

Questioning the Relationship between Consumption and Exchange: TheatreWorks' Flying Circus Project, December 2000

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What Is the Flying Circus Project?

Following our earlier research on the TheatreWorks productions *Lear* and *Desdemona*, a colleague and I were invited by Ong Keng Sen, Artistic Director of TheatreWorks, to attend the Flying Circus Project (FCP) workshop in Singapore in December 2000,¹ as observers of the process.² The FCP is described by TheatreWorks as follows: "This multi-disciplinary, long-term research and development program in theatre, dance, music, visual arts, film and ritual has continued for six years, with laboratories consisting of classes, improvisation workshops and seminars. The focal points are on cultural negotiation and process in the arts practice. It looks at the different creative strategies of individual artists, both traditional and contemporary, through the recognition of differences between the many Asian cultures."³ Ong established the FCP in 1994.⁴ He has a passionate interest in developing ideas

of cross-cultural exchange and “is known for his rejection of authenticity and his embracing of multiple realities and hybridity within Asia.”⁵ Ong trained in contemporary performance at New York University, and he combines this training with his understanding of Asian cultural traditions to create works that reflect what he sees as the dynamism of Asian culture. His works, although they attract criticism—particularly from within Asia⁶—challenge the idea of Asian art as static or museumlike and focus instead on the potential for exchange between ideas of traditional and contemporary arts practice.⁷ These works serve to intervene into the (global) landscape of intercultural performance, broadening its parameters and raising questions about the politics of consumption and exchange in the process. I believe that Ong aims to create spaces for intercultural exchange that move beyond existing paradigms and focus instead on the “multiple realities,” beliefs, and practices that exist across Asia. However, the very idea of intercultural exchange is a fraught concept and is becoming increasingly so as a result of rapid globalization. As Joanne Tompkins and Julie Holledge point out in their book *Women’s Intercultural Performance*, “As the economic forces of globalization shrink and stratify the world, the creation of intercultural performance is an increasingly complex affair. Even the concept of cultural identity is fraught with the complications of migration, cultural authenticity, and ‘ethnic cleansing.’ The questions concerning cultural appropriation and assimilation that used to preoccupy rehearsal rooms are being replaced with a search for a methodology that can shift representations of cultural difference from superficial descriptions to ‘thick descriptions.’”⁸

Ong Keng Sen was, I believe, aiming to use the FCP 2000 to create a space within which this search for “a methodology that can shift representations” could be undertaken. According to the flier for the FCP 2000, “Contemporary Asia is the focus, with the proposition that religious rituals and traditional arts are contemporaneous within their contexts. This contextualization balances the continued exoticisation of Asia.” Over seventy artists from East Asia attended the December 2000 workshop, as well as a small number from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Areas of specialization ranged enormously and included, for example, computerized music, contemporary performance, traditional Thai dance, Chinese Opera, video art, Indonesian dance, Cambodia Court dance, and puppeteers

from Myanmar.⁹ These artists were selected by Ong and invited to participate in the FCP. There were also twenty Lamas and a living Buddha from Tibetan Buddhism, and ritualists (Dongba shamans) from Yunnan in China, who practiced Naxi exorcism ceremonies. Ong selected this diverse range of artists so that they could work together to highlight what he sees as the key concerns of the FCP: “reinvention, juxtaposition and cultural negotiation.”¹⁰ It is important to point out that for Ong the idea of intercultural exchange extends outward from the process and experiences of the participants to include the responses of the spectator/observer. He believes that “a new language” needs to be established so that spectators can *read* contemporary intercultural exchange. It is this desire that, I believe, motivated his invitation to academics to participate (as observers) in the FCP process. Ong sees academics and writers as important participants in the establishment and understanding of this “new language” through their responses to his work, and in this regard he is always willing to allow scholars and interested parties to attend his rehearsals/workshops.¹¹

In order to convey a sense of the structure of the FCP¹² I will divide the process into three sections.¹³ First, there were presentations or workshop sessions, where the artists were provided with a forum to talk about or demonstrate their work and the traditions that informed their practice. These presentations/workshops were fairly interactive, with artists talking and then responding to questions. Participants were eager to learn about the techniques and skills of others, so many of the questions focused on practical issues such as choice of location, materials, and modes of presentation. Second, the Lamas and the Naxis performed a number of rituals¹⁴ and workshops, and also held discussion sessions with participants about their beliefs and practices.¹⁵ Third, because one of the principal themes for the FCP was “the interface of Asian religious rituals and the urban artists from contemporary Asia,”¹⁶ participants were asked to break into groups and share their skills in order that they might create a performative response to the material presented by the Lamas and the Naxis. These presentations were called “reinventions.” The participants were initially placed in groups by Ong Keng Sen and Krishen Jit,¹⁷ and each group comprised a range of traditional and contemporary practitioners who worked together, sharing skills and techniques to craft a response to the ritualists (the Lamas and the Naxis), who did not participate in the reinvention sessions themselves.

