a grand reunion with his family. Since

audiences associate grand reunions with happiness, they appear very often in the new comedies.

The New Year's celebration may also be seen as a setting for humorous situations. The story of *Twist Two; Love Flu* is set in a hospital. Here, both the sicknesses of the patients and the skills of the doctors are presented comically; patients with bone fractures can walk on air; doctors learn to use acupuncture in a last-minute rush, sticking patients with needles while thumbing through the books.

In *An Only Child Joins the Army*, the comedy is built through juxtaposition and misunderstandings between characters. *Open for Business* uses black humor for its comedy, bringing its audience to laughter after enormous pain. In *Finding My Father*, the tools that accomplish the humorous effect are amplification, abnormal actions and incongruent costumes. In addition, fantastical plots; an array of amusing accents; characters associated with specific catchphrases; and magnified action, language and psychology—all these provide sources of humor in these plays.

Nevertheless, the comedy of some of the new dramas proves to be frivolous and superficial. *Cui Hua's Friends* rearranges television commercials for household products such as Wahaha, Colgate, Qi Manwear, or even Anerle and Xinxing Hospital. These are coupled with elements of stand-up comedy, skits, and *Erenzhuan*, etc. They have no real plot-line, and not much more theme than the parody of TV commercials. They count for their comic effect on the performances of the actors, and on easily-earned laughs that require little thought. True comedy, however, is about the open-mindedness, the generosity and detachment that are gained from life experience. Real comedy comes from the rumination on various times of life; it is not the forced laugh that comes from nowhere. The new Chinese dramatists must not neglect the deeper meaning of their works in pursuit of a comical style.

## 2. Commercialization: Market Demands for the New Drama

The most prominent sign of the new drama's orientation towards commercialization is the growth of celebrity status and all that goes with it: branding, fashion, large holiday performances such as the New Year's celebration.

A dazzling cast always attracts audiences. *Hi, Cutie!* is full of star attractions, such as music director Qi Qin, and singing groups such as Ye Pei, Mei Mei and black duck, bringing added attention to the show. Other celebrities appearing in such works include singer Mao Ning and Qu Ying in *Add Some Leek Sauce If It Tastes Too Sweet*, comedy star Pan Changjiang in *Finding My Father*, Liu Xiaoqing in *The Last Night for Jin Daban*, and celebrity couple Feng Yuanzheng and Liang Danni, who starred in *A Family Photo*.

We also see spin-offs that commercialize New Year's celebration spectacles. For example, after the New Year's celebration, *Cui Hua, Put the Pickled Cabbage on the Table*, became hugely popular, Liu Yan went on to capitalize on "Cui Hua" by coming up with her *Cui Hua, Put the Pickled Cabbage on the Table 2003* and *Cui Hua's Friends*. Cui Hua emerged as a new brand for consumption, with various companies coming out with the Cui Hua doll, the Cui Hua book series, etc.



Similarly, *Twist Some Fries Right Away If You Want To*, first staged for the New Year, became the hot new show in 2003 by earning over one million *renminbi* at the box office with 52 shows. Other shows were also created to build on the success of *Twist*—there were *Twist Two*; *Twist Flu* and *Twist Three*; *Vagabond Folks*. The sensationalizing of Cui Hua and *Twist* aims to achieve a chain effect in the minds of the viewers, encouraging them to spend money at the end-of-the-year holidays year after year by attending these shows.

The new drama is also consciously in pursuit of what we call the “take-away” attitude—that is, it absorbs elements of various fashions. In *Finding My Father*, a stage full of traditional-looking men on a thrust stage is replaced by eight modern, pretty girls in mini-skirts and white go-go boots humming “I Love You.” Also running through the dramas are elements of popular music, Peking Opera, Pingju Opera, Huangmei Opera, children’s songs, rap, ballet, modern dance, etc. In *Hi, Cutie!*, apart from introducing clips from well-known songs into the plot, we also find an inflatable, floating boat, a large music box and a merry-go-round.

It must be said that these new plays are successful in drawing audiences, and to some extent make up for today’s acute lack of recreational activities. Nonetheless, this new drama is still in its initial stage and in need of improvement. They exhibit problems such as uneven development, superficiality and over-sensationalizing. The new drama needs to consider not only market and popular demands for entertainment, but also its instructional social function.

