Relating Singapore: Cosmopolitan Aesthetics and Contemporary Performance.

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Abstract

This thesis addresses the place and function of theatrical performance in the highly globalized postcolonial city state of Singapore. In so doing, it combines a detailed study of a number of theatrical events and performative practices, with a broader enquiry into how the localized experience of theatre can be valued without recourse to instrumentalist justifications or appeals to afunctionality. Recognising modern Singapore's distinctive status as a "world city" run as an "illiberal democracy", it proposes the idea of a "cosmopolitan aesthetics", which understands the encounter with theatre in relational terms as fostering worldliness.

The introduction elaborates on this with reference to firework performances in Singapore and London, and the responses of the author as a British person resident in Singapore. Part One surveys current perspectives on cosmopolitanism, and develops the idea of relationality with reference to the singularity of the theatrical event at its moment of emergence, and to the social context into which the event intervenes. It also reflects on the relations between foreignness and the challenge of writing about live performance.

Part Two explores the complex ways in which singular and social relations intertwine in the process of relating Singapore on and to the stage. Each chapter takes theatrical space as a constant against which are measured expanding scales of social experience: solo performance and selfhood, socially committed theatre and city space, intercultural improvisations and regional dynamics, internationally-staged performances and globality, and an olfactory *dérive*, performances about trees, and the figuring of the environment.

The thesis aims to make a positive contribution to the growing literature on intersections between artistic practice and global cultural and economic processes, and to compensate for a dearth of discussions on the relationship between theatre and cosmopolitanism. It also promises an original perspective on Singapore theatre, and proposes a number of enabling critical concepts, including "weak interculturalism" and cosmopolitan relationality.

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Figures.

Abbreviations

BG	Brigadier General
CC	Community Club
CDC	Community Development Council
CMIO	Chinese Malay Indian Other
ERC	Economic Review Committee
FCP	Flying Circus Project
JI	Jemaah Islamiah
KBE	Knowledge Based Economy
KL	Kuala Lumpur
MICA	Ministry for Information, Communications and the Arts (formerly MITA)
MITA	Ministry for Information and the Arts
MRT	Mass Rapid Transit
NAC	National Arts Council
OB markers	Out of Bounds markers
PAP	People's Action Party
PM	Prime Minister
R(A)	Restricted (Artistic)
RSC	Remaking Singapore Committee
Sars	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
SM	Senior Minister
ST	Straits Times
STB	Singapore Tourist Board
TNS	The Necessary Stage
TWC	The Working Committee

Introduction: Fireworks.

1.

On 12th October 2002, a spectacular firework display was staged in Singapore to mark the opening of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, a new harbour-side performing arts complex housing two theatres, a concert hall, recital studio, art gallery, library, restaurants and shopping arcade. The stakes in staging such an event were high. Since the Asian Economic Crisis of 1997-8, governments and businesses in the Southeast Asian region had been struggling to compensate for the loss of trade and investment to China.[1] A mere six hundred and ninety square kilometres in size, and with few natural resources, Singapore's well-educated populace of 4.2 million – of which twenty five per cent are foreigners, or foreign-born – is its primary asset, and the government's response to the crisis was to accelerate plans to develop the city state as a global player in the "Knowledge-Based Economy" (KBE). However, concerned that the pragmatic, conformist ethos that had served the economy well in the years following independence in 1965 would inhibit the innovation and risk-taking required for "value creation" in the KBE, in 2000 the government produced the *Renaissance City Report*, which sealed Esplanade as the centrepiece of Singapore's new "funky town" image at home and abroad.[2] Speaking in the context of the building's completion in May 2002, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong expressed this idea with characteristic succinctness – and pragmatism: "[I]f you want the economic side to flourish, you want more entrepreneurs, more and more creativity, you must also look at the art side. The two go together" (quoted in *The Nation* 2002). In the case of the Esplanade fireworks,

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[1] The causes of the events that came to known as the "Asian Financial Crisis" of 1997-8 are varied and complex. Contributing factors included: extremely rapid economic growth in the Southeast Asian region from the late eighties onwards; lax regulation and poor debt servicing; a disproportionate amount of Foreign Direct Investment being channelled into the stock market and real estate without any appreciable benefit for the agricultural and industrial sectors; a rapidly appreciating US Dollar (to which a number of Southeast Asian currencies were pegged); rising wage costs and China's growing competitiveness in this area; intensive currency speculation, and panic concerning the movement of the market, fuelled in part by the grim prognoses of the International Monetary Fund. Thailand, Indonesia, South Korea and Malaysia were the hardest hit economies, with knock-on effects including political crises and sharp rise in the proportion of the population living below the poverty line. Singapore and Singaporeans also suffered from the contagion, from a perceived lack of transparency in the dealings of Government Linked Companies (which includes almost all of its major businesses), and from the degree to which its companies had invested heavily in the region.