The FCP 2000 was a complex event in terms of both its structure and the responses it elicited from participants and observers. I believe that it was a process in which both consumption and exchange or play and deep engagement occurred on a number of levels. The difficulties I faced in trying to write about it in a coherent manner exemplified, for me, that this was indeed the case. The question I keep returning to, however, is, whom was the FCP for? This is a question that I seem to be continually asking in terms of my work on interculturalism. If the FCP was for Ong simply to play with the more “exotic” cultures of Asia, then its relevance is limited. If, on the other hand, it was a forum within which artists were afforded the opportunity to play with differences and indeed similarities, then another set of questions arises. Because the previous FCPs did eventually lead to large international productions (see n. 19), critics may suggest that the FCP becomes a marketplace where Ong has the opportunity to select a combination of both “exotic” (read “traditional”) and contemporary practitioners for his next project. If this is the case, then it could be argued that the workshop process becomes more about display than about exchange. Yet I would suggest that even if the FCP does inform or lead to the development of a major production, this does not necessarily mean that the participants become puppets on display. Surely the process itself must be considered on its own terms. If the aim of the FCP is, as the publicity material suggests, to facilitate exchange and better understanding between practitioners across a range of cultures and disciplines, so that they can share techniques and skills as well as experiencing different ways of performing and “reading” performance, then the project becomes something truly useful and empowering for the practitioners regardless of potential “product” outcomes.

Whom the FCP was for is the key question that informs this essay. It is a question that in turn raises other questions about the nature of consumption and exchange within this specific intercultural process. I do not believe that I will arrive at a concrete answer to these questions; rather, I will use this essay to tease them out so that they may stimulate reflection on the role of interculturalism within the context of an increasingly globalized world. In this regard it must also be noted that any discussion of the FCP cannot be divorced from the fact that it was a very expensive undertaking and one that was not solely a government-funded initiative.¹⁸ It is interesting to consider

what it is that major corporations gain from sponsorship of an event that was not framed in terms of outcomes. Unlike the previous labs, the FCP 2000 was not established, according to Ong, as a training ground for any major intercultural production.¹⁹ Yet it received considerable support from a range of companies. Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that Singapore, as a nation, continues to attract world attention as a consequence of its success as a global player. Internationally renowned intercultural theorist Rustom Bharucha suggests that Singapore's "survival, if not phenomenal economic 'success', has been facilitated by its embrace of global capital at the very outset of its formation as a nation."²⁰ I believe that a government desirous of a position for Singapore as a key global economic center—indeed, as the economic capital of Asia—continually reinforces this embrace. In fact, in recent times this desire has been refined to focus on the concept of Singapore as a "knowledge economy,"²¹ as Paul Rae points out. "What is this knowledge economy? In Singapore the government has decided that, as a tiny nation with few natural resources, the key to economic survival in the coming decades is to make money out of ideas. Or, as a characteristically utilitarian government paper on the arts recently put it: 'A vibrant arts and cultural scene will provide people with the stimuli and the opportunities to create products and services that are innovative and value-adding.'"²² This emphasis on the idea of Singapore as "the" knowledge economy creates a climate in which corporations may experience pressure to participate in the developing cultural economy by investing in a "vibrant" artistic scene. The pressure to be seen as good corporate citizens when combined with the success and profile of Ong Keng Sen and TheatreWorks as a local as well as internationally recognized theater company may be the reason why investors were willing to support the project.²³

A TheatreWorks flier advertising the FCP stated: "The development of artists in external form, internal landscape, intellectual muscularity and politicization are major pillars of the FCP." What interests me here is attempting to link these aims to the actual events that took place in Singapore in December 2000. I am not in a position to comment on whether or not the internal landscapes of the artists were developed, but I do believe that they were stretched in terms of external form through the group work process. Both traditional and contemporary artists were encouraged to come to some

understanding of each other's techniques so that they could work together effectively. This was a complex process that included the teaching of technique, discussions about form as well as content, and the demonstration of artistic practice. These sessions were followed by the "reinvention" sessions, where artists worked together to interpret and respond to the material presented. It was during this reinvention process that difficulties arose for some of the "traditional" performers, as they felt that adapting or stretching their tradition in order that it might fit into a collaborative framework meant challenging their training and philosophy, and as a consequence (in some cases) it was seen as not being appropriately respectful or representative. (See the section "Finding Moments for Exchange" for more information on this.)

What intrigues me, however, about these stated aims is the desire to develop the artists' intellectual muscularity and politicization. What does a term like *politicization* mean in the context of a workshop that comprised participants from many different countries, regimes, and religious beliefs? Is "politicization" about asking artists to consider their craft and to use this craft as a commodity in the exchange processes with other practitioners so that they can enhance their performative vocabulary? Or is it less about the representational world of performance and more about affording artists the opportunity to meet and discuss "real" cultural differences in order that they might become more informed about different cultures and, by extension, political frameworks? It is difficult to know how much the workshop was attempting to achieve in this regard. However, it is my belief that politicization, when considered within the context of the FCP, needs to be broadly interpreted so that it can be seen as a framework that attempts to provide practitioners with an understanding of both the value of their craft as an object of exchange within the performative context and the importance of being self-reflexive about the attendant issues of power, control, and difference any exchange involves.