## **B. Contemporary Drama Criticism**

In comparison with the dynamic development of the new drama, dramatic criticism is gradually losing its function and effectiveness, and this can be seen in two ways. First, suggestions from theoretical circles are not conveyed to the public, either directly or indirectly, so they have no influence on the public’s tastes and judgment. Second, at the same time, expert opinions are not sought out to support government decision-making. Of course, development of theatre criticism has to start from these two points.

In recent years, mass media such as newspapers, journals and television have begun to show tendencies to ignore the public. Deliberately or not, they turn their backs on the public function of these media, becoming merely a handful of media people in back rooms, using what was intended to provide information to the public as a platform for their personal opinions. Their viewpoints are inevitably limited by their own levels of understanding. More importantly, they hold direct control of the channels for media communication, forming a media monopoly and giving rise to the corruption that accompanies it. As a consequence, these media are hardly a substitute for actual criticism; they have neither the expertise nor independence of thought to play the role that objective criticism plays.

Of course, the fact that the mass media do not pay enough attention to theatre critics—or are not willing to provide channels for expression for them—does not mean that experts have nowhere to express themselves. Experts in circles for drama research can express their own academic research achievements and opinions in specialized media. However, what we are all witnessing today is that their impact on

society seriously shrinks when experts only have their voices heard in specialized media, instead of through mass media aimed at the public.

With the opinions of the experts seriously blocked from the public media, the influence of drama criticism on artists is extremely narrow and kept far from the public. The information that the public obtains is heavily sifted by the media, and the experts' comments are usually screened from the public. Even if the experts may sometimes broadcast their opinions, they are often misrepresented or distorted in the media, so that drama criticism cannot have a direct impact or serve a correctional function towards the creation of drama or on drama criticism itself.

For historical reasons, drama has maintained a close connection with government in contemporary Chinese history. Compared with other categories of the arts, such as fine arts, music and dance, which have close relationships to television, film and literature—drama reflects some special characteristics in its relationship to government institutions. This is to some extent owing to the special status that drama has enjoyed in cultural institutions since the 1950s. During that time, the organization of the Chinese government was deeply influenced by the former Soviet Union, which set up a special Drama Improvement Bureau. From this, we have proof that the theatre held a special status.

Admittedly, in a sound market environment, the connection between government decision-making and the creation of drama is very limited, as the art of drama has its own pattern of development. At present, though, China is still in a special historical period, with a unique artistic context, and drama has been increasingly marginalized as an “artistic” category in a market economy. With the shrinking of the market, theatre circles have become more dependent on financial support. In 2001, for the first time the rate of self-sufficiency for the official recreational performing groups dropped below 30%, and by 2003, the national subsidy for each show had surpassed 7,000 rmb, up from 2,100 rmb in 1995 and only 200 rmb in 1985. Against this background of increasing dependence of the drama groups on national financial assistance, the government cultural and theatre policies are exerting drastically expanding influence on the existence and development of the entire Chinese theatre world.

The increasingly important role of the government and public finance on drama should, at the same time, result in an unprecedented amount of influence of drama criticism on the creation of drama and performance. The means for modern government to achieve effective and orderly social governance lies in its decision-making process, especially when it comes to public resource allocation. The government can surely depend on the experts in each field. Of course, the “dependence” we refer to here does not mean that the government will completely hand over its decision-making and resource allocation power to experts and professionals. Instead it means that, when making decisions and deploying resources, the government will, to a great extent, integrate the analyses and research results of the groups of experts. By weighing the opinions of various experts, the government may have a deeper understanding of the potentially positive effect of a given policy, while at the same time being able to anticipate, with relative clarity, the possible negative consequences of a policy. In this way, more appropriate allocation of public resources may result in more benefit to society.

With the increasingly important role of government decision-making on the development of the new drama, and the more and more decisive role that public finances play, the government tends even more to marginalize the value of expert opinion and criticism in art circles, relying instead on its own opinions. This has the inevitable result that the artists directly involved in the creation of drama and performance totally ignore the existence of the critics. To be honest, the government is still relatively self-contained in the sphere of decision-making about both the drama and its funding—and this is a major reason for the ineffectiveness of dramatic criticism.

