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Encounters

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# Encounters

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Ong Keng Sen

My sojourn as a creator, for the past six years, of intercultural projects bringing together traditional Asian arts and contemporary interdisciplinary expression has only just begun. In March 2000, I directed *Desdemona* in which 10 artists—actors, musicians, designers, video/installation artists—from India, Korea, Myanmar, Indonesia, and Singapore worked together on-stage. *Desdemona* premiered at the Adelaide Festival and then went on to the Munich Dance Festival and the Singapore and Hamburg Festivals. In 2001 it metamorphosed into a visual arts exhibition/performance/outreach program at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. *Desdemona* was preceded by the 1997 Japan Foundation Asia Center *Lear* that I directed in collaboration with 30 traditional and contemporary artists from all over Asia. This article is a reflection on these collaborations, a window into an intercultural journey.

I should first introduce The Flying Circus Project that is at the root of my thinking. The Project is an ambitious large-scale laboratory that brings together diverse Asian artists—documentary filmmakers, drag queens, visual artists, rock and computer musicians, disk jockeys, modern dancers, and actors, as well as ritualists and other traditional performers. For four weeks, different cultures, aesthetics, disciplines, and of course, individual personalities encounter each other in a series of training classes, workshops based on improvisation and reinventing traditional art forms, discussions, and lectures. Thus far, three laboratories have brought together 150 artists from India, Korea, China, Tibet, Taiwan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, Japan, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore in a process that I call “cultural negotiation,” with no view to end-product or final presentation. The Project has also included a few “guests” from Europe and the U.S.A.

The question posed by the Flying Circus Project is, “Can we, as artists from Asia, bring another perspective and forge a different relationship to intercultural performance than what has developed in the United States for instance?”

To even begin answering that question, we need to explore what is contemporary in Asia. In November 1997, I set out for an eight-week research trip to India in preparation for the second Flying Circus Project. Thus began the journey of what was to become *Desdemona*. I was already thinking of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, whose interracial marriage seemed the perfect way to open up issues of culture and race that we are confronted with in any intercultural exploration.

But I also wanted to move away from earlier interpretations of *Othello*, especially the obsessive stereotyping of black machismo. What if *Othello* was



1. The ghost of Desdemona exacts her final revenge by transforming Othello (Madhu Margi) and the male slave (Miroto Martinus) into two women dreaming of their lovers. (Photo courtesy of Ong Keng Sen)

played by a woman or by a slight, slender boy? (Finally, I cast two Indian performers in this role, a man and a woman: Madhu Margi, a *kudiyattam* actor, and Maya Rao, a modern theatre actress also trained in *kathakali*.)

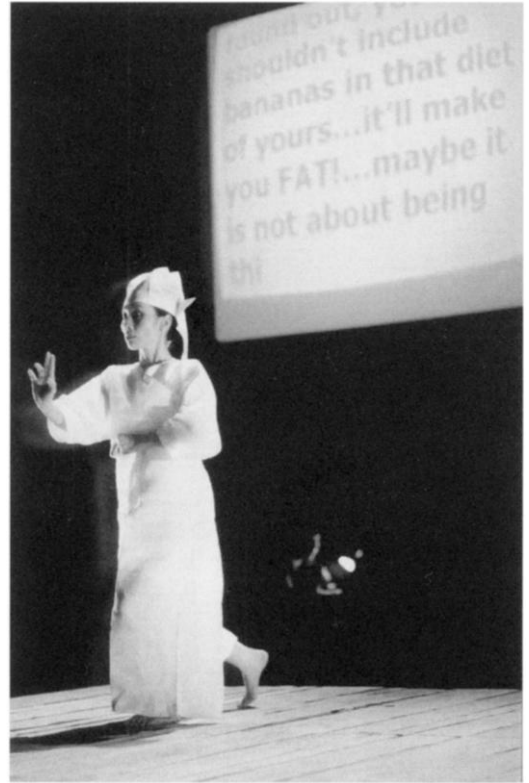
*Desdemona* opens with Othello asking, “Who am I? What am I?” The audience learns that his father and his father’s father were also named Othello, and that he is childless. Haunted by his father, Othello longs for a son, also to be named Othello. To him, Desdemona is a sex slave who will produce a male heir for him.