Singaporean Context

Rustom Bharucha, in his critical paper "Consumed in Singapore: The Intercultural Spectacle of Lear," situates Singapore as a "postmodern yuppie-dom,"²⁴ a modern incarnation of the cultural orphan floating at the end of the

Malay Peninsula. In attempting to contextualize contemporary Singapore, Bharucha borrows heavily from (and indeed critiques) Kuo Pao Kun, Singapore's premier playwright, who saw contemporary Singaporeans as cultural orphans. In his essay on Kuo Pao Kun and the "Theatre of Tensions," T. Sasitharan elaborates on Kun's position: "The claim is that the present generations of Singaporeans, who are cut-off from their Malay, Chinese and Indian 'Mother-cultures' due to migration, history and politics, are culturally 'rootless' as a consequence. They are thus incapable of generating anything but fragmented, disrupted, and unwhole selves. More significantly, they will always lack the confidence and the imaginative potential to transform their selves in order to meet the demands and rigors of a modern, globalized, urban, multicultural life." Sasitharan goes on to argue that the position of "cultural orphan is not entirely undesirable. For it is precisely because the Singaporean is 'rootless,' de-linked from his [*sic*] 'mother culture,' that he is relatively unburdened by his past and free to re-invent the genealogy of his self."²⁵ In more recent times Kuo has urged Singaporeans to mobilize this orphaned position and to transform it into one in which Singapore is positioned as the site of an "Open Culture" that, as a result of the freedom associated with rootlessness, provides its citizenry with the opportunity to embrace all of the cultures of the world. Kun goes on to suggest that "when a de-culturalized people become thirsty for culture, they are less discriminative [*sic*] of where the resources come from than of the inspirational value the new culture evokes."²⁶ Kuo's desire for Singaporeans to embrace other cultures has occurred alongside a governmental shift in terms of the management of national identity, as C. J. W.-L. Wee points out: "Dramatic changes occurred in the People's Action Party (PAP) government's cultural management through ethnicity from the 1970s, when the state had an 'ethnically neutral' policy undergirded by a rational commitment to cultural modernization, to the international appearance of the 'Asian values' discourse and the 1980s re-ethnicization of Singaporeans into hyphenated identities. In the process, the PAP claimed that an Asian modernity should be able to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity that existed in the West."²⁷

However, this desire to create "hyphenated identities" or to embrace the Other, as Kuo urges, is considered dangerous by Bharucha, who sees increasing openness as leading to "the paradoxical condition of globalization

where superficial access to cultures of the world has resulted in an ever-proliferating sameness of cultures, punctured by growing sectarianism and intolerance.”²⁸ This is an important point that Bharucha uses to castigate Ong for what he sees as his approach to interculturalism: “For him an ‘openness’ to other cultures is less a moral imperative than a creative opportunity to engage and play with the cultures of the world, whose forms, techniques and artefacts are available for his creative use.”²⁹ I experience an acute sense of unease in response to this positioning by Kuo and Bharucha of Singapore as a cultural vacuum where “rootlessness” prevails and the overarching desire is to consume the Other (whatever or whoever that might be). This is a positioning that I believe is premised primarily on a perceived lack of any real interaction or cultural exchange between groups, due not only to the loss of “mother cultures,” but also to governmental policies that seem to enforce harmony at all costs, policies that attempt to avoid the domination of one racial group over others through state intervention. Positioning the shifts in Singapore’s national identity in terms of the loss of mother cultures signals, to me at least, an understanding of culture as originary or authentic and static, unable to be adapted and relevant within a multicultural (hyphenated) society. It suggests that once migration has occurred, culture is lost, and irrevocably so. Surely cultures must evolve or die, particularly in an era of increasing globalization.

I read Ong’s desire to question or draw attention to the concept of politicization in the FCP 2000 as in part a response to Bharucha’s critique of his work as more play than serious intercultural practice. Perhaps he is also attempting, by focusing on politicization, to extend the idea of Open Culture beyond surface appropriation. This criticism of Ong as someone who is more concerned with creating an aesthetic than really using his work as a site for intercultural exchange is leveled at him from time to time and seems to be an issue he is deliberately trying to counter in the FCP, first by not using the workshop as a starting point for the creation of a performance, and second by deliberately foregrounding the idea of politicization as one of the workshop’s pillars.³⁰ In this regard I think it is important to look at the reinvention/discussion process to gain some insight into the kinds of issues and questions that were raised at the FCP and the extent to which the concept of politicization was mobilized by the process.

Reinvention/Discussion, Example 1

We arrived to a baptism of fire, literally speaking: we entered the space as a series of reinventions were occurring. These were created by the participants in response to the Lamas' contribution to the FCP. In one of the initial reinventions fire was used to set a newspaper costume/robe alight. The room filled with acrid smoke that pierced our eyes and throats, and, as we hid behind any veil of clothing we could, we saw a piece of burning paper float upward. We watched nervously as it floated toward the electrical cables and lighting rig and were relieved when it made a loud *bang* and fractured to ash. Nobody else seemed overtly perturbed by this occurrence, and the reinventions continued. The focus seemed to be on fire, water, sand, and red icons, with the addition of video projection and techno music. The smell of incense dominated—the symbols used were a reflection of the religious rituals performed by the Lamas. All of the reinventions were of a very high standard and each in its own way elicited some kind of response from the observers.

Despite the standards of professionalism and the beauty of some of the images presented in these sessions, the response from Ong was that the participants needed to dig deeper to find a less superficial or surface response to the idea of ritual as presented by the Lamas. He felt that the presentations seemed very similar, that there was more focus on form than on content; he expressed concern that many groups were “dominated by one person and others just followed orders.” The Singaporean participants tended to dominate these reinventions. They were experienced contemporary performance practitioners who had worked for or with TheatreWorks in the past. This gave them an advantage in that they knew how to participate effectively under pressure. I believe that Ong was encouraging the more traditional performers to assert their craft and skills here instead of allowing the Singaporean practitioners to shape the group responses. Ong urged the participants to spend more time thinking about the kinds of questions the Lamas elicited for them internally. Krishen Jit suggested that the groups should refocus and think about harnessing the differences within rather than aiming for some harmonious presentation: “If individuals are given choices and power, the piece may not cohere; it may not look smooth, but it may be more honest.”³¹ Was this their attempt to ask participants to probe their “internal landscapes” in order that they might draw on different cultural or religious

interpretations or responses to the Lamas to inform their own practice? This was an interesting point in the process. Here Ong and Jit seem to be urging the performers to share differences, to explore how each responded to the Lamas and to use the tensions or anxieties the different responses raised to fuel their reinventions. It seems that the desire was to encourage participants to create a kind of politicization in which real cultural differences were combined with the varied skill bases to create a range of deeply felt responses to the Lamas.