It cannot be stressed enough that objective, just, honest and professional criticism are important to the healthy development of the dramatic undertaking. However, development of the drama needs a sounder environment, one which includes several layers: experts should have more opportunities to speak directly to the public, and the government should depend more on theatre professionals for decisions about the theatre and its funding. In addition, people in the media should improve their professional ethics, and government officials should pay more attention to scientific decision-making. Above all, the embarrassing “elimination of the critics’ voices” should be resolved through the creation of some special systems. Fundamentally, these layers can all be combined into one—that is, to speed up the modernizing and re-structuring of the whole society.

REMARKS ON PRESENTING ERIC BENTLEY WITH THE IATC'S  
FIRST THALIA AWARD FOR LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT  
IN WRITING FOR THE THEATRE (Seoul, Korea 25 October 2006)

By DON RUBIN

*Director, Graduate Program in Theatre Studies, York University, Toronto*  
*Editor, World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*

When I was a university student about a hundred years ago, it seemed to me that all the books in my courses were edited by the same person – Eric Bentley. There were plays by Pirandello (translated by Eric Bentley) and books of criticism about people like Shaw and O'Neill and Brecht (written by Eric Bentley) and books of theatre theory (back then we didn't know they were theories and we still called them ideas) and they too were written and edited by Eric Bentley. Like most students, I had no idea who Eric Bentley was but I sure knew he was important.

Some years later, as a young university professor entrusted with running a performing arts series for my faculty, I found myself in the marvellous position of being able to include a lecture series in my program and I knew that one of the people I wanted to have lecture was this ubiquitous scholar Eric Bentley. I contacted him through one of his publishers and asked him to give a lecture in Toronto on Brecht's theory of *verfremdungseffekt*. He, of course, said "no". He wasn't interested in talking about Brecht's theory of *verfremdungseffekt* ... but he would be happy to give a concert.

"A concert of what?" I asked incredulously. "A concert of Brecht songs," he said. "And maybe some Prevert."

I wondered if Bentley could sing and also dance but thought better of asking the great man. I said "yes" and Eric Bentley came to Toronto a few months later. He sat down at a harmonium – a little fake piano – and talked about Brecht as a writer, as a song writer. He then read some Brecht poetry and started to sing. I have to admit that Eric was no singer but then we all knew that Brecht didn't want real singers anyway. He continued singing for three hours. And then took a break and then came back and sang some more for those who stayed. And most stayed.

A few years later, I was starting a new theatre journal in Canada called the *Canadian Theatre Review*. I asked Eric Bentley if he would be a member of our editorial board. He said "no" but he said he would do everything that an editorial board member would do. He would read articles for me; he would recommend writers; he would advise. And he did. And he did more over the years than many of my official board members.

One project he worked closely with me on was publication of a special issue of *CTR* dealing with "Homosexuality and the Theatre," a subject he had become keenly interested in and one which continues to hold his interest even today. Indeed, over the last 30 years, he has become one of the most incisive theatre voices on gay subjects in the English-speaking world. He also contributed one of his major plays to that issue – a play about Oscar Wilde called *Lord Alfred's Lover*, still one of my favourite Bentley plays.

Given all this, I guess it is fair to ask at this point: "what is a critic...anyway?"

In one interview done some years back with the Voice of America and which subsequently appeared as an “Afterword” to a collection of his plays, Eric Bentley is quoted as saying that he doubted “that anything is harder than being a really good critic.”

“To write theatre reviews,” he said in his 1956 volume *What Is Theatre*, “is worse than walking on eggs. It is to walk on live bodies and make them bleed.... I sometimes feel that theatre reviewing is the art of making enemies and failing to influence people....” That piece ends with the words, “I am afraid I take criticism seriously.”

For Bentley, the German dramatist Gotthold Lessing was a version of what he called the “exemplary critic.” Lessing’s power, he said, derived from his ability to conduct in his writing both an ongoing polemic as well as an extended enquiry into the theatre of his time. Lessing was simultaneously “fighting off what he firmly held to be wrong,” said Bentley, while “constantly asking himself what he held to be right.”