Desdemona appears, talking of how her people were colonized by Othello’s father’s father. Not allowed to have names, they were designated by numbers. Her own name, Desdemona, was bequeathed to her secretly by her mother. To Othello, who has no memory of his mother or his mother’s mother, Desdemona represents a challenge, bringing to the fore a female identity unearthed through memory. As the performance unfolds, Desdemona hallucinates about her death, her mother, and about being stabbed by a sword. She wants to drink the poisonous saliva of the sword. The sword, mother, and Desdemona slowly fuse into a single passion. It is this passion that threatens Othello and that he destroys. As he kills Desdemona, Othello utters these words: “In you, I do not exist.”

Desdemona returns as a ghost. She takes revenge by possessing Othello’s body and the body of a male slave, transforming them into beautiful women. The two kiss each other and as the poisonous saliva flows from Desdemona’s sword (the male slave) into his mouth, Othello is killed. Thus Desdemona forces Othello to encounter the female within him, including his mother.

I wanted to harness a wide range of “contemporary” arts in *Desdemona*. I wanted the contradictions of traditional and contemporary exposed rather than glossed into unity. Maya Rao hinted at Othello, his father, the female within him, and much more. Maya wanted a flow between male and female. Opposed to narrow portrayals of gender that would reinforce stereotypes, she was not costumed/made-up to look like a man. Rather than play two characters, she represented the male and female aspects in Othello.

My method of constantly creating different performance drafts, turning written scenes on their heads, developing extensive performance texts, multiple focal points and multiple realities, parallel texts of music and visual arts was difficult for the traditional artists. They had trained from a young age by fixing



2. As the performance unfolds, *Desdemona* hallucinates about her death, her mother, and about being stabbed by a sword. In this Burmese dance, performer U Zaw Min suggests the presence of *Desdemona's* mother as he imitates the movement of a puppet.

(Photo courtesy of Ong Keng Sen)

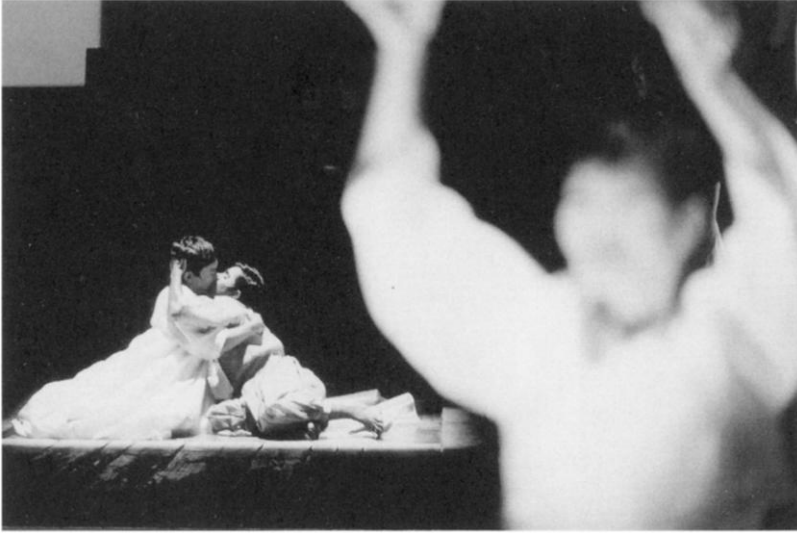
3. An email being written by collaborator-performer Low Kee Hong, is simultaneously projected onstage behind *Desdemona* (Claire Wong). (Photo courtesy of Ong Keng Sen)

and drilling sequences. In particular, my insistence on leaving open spaces till a week before the performance (the final rehearsal period was six weeks long) was a shock to many of the performers. But I was intent on driving a dense, intense, stream of consciousness into the psyche of the two central characters. This required multiple layering, quick shifts into surrealism, abstraction, symbolism, the fracturing of self into different parts, and nonlinearity.