In answer to Ong and Jit's critique, participants expressed some dissatisfaction with regard to the way in which the reinvention groupings were organized. They felt that they were not given enough choice on who they could collaborate with or enough time to construct their responses, and that too much time was being spent on talking rather than doing. One participant stated that she did not want to share her very personal, sacred response to the Lamas with others she didn't know. She also said that she wasn't sure what they would present in conjunction with her response and was anxious that collaboration might detract from the integrity of her own feelings. This response seems to highlight the anxiety some of the performers felt about having their work shaped or negotiated. It was an anxiety that many of the traditional performers had to grapple with in the process of the workshop. They had been taught to achieve a purity of tradition and were now being asked to mine that tradition and allow it to be represented in a group-devised piece that had the potential to become a pastiche rather than a faithful representation of traditional skill and practice. This was a difficult process to negotiate, and at times performers felt as if they were not being respectful of their tradition when they worked in this way. This also raises the larger issue about the nature of exchange at play in the workshops. While some of the contemporary practitioners involved in the workshop were highly skilled in specific disciplines (contemporary dance, sound, video, installation, etc.), others, particularly some of the Singaporean participants, were involved "less because they possessed any specific, identifiable skill, but because they were excellent generalists. Linguistically and culturally, they served as intermediaries and translators, whose strength lay in an ability to absorb all stimuli, and respond rapidly and incisively."³² While these practitioners contributed hugely to the overall workshop process, their rapid responses and, in many

cases, desire to shape the work were intimidating to some of the traditional performers, raising the issue of the fairness of the exchange. In this regard it was interesting that Ong encouraged participants to challenge the groupings and to let their own work emerge in the reinventions. The apparent tension here between the traditional and contemporary practitioners is significant in relation to Ong's approach to performance practice; Paul Dwyer commented that he once asked Ong to define his/a vocabulary of contemporary performance practice.³³ In response Ong was vague and mentioned something about self-reflexivity. This is not to suggest that contemporary practitioners are not skilled or are somehow inferior to traditional practitioners. However, Dwyer believes, and I agree, that if Ong's focus is on harnessing the skills of the traditional performers within his work, he needs to develop (or articulate) a vocabulary of contemporary practices so that the traditional practitioners feel that an exchange is taking place, rather than a plundering or *deconstruction* of their traditions.

I think that encouraging participants to reach deeper in order that they might liberate their responses to the Lamas is a good idea, as I believe it provides a stimulus for opening up the dialogue between the artists involved. I wonder, however, about the processes of translating these potentially sacred or deeply personal responses into a performative frame. How does one harness a ritual and re-present it through a performance? What is the relationship between the ritual and the response here? And ultimately who decides what a *deep* performance is, in comparison to a shallow one? There were obvious tensions here regarding the relationships between process and expectations. Yet, despite these tensions, the participants were asked to spend part of the following two days reinventing this reinvention on a deeper level and to come back to the group with their responses. It was also decided that a number of participants would be assigned to respond to various reinventions, a strategy that was important as it allowed for a range of voices to be heard, not just those of Ong and Jit.

Reinvention/Discussion, Example 2

What emerged from this process was interesting. In the following reinventions some participants seemed to respond to the criticisms of Ong and Jit

by trying to move beyond a concern with form and to focus on deeper questions regarding ritual and connection. However, one of the reinventions that changed very little from the previous presentation was a movement sequence that involved the Chinese opera singer Zeng Jing Ping and the Thai dancer Pichet Klunchun. Instead of reworking their piece, which was hauntingly evocative, they relocated it to the grounds of Fort Canning Park. As the rain poured down and we watched from the balcony, they slowly walked toward the lawn in red robes under a red umbrella. They performed their sequence, which spoke about loss, death, and sorrow, to a hauntingly sad soundtrack. The bright red of the costumes juxtaposed with the deep green of the grass made the powerful piece even more evocative. There was no techno, no video, and no dialogue, just movement. This response to the Lamas was strikingly different than to any other. Nestor Horfilla, a theater director and activist from the Philippines, responded to this piece by saying it was for him about pain and struggle and that he found it a moving experience. Ong did not like this piece; he saw it as dated. In a final response to the reinventions, Jit said that Horfilla's response to the piece reflected "what Nestor wants in his life." It was as if Horfilla's heartfelt response was relativized because of his own struggles for land and the environment in the Philippines. Initially I felt that this was a moment where the option of exploring difference was silenced, and that perhaps Krishen Jit and Ong Keng Sen were so constrained by their own vision of the workshop and what it should achieve that they dismissed a response that sat outside this frame. However, Jit's response could also be read as a challenge to the participants to consider the relevance of criticism. When talking about the range of responses to the reinventions, he urged the participants to think about the ways in which these responses affected them as performers. He also asked the participants to consider whether they thought that criticism acted in a subversive or potentially useful way.