Our honoured guest today has lived those ideals both in his life and in his work as critic and reviewer (a function he only held for about four years), in his writings as scholar and playwright, in his enormous contributions as both translator and performer. No one has fought harder or more brilliantly than Eric Bentley against what he firmly held to be wrong and no one asked himself more constantly and more articulately – in print and in person -- what it was to be right.

His ideas on playwright as thinker made us understand that great ideas and great theatrical thinking can walk hand-in-hand without apology. His work on German theatre gave us not only the plays of Brecht in English but profound insights into Brecht’s work, his thinking and his life. His work gave us as well not only the plays of Pirandello in English but reasons to stage them and teach them and understand them. If these had been his only contributions to world theatre, they would be more than enough to ensure him a place in this planet’s Hall of Theatrical Fame. But he did more. He changed the way we all saw theatre and dramatic literature. Almost single-handedly -- through his nearly 40 books, his collections, translations and essays – he created what we all think of today as the canon of modern drama.

For all this, I say on behalf of so many of us, thank you Eric Bentley. You have indeed changed the way we see and the way we study theatre in this complicated world we live in.

Eric Bentley once said that he tried to live his life “at the crossroads where hope and the critical intelligence meet.” A wonderful notion. The corner of Hope and Critical Intelligence. That has surely been his address. And that address is his gift to all of us.

Eric Bentley has made the theatre a more thoughtful place, a more welcoming place for the concerned and the committed, a more challenging place for playwrights, scholars and, yes, even critics.

Through his writings over six decades, he has made us better. I could not be more delighted that the International Association of Theatre Critics has chosen to award its first Thalia Prize to this great scholar, critic, playwright, performer and true Man of the Theatre, Eric Bentley.

Editor's Note:

For the record, Eric Bentley is the author of more than a dozen books of criticism and analysis including:

- The Playwright As Thinker
- Bernard Shaw
- In Search of Theatre
- The Dramatic Event
- What Is Theatre?
- The Life of the Drama
- The Theatre of Commitment
- Theatre of War
- Bentley on Brecht

He is the editor of more than a dozen anthologies including:

- The Modern Theatre (6 volumes)
- The Classic Theatre (4 volumes)
- 30 Years of Treason
- The Theory of the Modern Stage

He is the English language translator/editor of numerous European playwrights including:

- Bertolt Brecht (16 volumes in the Grove Press edition)
- Naked Masks by Pirandello
- Eduardo De Filippo
- Karl Sternheim

He is the author of a dozen original plays and original re-visions/responses including:

- Lord Alfred's Lover
- Are You Now or Have You Ever Been
- The Kleist Variations
- The Memoirs of Pontius Pilate

He is heard on more than a half-dozen record albums.

## **Thalia Prize Acceptance Speech**

**Eric Bentley**

(Note: Publication of this speech is submitted to author's approval.)

Thank you. I couldn't be more pleased to find my theater writings of interest to fellow writers and readers beyond my usual public in the U.S. I am grateful too that it is not just my theatre reviews that are honored here but all my writings for or about theatre.

What is drama criticism? As usually understood, it is the reviewing of plays as they are performed in the public theatres. What is its function? Well, there are two distinct functions, and two kinds of writers to watch. In New York anyway, the first function is that of Consumer Guide. Theatre going is expensive and this kind of critic advises that a given show is worth your money or not. "This show is worth a 100 dollar admission charge, that one is only worth \$5" ... and so on. I also think this type of review could be quite short, like the one or two line summaries of films provided in some newspapers. However, I am probably in a minority of one on that. Newspapers want their drama critics taken more seriously, as if they were experts to be envied their expertise, or even prophets to be revered. And so for this, as for other reasons, a certain falsity enters into newspaper criticism. It is hard for it to be on the level, and it usually isn't. To make matters worse it adapts itself, often, to the hit-and-flop mentality of commercial theatre. To help a show succeed the poor critic feels he has to exaggerate his enthusiasm. To force it to close on Saturday night he has to think up the devastating one-liner. It is true that such a one-liner can be truly witty. More often, though, it sounds forced and affected and, produced year after year by the same critic, conveys only a sense of a critic's dyspepsia, or even misanthropy.