After *Lear*, I was dissatisfied with simply directing an Asian production that juxtaposed many different languages and many different traditional forms. I had to take a more critical reflexive look at the process that I was engaging in. How do I encourage the intercultural process, allowing the audience to peep through the seams of the new work? How do I reveal the obsessions, the thoughts, and the lives of the Asian individuals who make up such a company?

*Desdemona*, in her loneliness, states that she wants to speak to Othello. At this moment, we rupture the narrative introducing into it a conversation between individual artists of the company, from different cultures with different histories, memories, and languages. *Desdemona's* imagination becomes the vehicle through which they reveal their frustrations in communicating, and the attempts to find a common ground for dialogue—the dilemmas of any intercultural enterprise.

Matthew Ngui had documented the company through video/audio interviews. These demonstrated the stunning contrasts of our different worlds. The traditional puppeteer has lived his 60 years in Myanmar, while the Singaporean contemporary performer was completing postgraduate studies in New York. Some grew up listening to rock and roll, others with Malayalam folk songs and rigorous kathakali training. The interviews evidenced suspicions about the process, about each other: “You do not speak my language and I do not speak yours.” They also suggest that translations can be misleading.



4. *Desdemona* (Claire Wong) wills the death of Othello. As she chants to Korean shamanic percussion, Othello (Madhu Margi) and the male slave (Miroto Martinus) kiss. (Photo by Ong Keng Sen)

Park Hwa Young, a Korean video artist, created witty parallel texts highlighting the dilemmas of a fictional character called Mona. She is a modern woman who goes on diets and signs declarations to immigration authorities stating that she is not pregnant, in order to extend her visa. When *Desdemona* possesses Othello, a scientific list appears, sexually categorizing women based on the shape of their feet. The Korean handwriting written in lipstick that is projected on the screens grows threatening, hinting at the systems of entrapment that have confined women throughout history—from bound feet to discrimination based on notions of feminine impurity, and the different social interactions expected of men and women.

Another performer/sociologist, Singaporean Low Kee Hong, punctures the narrative of *Desdemona* with bluntly incisive emails to Mona written onstage and seen on monitors: “Are we simply pawns in Keng Sen’s game?” “Do we provide an instant Asia exotic tidbit for the festival market?” Candid and personal, the emails attempt to probe an individual’s reasons for entering the project. They pick at tensions during rehearsals between contemporary and traditional artists.

Ultimately, *Desdemona* is a cultural study about a group of Asian artists looking at themselves and rethinking the ways in which Asia has been represented on the stage in the past.

I wonder: Am I using traditional arts only to gain personal recognition for my own projects? Am I buying “Asian art” just like Europeans and Americans before, fascinated by otherness? Am I the new colonizer in Asian disguise, vested with the financial strength and confidence of Singapore? Are *Lear* and *Desdemona* the new Peter Brook *Mahabharata*? Who owns the work? Does it belong to the persons who paid for it or the persons who created it? But who created it? Do I appropriate the work of other artists? So many questions with no answers.

Touring in Asia and to Europe and Australia raised further questions. In Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Jakarta the productions revealed that Asian cultures were exotic or alienating even to Asians. Sometimes, there was anger that the art forms in the productions did not include representations of contemporary urban life. A Japanese conceptual artist said that the *noh* artist was not representative of his culture. In Singapore, arts administrator Ming Yen Phan was so alienated that he walked out, slamming the door, calling the production “the greatest piece of shit” he ever saw. Ironically, multiracial and



5. In the penultimate scene of the performance, *Othello* (Madhu Margi) remembers the killing of his wife. (Photo courtesy of Ong Keng Sen)

6. In *Desdemona*, *Othello* is played by two performers: Madhu Margi, a male *kudiyattam* performer, and Maya Rao, a contemporary actress trained in *kathakali*. Here, Rao transforms from *Othello* into a mother-wife-goddess figure. (Photo courtesy of Ong Keng Sen)

multilingual Singapore was befuddled by the various Asian languages in the piece, ranging from a highly sophisticated codified gestural language to Sanskrit to the contemporary visual arts language.