My own responses to these reinventions were that they did try to move beyond any cohesive or homogenous response to form in their attempts to carefully consider the impact the Lamas' visit had on the individual participants. In terms of the reinvention on the lawn, I felt that this piece certainly challenged me to think deeply about issues of memory, loss, and connectedness—issues and concerns I would certainly associate with my own "internal landscape."

Finding Moments for Exchange

Another response that emerged from these reinventions was a guarded critique of the perceived lack of engagement between the Lamas and the participants. For example, one of the pieces comprised a video montage of the Lamas and live voice-overs of questions to them about the difficulty of cultural connection, of translation, of discussion. This I found quite powerful: “Do your robes hide and protect you from all the grime in this world?” “What do you see?” “I never told you my name,” “How do you say *hello*?” While this could be read as reflecting the difficulties experienced by practitioners in terms of the possibility of connection with the Lamas, it could also be read as a metacritique of the way in which the Flying Circus Project was constructed. It seemed to me that at one level the Lamas and the Naxis were the exotic ritualists flown in to demonstrate their techniques and to provide a framework against which the participants were supposed to respond. Ong said that he found the Lamas to be “exotic” in comparison to the Naxis: “The Naxis are something that is almost from a different time and space. They are old-world people.”³⁴

For my part (although I understand the aims of the FCP in bringing together ritual and contemporary practice so that exchange might occur at the interstices), responding to the Naxi ritualists proved a difficult emotional challenge. These men, who looked much older than their age, arrived and performed a number of rituals for the FCP participants. They talked of the loss of their traditions due to the lack of interest of the younger generations and the refusal of their children to carry them on. In fact, the situation is so dire that the five young men who are learning the practice in China have to be paid to do so. The ability of these men to perform their rituals was also hampered by their ill health, with only one of the three shamans still fit enough to dance.

Of the rituals performed by these shamans, the one that caused me the most distress was the one they performed in the grounds of Fort Canning Park on December 17. This ritual, which was to respect nature, was performed under a huge tree. While this was not the correct tree, the shamans were prepared to accept it for the purposes of the ritual. As they conducted the ritual, observers and participants crowded around them with still and video cameras, striving to get the best view. There was even a Japanese sound artist

who held a microphone (wrapped around a roll of toilet paper) against the faces of the Naxis in order to record their chanting so that he could use it as material for his sound installations. The image of these old men chanting and dancing (albeit tentatively) around the park followed by the cameras was distressing. This was, for me, consumption on a grand scale. Yet the rituals themselves seemed like a kind of simulacrum of something that was once sacred and powerful, with objects and spaces substituted to make the stories work. It was as if the performance of capturing the performance outstripped the actual concept of being there. Participants could be heard quietly commenting on this as the spectacle unfolded.

I withdrew and sat on a rug, where I talked to a participant from the Philippines who was tired and wanted to go home. But as I reflected on this afterward, I wondered if the Naxis were really being exploited or whether, for them, the opportunity to share their rituals, perhaps for the last time, provided them with a sense of empowerment. If nobody in their home province was interested, at least here they had a willing audience. Nonetheless, I still felt a sense of anxiety that the whispered comments about consumption at this ritual could degenerate (when reinvented) into parody or ridicule as a consequence of the rendering of the “Naxi experience” irrelevant. But what does my anxiety mean here, in my critique of this ritual as a simulacrum? Am I seeking some kind of authentic reproduction of the *true* ritual? While I am troubled by the paradox of my own desire, I think the point is that these ritualists elicited a number of contradictory responses in me as I tried to consider their role in the Flying Circus Project. The larger issue here is that Ong believes that in inviting the Naxis to perform these soon-to-be-lost rituals for the FCP he is allowing traces of the stories to be absorbed and then reinvented into the practitioners’ work. While this could be read as a form of paternalism, a desire on his behalf to “save” a fragment of a dying cultural practice or a desire to use this “exotic” material to enhance the reinvention process, I do believe that his desire is based on a wish to capture or extend this ritual through memory so that it does not vanish. I discussed this issue with Ong in response to his casting of Madhu Margi, one of the last remaining practitioners of the Kudiyattum art form, as Othello in his *Desdemona* project. In response to my question about the “saving” or recording of dying practices, Ong stated that he wanted to offer Margi the

opportunity to use his extensive skills to inform the performance as well as to provide him with an opportunity to exchange with other practitioners, showcase his skills, and extend his range.³⁵ Ong pointed out that these kinds of workshops, where ritual and contemporary practice meet and traces of dying or threatened rituals can be saved, represent the “future of ritual.”³⁶ If Ong’s desire is to capture a trace of the ritual so that it is not lost or erased, why, then, in the case of the Naxis, were so many compromises made? On the other hand I am not advocating the idea of an authentic or static Nazi ritual here. Indeed, if the Naxis see their practice as evolving (and therefore accept the compromises, as they did), where do my anxieties lie? I think they lie in the fact that rather than appreciate this ritual for its ancient stories and beliefs, the practitioners—for the most part—seemed determined to capture it, contain it, and own it rather than to experience it, and this act altered the ritual in a way that seemed to me to take away from its integrity. When the shamans are totally surrounded by video cameras and microphones and their sacred performance cannot be seen unless through the mediatized lens, then I would argue that the ritual becomes a farce. It was this seemingly disrespectful approach that made me retreat.

