

Guest Editor's Column

Theatre in Asia is a bafflingly complex and diverse art, reflecting the enormous diversity of the continent itself. It is difficult to speak of an “Asian” theatre as a unified or even vaguely homogenous form, and the articles in this issue speak to that diversity and complexity. Covering theatrical forms mainly from India and Southeast Asia, these articles cover a variety of subjects from traditional texts and performances to contemporary, hybrid forms, to the influence of the global economy.

Much Asian performance is rooted in ancient, highly stylised, coded vocabularies that require years of rigorous training. Many of these traditions have been adversely affected by the demands and pressures of the modern world – whether because fewer and fewer young people, subject to the logic of a capitalist world, are sent to learn them, or because these art forms are being actively suppressed due to religious prejudice, or even systematically wiped out by acts of war and revolution. Given the precision of these forms, and the need for time-consuming, minutely detailed training, how are they to be “preserved?” Several Asian art forms have been listed by UNESCO as “Intangible Cultural Heritage” – among them, the Kutiyattam and Ramlila of India, and the Mak Yong of Malaysia. UNESCO affirms that it is not just the form itself that is important, but the transmission of the related knowledge and skills from one generation to the next as well. It is here, perhaps, that problems arise. Those in the younger generation have little interest in picking up these skills, or are unable to pursue their interest due to economic constraints. Of great concern is the loss of many masters of these forms, whether due to age and infirmity, or as a result of violence and active suppression. Attempts are being made, in the face of such losses, to preserve what is still available, or to reconstruct the discipline from ancient text or collective memory. In Malaysia, for example, Eddin Khoo’s Pusaka foundation works actively to maintain Malaysian traditional performing arts which faced a ban in Kelantan – as a result of his work, these traditions have been successfully passed down to a new generation.

Another path taken by many is to adapt these forms to the times, resulting in more hybrid performance vocabularies. If a heritage is to survive, after all, it must remain relevant – and the danger of merely “preserving” these forms is that they become museumised, divorced from the lived reality of the community. Malaysia’s Five Arts Centre creates performances which consciously blend a variety of traditional art forms with contemporary themes and forms, and often use different languages as well. In contemporary Asia, many practitioners have also chosen to create works which are much less dependent on or steeped in

Asian traditions, and instead adhere more closely to European traditions of realism, or to Brechtian Epic theatre (itself inspired in part by Chinese forms), or to Absurdism and so on. Singapore's Eleanor Wong, for example, roots her work in the contemporary, in both theme and form. Malaysia's Kee Thuan Chye experimented in his early years with absurdism, before moving towards a more Epic style.

The papers selected for this Special Issue deal with many of the points outlined above. Several of the articles are centred on theatrical forms from India, and the content highlights the sheer vastness of theatrical output from the subcontinent. These articles look at both text and performance, traditional and contemporary.

Sukanya Chakrabarti, for example, analyses the work of Kalidasa, the court poet of the Gupta period who wrote sometime in the 4th or 5th century ACE. Her analysis situates his work firmly within his own period, but emphasises its transgressive qualities. Kalidasa wrote within a rigid socio-cultural ambit; Sanskrit drama writing was constrained by the codes of the *Natyasastra*, which calls upon writers to arouse (through their work) eight specific *rasas*, which themselves fit together in a set hierarchy. He was also working, of course, within a rigid social framework of class and caste. Chakrabarti highlights not the constraining traditions within which he worked, but the subtle ways in which he transgressed these constraints – which in turn makes us question how rigid these traditions really were.

Maya Vinai and M.G. Prasuna's discussion of *Krishnattam* can perhaps speak to that question of rigidity in tradition. The article highlights what they see as the almost undiluted continuation of the form and style in modern-day India. *Krishnattam* is an ancient temple dance tradition particularly associated with the Southern Indian state of Kerala. Vinai and Prasuna contend that the reason for the continued impact of this dance form on a modern audience is precisely that the tradition remains unchanged and undiluted. It therefore occupies what they call a sacred space in the public imagination, which allows the dance to have a recuperative impact on the audience. Their focus is as much on the audience as it is on the performance, and to that end they have sought the expertise of actual practitioners of this form. Thus, they highlight the continued relevance of an ancient and seemingly unchanged dance form.

Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof's article takes a broad historical sweep to look at the various cultural influences present in much of the theatre in India. His view complicates our perceptions of these forms by highlighting that they have, from earliest times, been remarkably hybrid, and that their hybridity spread beyond borders to influence, for example, Southeast Asian theatre through the introduction of *bangsawan*. Highlighting this hybridity reframes our notions of tradition by asserting that these forms were, from the beginning, constantly

developing, borrowing and absorbing different vocabularies as and when necessary.

Also looking at hybridity are Kathy Foley and Zainal Abdul Latiff, who focus on actor training in the modern theatres of Malaysia and Indonesia. Examining the work of leading theatre practitioners in the two countries, Foley and Zainal highlight ways in which traditional forms are strategically melded with contemporary performances to create work which nods to tradition while simultaneously grappling with modern issues such as national identity and heritage. In a modern, hybrid nation state, what can be claimed as “national” identity and heritage, belonging to all? How is it to be *made* to belong to all? Foley and Zainal seek to show, then, how tradition can be harnessed to be relevant and meaningful in the modern world.

Taking a completely different approach is Tjoa Shze Hui, who highlights the work of Singaporean playwright Joel Tan. Tan’s play *Hotel*, which Tjoa discusses here, is determinedly contemporary and does not use the vocabulary of traditional performance. Tjoa suggests that in refusing the traditional in this way, Tan is bucking the trend of creating work that situates itself in relation to a Western market. Rather, Tan’s work questions the need to adhere to the requirements of glocalisation, and instead valorises the possibility of deliberately challenging those requirements by embracing the local, whether or not it is “readable” to a Western audience. He is, perhaps, on the cutting edge of a tradition which focuses on Singapore in relation to itself, rather than in relation to the West.

It can be said, then, that all these articles deal in different ways with notions of tradition and the contemporary, and the different approaches analysed here point to the vitality of the contemporary, as well as the continued relevance of tradition.

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