Maybe we need to move beyond the dichotomy of Western and non-Western. But I am unable to escape the feeling that there is no way out of this binary and that we merely move in circles like currency crossing borders—crossing but not mediating, crossing but not engaging, crossing but not transforming.

In Berlin, I was asked whether I knew Brook's intercultural experiments. What, therefore, was new about my *Lear*? Arrogantly phrased, the question clearly implied that an Asian company would be ignorant of the developments on the "world culture scene" (read European-American). In another public talk in Copenhagen, the *Lear* artists were asked whether we were aware of how the event was framed around us, and how we might be manipulated to represent what we are not.

More terrifying and humorous instances of cultural clash: A European critic likened the Beijing opera performer's voice in *Lear* to the sounds of his washing machine. A festival director said that the less synthesizer music the better, implying that such sounds disturbed the "Asian atmosphere." A critic described the sounds made by the *kathakali* performer in *Desdemona* as jungle-like animal sounds, which were not interesting to a European audience. An Australian critic called *Desdemona* an example of theatre from Peninsula Malaya (a pre-1965 term used to describe Singapore and Malaysia before separation and independence) with the strange "Asian values" espoused by politicians from that region. The implication was unmistakable: Asians should not step out of line by redefining their own values after these have been set "internationally," that is, by Westerners. (In my explorations of the connec-



7. Desdemona (Claire Wong) walks toward the audience as the musicians at the edge of the stage (Jang Jae Hyo and Shin Chang Yool) play a constant hum. (Photo courtesy of Ong Keng Sen)



8. Othello (Madhu Margi) is plagued by his father's legacy and rejects his mother's memory: "Who am I? My name is Othello. My father's name is Othello, my father's father's name is Othello. My son will be called Othello. Do I exist? I do not know." (Photo courtesy of Ong Keng Sen)

9. *Desdemona* (Claire Wong) awakens to the puppet's call. She remembers her mother and begins to play with the puppet. In the process, she becomes filled with the power to manipulate her final revenge. (Photo courtesy of Ong Keng Sen)



tions across Asia, I am constantly reminded that “Asia” as a construct is no more than an accident of colonization.)

I have also been asked by some curators to cut down on the video art. Video art is the space of multiple meanings, ambiguity, documentation, and reflexivity in *Desdemona*. One curator said that we should just bring nothing more than our “wonderful costumes” from Asia. Not only would this reduce freight costs, it would also be more typically Asian to perform in an empty space with simple lighting fixtures. Further, she continued, we had too much video, could we cut some? I smiled but wondered whether she would say the same to the Wooster Group.

Is Asia still the “return to nature,” the “spiritual connection” through which the first world is transported away to another time? In the post-show discussion in Munich, an audience member said that he could “feel” and enjoy the clear story in the traditional dance/music sequences but the metatext and framing devices interrupted his enjoyment. Asian performances should have simple storylines and should not engage in intellectual gymnastics. Cultural studies belong somewhere else and to someone else.

Critics wrote about the fractured surfaces of *Desdemona* that pose unanswerable questions. It's fine when Pina Bausch or Richard Foreman is obscure but good Asian companies should provide an “ethnic evening out.” *Desdemona* was, for me, an attempt to starkly reveal the schizoid way in which contemporary Asian work is viewed, especially when it incorporates but does not simply celebrate traditional performing arts.

I don't wish to suggest that Asians own the material in Asian performing arts. Creativity is a shared space where there should be a flow of raw material among all cultural worlds. For myself, what began as a challenge to appropriate the Western voice has faded. An irate Sanskrit scholar had once asked me why we had not titled *Lear* something else when it had been dramatically reworked into an Asian epic about a daughter who killed her father. I remember him with great affection because it was a most unlikely scolding to receive in the heart of Kerala. I told him then that my work was about reinvention, in particular about Asians having the choice not only to reinvent ourselves but also to reinvent the worldview of others. Without the reference to a standard, this reinvention would not be a political action, hence my insistence on “appropriating” Shakespeare to say something else.

*Desdemona* reflects the death of a phase of cultural appropriation/counter-appropriation and the birth of a new phase, with its emphasis on the human process as opposed to product.

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