While the role of the Naxis in terms of stimulating discussions about ritual, spirituality, and internal landscapes is a difficult one to ascertain, there were some interesting discussions between the “traditional” performers and Ong in this regard during the process. At one point Ong stated that he felt the traditional performers were not harnessing their traditions enough within the process. Some of the traditional performers responded to this by stating that they could not just turn their traditions on and off and that this was the reason that they did not always use their particular skills. Pichet Klunchun, a traditional Thai dancer, responded by saying that he didn’t really understand what the Flying Circus Project was about, that he came with a purity of tradition and that he became totally confused as the workshop unfolded. In response to this revelation, Ong stated that there is no purity and the idea of the workshop was to test the stereotypes of Asia, to encourage people to look at each other and, where appropriate, to negotiate with one another. He also stated that if Klunchun was confused, then the FCP was working. Initially I thought this was a valid point, but then I began to think about what it meant. Was this the kind of politicization Ong was seeking? I’m sure that

Ong would have seen this as an empowering process whereby Klunchun had learned the limits of his tradition and perhaps the value of moving beyond the confines of his own practice to work with other artists in the region. However, I also wondered whether this position could be read as some kind of cultural imperialism, where all traditions needed to be relativized. The confusion experienced by Klunchun could be seen as occurring in response to the broadening of his parameters so that he can now engage with other art forms, but what does this do to his own sense of worth as a practitioner? Is there any consideration of the sense of loss that might occur when certainties are fractured?³⁷ How, if at all, are artists who feel confused and anxious to see their position as one of empowerment? Again, whom is the FCP for?

Aside from the analysis of these fragments from the FCP, it is important to try to consider what happened during the workshop as a whole. This was an expensive month in which food, accommodation, and airfares were provided for the participants with the aim (as stated earlier) of “developing the artists in external form, internal landscape, increasing intellectual muscularity and politicization” through the interface of rituals and the work of contemporary Asian artists.

In terms of politicization, I believe that some significant issues were addressed during the workshop, particularly about the possibilities of exchange, translation, cultural difference, and the relevance of ritual. It is also important to note that there were attempts by a number of participants to politicize the process or structure of the FCP through the use of tactics of subversion. These tactics, manifested primarily through unplanned interventions into other people’s work, punctuated the process for both participants and observers and allowed a space within which to question the structure and direction of the FCP and in turn to reflect upon whom the workshops were for. These tactics were actively questioned, and indeed welcomed by Ong and Jit as an opportunity for the participants to own the process, hence perhaps illustrating that the FCP was a forum for participants to experiment rather than to be directed or controlled by Ong. However, the idea of allowing subversion or incursion raises difficult issues about control and meaning: is something *truly* subversive if it is sanctioned?

What emerged for me in response to the FCP is that the term *politicization* needs to be seen in the broadest possible sense to have any validity at all. In this

regard it is worth returning to the end of Bharucha's paper, where he says: "New dialogic structures of cultural practice are needed by which the mechanisms of the spectacle can be ruptured through new modes of investigating cultural difference in which the disparities, disjunctions, and injustices of the global economy can be duly acknowledged—and confronted."³⁸ Although Bharucha makes astute comments about TheatreWorks and the FCP, he doesn't seem to be able to offer any alternatives to the existing models. Yes, he does suggest that "new dialogic structures of cultural practice" need to be developed, structures that would allow for the interrogation of the multiple levels of oppression that exist, but how does one do this? Bharucha spends a lot of time, I believe, critiquing existing models of intercultural practice within a broad cultural/social frame, yet it is unclear to me how he envisages the changes he desires manifesting themselves within a performative context. Is Ong supposed to go around Singapore looking for the dispossessed and inviting them to join the workshop? Another factor that must be considered here is that the participants at the FCP are all well known or have a reputation as up-and-coming practitioners who were selected for the potential contribution they could make to the process, so how does one add to this? In his own comments, it seems as if Bharucha is advocating a particular and very narrow interpretation of the concept of politicization—as a radical intervention into the structure of society. If this is not the model chosen, is the work considered wrong and automatically negated?

This might seem like harsh criticism, yet at the Australasian Drama Studies Association Conference in 2000, when I gave a paper on TheatreWorks's *Desdemona* there was intense discussion centering on Ong's motivations, particularly in response to the quote that for him "interculturalism is as important as health and sewerage."³⁹ People seemed to believe that his motivations were akin to what Bharucha suggests—more about play than serious interrogation and advancement of shared ideas through intercultural exchange. But it is easy to critique. Where do we draw the line?

Conclusion?

The problem with this paper, and it is a problem of trying to engage with the debate in general, is that there are no definitive answers. The answer, once

attained, is immediately called into question. It could be argued that Ong is both playing and at the same time attempting to engage deeply with interculturalism. However, until we can proffer alternative models that are less problematic, I believe we should at least acknowledge the willingness and interest of Ong Keng Sen and TheatreWorks in general to engage the issues and to try to facilitate a range of exchanges despite the fact that their foundations may be flawed on any number of levels. In fact, Ong pointed out in a recent interview with Barbara Schwerin von Krosigk that while there is no definitive proof about the success or otherwise of the Flying Circus Project, he feels that artists “start to dream of projects together, across borders” in response to their experience at the FCP, and he has seen evidence of their desire to collaborate through applications artists make to his Arts Network Asia⁴⁰ for funds to work on either individual or collaborative projects.⁴¹ In this regard the focus returns to the artist, and agency lies with them, so that they can determine whether, and to what extent, the FCP was a useful exercise.