[2] In July 1999, *Time* magazine announced "Singapore swings". It went on to note: "once notorious for tight government control, the city-state is getting competitive, creative, even funky" (McCarthy with Elles 1999: 17). The report was duly noted in the *Renaissance City Report* under the sub-heading 'Foreign Assessments'. More broadly, the two stated aims of the report were "[t]o establish Singapore as a global arts city" by positioning it as a "key city in the Asian renaissance of the 21st century and a cultural centre in the globalised world", and "[t]o provide cultural ballast to our nation-building efforts" in order to "strengthen Singaporeans' sense of national identity and belonging" (*Renaissance City Report* 2000: 4).

then, fun was serious business,[3] and the cultural imperatives of global economic expansion were briefly, brilliantly, illuminated.

The aim of this thesis is to articulate the significance of those imperatives for theatrical performance in Singapore, and to consider how the experience of making, watching and responding to the theatre – both in Singapore and, appropriately qualified, elsewhere – in turn reproduces, modulates, or indeed challenges them. Until recently, such questions have received little attention within the discipline of Theatre Studies. One might speculate that the localized and delimited nature of the theatre has exempted it from the formulation of new research paradigms, unlike those disciplines where the increasing worldwide interconnectedness of social, economic, political, ecological and cultural processes directly implicate their objects of study. It is little coincidence, for example, that sociologists have led the way in re-thinking the meaning of and implications for cultural practices in such contexts (see, for instance, Tomlinson (1999) and Ben-Rafeal and Sternberg (2001)), while the production and experience of specific cultural artifacts – in particular, art objects and events – has been somewhat less vigorously reconsidered. Amongst those areas of aesthetic enquiry that *have* begun to address the impact of global processes, it is furthermore unsurprising that the focus has been on the visual arts (for instance, the essays collected in Mosquera and Fisher (2004)). There, the commodificatory logic of both monetary and discursive exchange that constitutes the art market has proved more consistent with the means and ends of such processes than more financially recalcitrant art forms, such as the invariably deficit-threatened, subsidy-dependent, or, at most, break-even, theatre.

The vastly expanded scope and volume of global exchange in goods, services and information in the last few decades have led many commentators to identify a qualitative transformation in scale and modes of commodification from previous systems of trade, organization and communication. This transformation is commonly, though not unproblematically, referred to as "globalization", and while its defining features may initially seem a far cry from those of the theatre, there is in fact nothing in the latter that is beyond the scope of the former. There are two reasons for this, the first being that, though differently inflected, many aspects of theatrical experience continue to resonate with audiences and performers regardless of the extent and

[3] "Fun is serious business", stated then Minister for Information and the Arts, George Yeo, in a September 1990 newspaper article entitled "Govt serious about making S'pore a 'fun' place" (cited in George 2000: 145).

complexity of global connectivity. After all, such connectivity continues to be experienced, and/or produced by individuals whose interactions with the world, despite the prevalence of electronic communications, are determined by the same resolutely corporeal form that remains a pre-requisite for the theatre. Similarly, whether in reaction to or as a mutation of the apparently diminished opportunity for shared experience and face-to-face contact brought about by increased mobility and the Internet, the urge to build or reaffirm a sense of communitas, as exemplified by (but certainly not limited to) the theatrical experience, remains strong. The function and appeal of the actor or performer, too, remain resonant. Their labour in exploring, negotiating and producing identities and actions, in stimulating recognition or bewilderment, in beguiling, seducing or repulsing, coincides in many ways with the strategies to which individual audience members resort in maintaining a workable conception of self, identity and inter-relationships in a fast-changing environment. Finally, language on stage can be both crafted and immediate, honed and responsive, in ways that cut through the endless chatter of the global mediascape, even when mining, mimicking or ventriloquising it.

The second reason that the theatre falls within the ambit of global processes is that it participates in their production. Even if certain features, such as its localized aspect, may ostensibly seem at odds with the unimaginable reach and impact of global media and communications technologies, it is a mistake to understand globalization as somehow "out there", and not as a product of its expressions. Many of the most watched global television events – such as the opening of the Olympic Games – are spectacles of liveness, in which the audience is as much a feature as the performance they are themselves watching. Moreover, my comments about the art market notwithstanding, profitability is no direct determinant of success in an age of "value adding" and "cultural capital". Theatrical performances can be as much objects of globalization as subject to it: as much agents as products.

Rather than understanding the theatre as either immune from or irredeemably implicated in a monolithic entity called "globalization", therefore, it is most appropriate to understand it as dynamically, if distinctively, engaged with the issues and debates, practices and discourses, interactions and transactions that are consistently making and re-making the global cultural and economic environment. To the extent that the theatre can be at odds with or complicit in aspects of these processes, there is a

political dimension to this understanding, which I shall have cause to revisit on many occasions over the course of this thesis.