Personally, I wouldn't mind if the newspaper critics didn't exist. Let shows just open, and let the public find out about them by word of mouth from those who attend first or second nights. The modern theatre is a huge industry which, like other huge industries, has far too many unneeded middle-men. I wouldn't mind if stage directors didn't exist, either. The 20th century welcomed them but they have outstayed their welcome, and are now a hideous imposition, especially in the opera house (which, for my money, is also a drama house). A friend of mine

who is a director says plaintively, “Oh, but a play needs someone. Like orchestral music it requires a conductor, if only to beat time.” Now I admit this had been believed as early as the 19th century. Not before that, however. In Mozart’s day, no conductor was needed: time can be beaten by the first violinist...

Let’s simply agree that Consumer Guiding is not proper drama criticism. What is? In the English language, for a couple of centuries now, there has been critique of theatre at the level of the best literary criticism. I might cite essays by Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt for evidence. As to regular coverage of London theatre, the late 19th century provides us with G.. B. Shaw’s reviews; the early 20th century, Max Beerbohm. From my boyhood in England, I vividly recall lively and enlivening reviews by James Agate and St John Ervine. But weren’t those in a newspaper? you will interpose. Yes, but weekly newspapers, I hasten to answer. And here I should try to be fair and add that the leading newspapers of London and New York, as I have known them since 1930, have often been much more than Consumer Guides. There are distinguished names: Stark Young, George Jean Nathan, Irving Wardle, Kenneth Tynan. And, if those are my elders, I might name as my juniors Robert Brustein, Gordon Rogoff, Richard Gilman...

And here let me take note of a bizarre fact. A young colleague, just the other day, asked me, “Hasn’t there been a terrible decline in dramatic criticism since the great days of Bernard Shaw or even of Stark Young?” I replied: If by great days, you mean that men like Shaw or Young ever presided over the theatre – dominated it in any way – you are mistaken. In their time they were almost invisible. Their work is visible to you because you have seen it – you have seen it as it is now collected in their books. Today no doubt it plays a part in the evolution of theatre. It played no such part at the time it was first offered to its newspaper or magazine public...

From this situation critics of a later generation such as myself can draw conclusions. I worked for four years as critic of a magazine, *The New Republic*. An awful silence followed every one of my impertinences and provocations. No one read me – at least that was my impression.



Bernard Shaw had quit drama criticism after four years. I followed his lead, and then did not wait as long as he did to reprint my reviews in a book. I am now referring to my book: *What is Theatre?* Everyone read that. Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams wrote me that if I didn't withdraw it from the bookstores, they would sue me for criminal libel. My arrival in the bookstores was evidently my arrival tout court. In the bookstores, as not in newspaper or magazine, my arrows had reached their target. Thus, in giving the first Thalia Prize to me, you are celebrating that odd man out: the theatre critic as book writer. And no book writer is content in any single division of the writing profession. If a critic doesn't also reveal himself to be a novelist or poet, it is ten to one that he will now declare himself as a playwright. For me that came in stages. First I translated plays – from German, Italian, Russian. Then I adapted plays and in my adaptations eventually departed so far from the originals they themselves became original. And, oh yes, I directed plays, I sang the lyrics I wrote ... And on and on.

The person you have chosen as first winner of the Thalia Prize has a perhaps unusual relation to the main topic of your concern: theatre criticism. I have practiced regular reviewing for only four of my 90 years. My interest in that reviewing was perhaps primarily an interest in my own education. The subtitle of *What is Theatre* is "A query in chronicle form." My reviews were just a chapter in my whole life's work. In short, the critic is not the whole man. I saw myself as theatre person, not theatre critic, and my more sacred pronouncements were saved for my plays. There I came to grips with my larger problems and those of the world outside me.

To conclude, I should address a question which some of you have already been asking me: if the purpose of daily theatre journalism is to guide the consumer toward or away from a show, what is the purpose of the broader theatre criticism I respect and try to emulate? Opinions could legitimately differ on this. Who knows how Bernard Shaw would answer it? Or Stark Young? Or Ken Tynan?