I believe that there also needs to be a reconsideration of what we mean by the term *playing* within an intercultural context. Rather than reading Ong’s approach as one of toying with the more exotic cultures and traditions of Asia for the sake of creating an interesting image or design aesthetic, should we not think about his approach as a postmodern one? In this context, a postmodern approach is one in which the focus is on creating, through the merging of traditions and contemporary practice, new kinds of fusions that are “rhizomatic”⁴² in nature rather than deeply rooted or faithful to any one particular “authentic” form, or indeed unrooted and free-floating or hybrid. I am not advocating here a type of interculturalism that is nonreflexive and nonpoliticized. Instead I am suggesting one that has a broad understanding of politicization as a multilayered concept that is about play or surface and depth at the same time.

A new paradigm needs to be considered when engaging with intercultural work, one in which the focus is, as Ong suggests, on internal landscapes and modes of cultural exchange rather than on juxtaposing “authenticity” or supposedly static notions of cultural purity against contemporary (read “hip”) practice. This new paradigm is not about delving into hybrid space to create an intercultural experience that adopts a contemporary frame and appropriates notions of tradition. Rather, it is about providing a space for

artists to reflect on what politicization is for them and how they might (being cognizant of this) mobilize their talents in order to create new models of cultural exchange. In this regard I propose Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the rhizome as one example of an alternative model. The rhizome has multiple entryways and it therefore allows us to move beyond the simple dualism of rootedness/nonrootedness by suggesting an elaborate web of connections within which the important contradictions and complexities involved in any worthwhile contemporary intercultural exchange can play off one another while existing simultaneously. This creates a process within which ideas are explored, shared, and debated, and participants have the time to use their skills to create synergies that, however uneasy, encourage reflexivity about the politics and poetics of cultural exchange. If intercultural exchange is to have an impact beyond the confines of a workshop or theatrical space, then it must be politicized exchange. This does not mean it must contain overt political confrontation or attack; rather, it must be about stretching the boundaries and limits of cultural knowledge, codes, and understandings, so that prejudices and stereotypes can be revealed and in response, new ways of sharing cultural differences and similarities established. These kinds of exchanges can be facilitated through a rhizomatic practice, and it is this that the FCP sought to mobilize. The FCP was attempting to establish a process that is about moving beyond aesthetic display, a process in which tensions are uncovered and probed rather than smoothed over and ignored, and a process in which the focus is on learning how to ask questions rather than on providing answers.

Notes

I would like to thank Murdoch University for awarding my colleague Dr. Jenny de Reuck and me a Special Research Grant so that we could attend the FCP 2000.

- 1 TheatreWorks is an international performance company based in Singapore. It was established in 1985. According to its Web site, "TheatreWorks has become known in Asia for its reinvention of traditional performance through a juxtaposition of cultures. . . . Under the artistic Directorship of Ong Keng Sen, TheatreWorks' concerns go beyond that of Singapore. It sees a strong synergy between nationalism and internationalism. . . . With this philosophy, TheatreWorks has performed in the cultural capitals of Asia and Europe since 1992 in major festivals and cultural institutions." See www.theatreworks.org.sg.

- 2 Observers were required, where possible, to attend all of the sessions each day, because Ong Keng Sen wanted us to achieve a sense of the process as a whole rather than to slip in and out of sessions. This meant that we started the day with the performers at approximately 8:30 a.m. and finished in the evening, once the final workshop or performance was completed. As observers we sat quietly and took notes to document or comment upon the workshop sessions. We were not involved in the practical process.
- 3 Flier for the FCP produced by TheatreWorks, Singapore (2000).
- 4 The Flying Circus Project workshop in December 2000 was the third in an ongoing series of workshops or labs held at TheatreWorks in Singapore. Lab One was held in 1996 and Lab Two in 1998. Each lab had a slightly different theme or focus. In Lab One the focus was on “learning traditional performing arts even though there were equal participants from both spheres of traditional and contemporary practice.” Lab Two involved artists from South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia, and “the focus was on the interplay between traditional and contemporary with a very strong push from the contemporary artists.” TheatreWorks flier.
- 5 Program notes for *Desdemona* at the Telstra Adelaide Festival (1999) 13.
- 6 See Rustom Bharucha, “Consumed in Singapore: The Intercultural Spectacle of *Lear*,” Centre for Advanced Studies research paper no. 21 (Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2000), 4; C. J. W.-L. Wee, “The ‘New Asian’ Modern in the Theatre: Cultural Fragments, the Singaporean Eunuch, and the Asian Lear,” Centre for Advanced Studies research paper no. 29 (Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2001); and Lee Weng Choy, “Ong Keng Sen’s *Lear* and the Appropriate ‘New Asia,’” *Substance* (Singapore: Substation, 1999).
- 7 In fact Ong sees Asian ritual as “a contemporaneous expression.” TheatreWorks flier.
- 8 Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins, *Women’s Intercultural Performance* (London: Routledge, 2000), 182.
- 9 Because there were many different languages spoken, translators were present at all times so that (relatively) smooth communication between participants was possible.
- 10 Program notes for *Desdemona*, 13.
- 11 This does not mean that there are constraints placed on what can be written about Ong’s work. In fact scholars such as Rustom Bharucha, Jenny de Reuck, and I have critically engaged with Ong’s work (in response to attending rehearsals and workshops) and are still invited to attend and respond to his projects. For more information, see Bharucha, “Consumed in Singapore”; Jenny de Reuck, “‘The Mirror Shattered into Tiny Pieces’: Reading Gender and Culture in the Japan Foundation Asia Center’s *Lear*,” *Intersections: Online Asian Studies Journal* 3.6 (2000), www.sshe.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/issue3/jenny3.html; Helena Grehan, “TheatreWorks’ *Desdemona*: Fusing Technology and Tradition,” *TDR* 4.3 (2001): 113–25; see 115 for further discussion on the “new language” interculturalism needs.
- 12 The FCP was an intense process. Artists arrived at Fort Canning Park (TheatreWorks’ headquarters) each morning at around 8:30; they ate all meals on site and spent their days attending a range of intensive workshops, discussions, and improvisation sessions. The day finished anytime between 8:00 and 11:00 p.m.

- 13 It must be noted that this division is arbitrary and serves only to provide some sense of the framework within which the workshop operated.
- 14 Some of these rituals were open to the public and were advertised in the local media as part of the FCP's public outreach program.
- 15 The Lamas attended the FCP for the first part of the process, with the Naxis attending for the latter part of the workshop. I attended the workshop December 11–21, and my analysis is based on my experiences during that period.
- 16 This material was printed in the flier.
- 17 Professor Krishen Jit is a key theater director and academic from Malaysia who worked with Ong Keng Sen in organizing and running the FCP.
- 18 The principal funding for the FCP 2000 came from the following organizations: Ford Foundation, National Arts Council, Asian Cultural Council, and Philip Morris Group of Companies.
- 19 The two previous FCPs led to productions on the international festival circuit. The FCP 1996 led to the development of TheatreWorks' *Lear*, a large-scale production funded by the Japan Foundation Asia Centre and directed by Ong Keng Sen, which toured Europe, Australia, and Asia. The FCP 1998 led to the development of *Desdemona*, the follow-up production to *Lear*. It must be noted, however, that when we interviewed Ong in Adelaide (1999) at the premiere of *Desdemona*, he expressed his discomfort with the festival circuit and indeed with the idea of making work for festivals. Perhaps this discomfort encouraged his framing of the FCP 2000 as a process- rather than product-oriented workshop. Unpublished interview conducted by the author and Jenny de Reuck with Ong Keng Sen in Adelaide, 1999.
- 20 Bharucha, "Consumed in Singapore," 4.
- 21 For more information on this, see the Singaporean Government's Renaissance City Report (1999), Ministry for Information and the Arts, www.gov.sg/mita.
- 22 Paul Rae, "Rates of Exchange: The Flying Circus Project in the Context of the Knowledge Economy" (paper presented at the International Federation for Theatre Research [FIRT] Conference, Sydney, July 12-15, 2001), 5. The quotation that Rae is referring to here comes from the Renaissance City Report (see above).
- 23 In terms of the structure and work practices of the FCP, there were no evident constraints from sponsors. However, the fact that the FCP attracted large amounts of funding does add to Ong's reputation and cultural capital. Perhaps it was as a result of the success of the FCP that he was invited to act as the curator for the *In Transit* project at the House of World Cultures in Berlin, 2002 (see n. 41 below).
- 24 Bharucha, "Consumed in Singapore," 10.
- 25 T. Sasitharan, "Kuo Pao Kun and the Theatre of Tensions," in *Images at the Margins: A Collection of Kuo Pao Kun's Plays* (Singapore: Time Books International, 2000), 13.
- 26 Kuo, cited in Bharucha, "Consumed in Singapore," 13.

- 27 C. J. W.-L. Wee, "From Universal to Local Culture: The State, Ethnic Identity, and Capitalism in Singapore," in *Local Cultures and the "New Asia": The State, Culture, and Capitalism in Southeast Asia*, ed. Wee (Singapore: ISEAS, 2002), 130.
- 28 Bharucha, "Consumed in Singapore," 13.
- 29 Ibid., 14. In fact Bharucha goes on to say that Ong's interculturalism cannot be separated from its position within the context of Singapore: "While disdaining the official multicultural imperative to 'Make Singapore Our Best Home', Ong's practice of interculturalism has enlarged the concept of 'home' to incorporate the cultures of the world within the spectacle of the state" (15).
- 30 It must be pointed out here that while the FCP was not set up to lead directly to a performance, some of the practitioners were involved in the TheatreWorks production *The Continuum: Beyond the Killing Fields*, which premiered in Singapore in October 2001.
- 31 This is material I recorded in my notes.
- 32 Rae, "Rates of Exchange." Rae attended the workshop as a participant and observer of the process, and his paper was written in response to this experience.
- 33 Paul Dwyer raised this point in response to a paper I presented on Ong's work at the FIRT conference in Sydney, 2001.
- 34 From my notes.
- 35 Interview, Adelaide, 1999.
- 36 Ibid. Ong is using the title of Richard Schechner's book *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (Routledge: New York, 1993) to talk about the ways in which he sees his work extending ritual. See www.in-transit.de/index_fl.htm.
- 37 I am grateful to Hans-Willem van Hall for pushing this point.
- 38 Bharucha, "Consumed in Singapore," 47.
- 39 Interview, Adelaide, 1999.
- 40 Arts Network Asia was established in 1999 by Ong with the support of the Ford Foundation. See www.theatreworks.org.sg.
- 41 This statement was made in Ong's interview with Schwerin von Krosigk and published on the Web site for the *In Transit* project, www.in-transit.de/index_fl.htm. This is an in-depth and interesting interview in which Ong talks about his approach to intercultural projects. Ong curated the *In Transit* cultural exchange festival/project from May 30 to June 15, 2002. The focus of this project was to interrogate the politics of translation and the translation of ritual into performance, and in this regard it can be seen as an extension of Ong's work on interculturalism commenced in the Flying Circus Projects.
- 42 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).