As I just mentioned I subtitled my book of reviews *What is Theatre* "a query in the form of a chronicle." In my case, reviewing led first to my long essay *The Life of the Drama* and thence

to my essayistic plays on big dramatic subjects like Christ, Galileo, and Oscar Wilde. But if I had died before these last two stages were reached, my theatre reviews, if they were good for anything, were above all contributions to a discussion. A discussion with whom? With anyone who might read them and turn over in his mind what they say. Pre-supposed, then, is a living theatrical culture in a living general culture. Thus my work would have no place in a totally commercialized culture – as Broadway and Hollywood often seem to be. It had no place in the culture of Soviet Communism where critics just hewed to a party line. It had no place in Communist East Germany where I was persona non grata in whom only the STASI was interested. And it will have no place in the theocratic Muslim societies with which the 21st century is now threatened.

England, where I was born and bred, once briefly had a theocratic culture. That was in the 17th century when the Puritans shut down the theatres and made a theatrical event of beheading their too theatrical king. For a year or two England was reigned by Puritanic virtue. God trumped Shakespeare. A god-intoxicated man named Oliver Cromwell who enjoyed slaughtering Catholic civilians, even women and children, was Lord Protector – the Lord's Protector of England against not only Catholicism but, I think one can say, civilization. You can read in Samuel Pepys' diary how England came to its senses. Cromwell dead, the theatre re-opened, the kings were back. They were frivolous compared with Cromwell. The Restoration Comedy of their theatres was frivolous almost to the point of pornography. Dionysus had trumped God. Shakespeare had trumped God. It was a defeat for piety. But it was a victory for civilization. Which, and not the deity of the organized religions, is the god of us theatre people, critics, playwrights and all.

---

<sup>i</sup> Interviewed by Hirofumi Okano, 22 October 2005, in a web page of Performing Arts Network Japan, [http://www.performingarts.jp/J/art\\_interview/0510/3.html](http://www.performingarts.jp/J/art_interview/0510/3.html). All the translations in this paper are by M. Noda.

---

<sup>ii</sup> Yoshio, Ōzasa, *Nihon Engeki-shi: Shōwa Sengo-hen* (History in Japanese Theatre: Post WWII) (Tokyo, Hakusui-sha: 2001), p. 598.

<sup>iii</sup> Kunio, Kishida, *Zenshū* (Complete Works), 28 vols (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1989-90), XXVII, pp. 84-85.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.* p. 313.

=====

6 November 2006

Dear Yun-Cheol

Safely back from Hong Kong, and almost recovered from jet-lag, I write to offer my formal thanks, on behalf of the entire IATC membership, for the wonderful congress you and your Korean colleagues organised for us in Seoul.

I think I can say that it outdid our other, very successful congresses of recent years in both the quality and breadth of its contributions to the congress theme, and in the work we were able to achieve on three very important initiatives: the journals exchange project, the setting up of the Asian group, and the gathering of views on IATC's future from our next generation of critics.

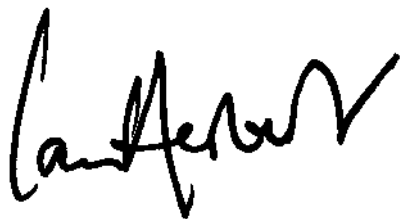
The first Thalia Prize presentation was a huge success, and we must thank Eric Bentley for his energetic performance both at the ceremony and in the talks he gave to local groups. I am very grateful to your Minister of Culture for honouring us with his presence at the ceremony. Likewise, I am most grateful to the Mayor of Seoul for giving up his time on a Sunday to host our welcome lunch, and for showing such a keen interest in the affairs of the Association.

The opportunities you gave us to see both international and Korean theatre of the highest quality were a further component in the congress's success, and we are deeply grateful to the Seoul Performing Arts Festival and the Korean companies for their support. Finally, I must thank KNUA and Dongguk University for the enormous contribution they made, in both personnel and premises.

We have gained a reputation in the last few congresses for their friendly inclusivity, and I think this congress took that tradition even further. Delegates who were taking part for the first time, both as national representatives and as members of the new critics' seminar, were made as welcome as old hands who were veterans of many IATC events. All of this is a tribute to you and your organising team - and I still marvel at how so few of you could achieve so much.

My warmest thanks – please pass them on to as many of your helpers and supporters as possible. I look forward in due course to seeing the Congress proceedings printed and published as a lasting record of your success, and in the mean time I hope that you will quickly be able to put as many as possible of the congress papers on our website, as proof to the world of your magnificent achievement.

Yours sincerely



Ian Herbert  
President, International Association of Theatre Critics