For the moment, however, it is appropriate to return to the opening celebrations of the Esplanade, at which I was a guest in my capacity as the co-artistic director of a Singapore-based theatre company, spell#7. There, many of the factors mentioned above were at play in instructively contrary fashion. A media spectacle and open-air performance for an audience of a hundred thousand, the event far exceeded in scale, profile and budget any that would ever take place within the building it inaugurated. A celebration of live performance by largely mechanical and pyrotechnical means, the venue backers and event organisers sought to garner local support for a symbol of international aspiration. Arrestingly marking the advent of the new – in this case the fresh significance of the performing arts to Singapore – the event was nevertheless charged with granting it the imprimatur of what preceded it – economic success in a globalizing market. Such paradoxes are not the "side-effects of globalization". Rather, they are the very stuff of it, such as it exists, and somewhere, slightly obscured by the razzle-dazzle, lie questions about the place of the theatre, and the experience of performance. It is for this reason that the Esplanade opening offers a means of introducing some of the key terms and debates that this thesis will explore and develop. This is in keeping, too, with the etymological roots of the term "introduction" (*intro-* "to the inside" + *ducere* "to lead"), for to start *outside* the theatre, by focusing on an event that is somewhat atypical of the performances to be discussed in the body of the thesis, serves as a means to ensure that these preliminary remarks will not form too well, too soon, around their proper subject matter. Further, there is a rhetorical feature at work here that should be highlighted. This figurative "outside" offers a vista from which a number of themes and discursive strands that will inform subsequent analyses are briefly illuminated, yet remains continuous with the space of the adjacent theatre. This is in contrast to the more conventional introductory overview or survey, which emanates from a panoptic spectatorial position, and subsequently zooms in on specific objects as the chapters unfold. If there is a lesson already to be learnt from the foregoing discussion of theatre's place in the processes of globalization, it is that the most appropriate perspective from which to address it is a grounded one. For this reason the subsequent discussion, although wide-ranging in its associations, is from the outset bound in to the specific conditions of an event, a place and a time, and mediated by my experience of, and subsequent reflections on, their conjunction. The methodological implications of this will be considered in due course. Suffice, for the

moment, to note that it would be bad faith to wait for such an opportunity before putting them into practice. Simply put, my aim here is to start as I mean to go on.

2.

A collaboration between French pyrotechnicians "Groupe F", Australian aerialists "Legs on the Wall" and Canadian company "Le Théâtre de la Dame de Cœur", the Esplanade opening combined fireworks, decorated bumboats,[4] live performers, video projections and recorded music. The structure of the piece was determined by this combination of elements and the nature of the performance site. The roughly triangular harbour became a huge arena, with the audience ranged along two sides, the boats plying the water in the middle, the aerialists performing vertically against a skyscraper to one corner, and the fireworks being launched from the far bank. Two roped performers opened the show by running straight down the front of the skyscraper to a halfway point, and then began to jump outwards from the building. Attention then shifted to the choreographed sequences of the illuminated bumboats, and subsequently to the fireworks behind. This sequence formed the basic structure of the piece, and was repeated twice more, gradually inter-mingling with new elements, such as "fire-breathing dragon" boats, in the build-up to the grand finale, a dazzling, bewildering and sustained series of firework explosions, which illuminated the whole harbour.

In so far as such inaugural events enact the performative function (in the Austinian sense of illocutionary force) of bringing what they announce into being, their own performance has a transparent, or recessive, quality. In the performance described above, there was no discernible narrative, and although each element carried imagistic resonances (the performers attempting to fly, the bumboats decorated with huge orchids, which are Singapore's national flower[5]) these neither developed, nor had a recognizably cumulative effect. This served what I took to be the larger end of producing an affective force which, unencumbered by concrete significations, cleared the way for transference onto the object of the inauguration: the "Theatres on the Bay".

If the performance were to have any enduring qualities at all, it would be in the form of media and merchandising images which, given the second-to-second semiotic

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[4] Small boats that are usually used to ferry sailors between ship and shore.
[5] The national flower is actually a specific kind of orchid, the *Vanda Miss Joaquim*. However, orchids in general – or generically-drawn orchids – are instantly recognisable within Singapore as a national emblem.

evacuations of the event, could be self-contained and self-explanatory, regardless of what point in proceedings they were taken. Commemorative postcards from the Esplanade shop exemplify this well enough (see figure 1 for an example), but also illustrate a basic difficulty with the issue of affect-transference. By contrast with Singapore's annual National Day fireworks, which build upon the symbols and narratives of the preceding mass performance in order to generate an emotionally resonant sense of national identity in spectators, the Esplanade fireworks beg the question: what happens when the affective object of a given performance is performance itself? The answer, as other postcards on sale at the venue demonstrate (figures 2, 3 and 4), has been to foreground the hardware. "We certainly hope that the stunning visuals of the Esplanade will be on newspapers and television networks all around the world on October 13th", remarked Singapore Tourist Board (STB) executive Yeow Mei Sin in the *Straits Times* story 'World's press arrives at Esplanade', the day before the opening (Lee 2002). The reference is ostensibly to the firework display, but it is also to the arts centre itself. In 1992, then Minister for Information and the Arts George Yeo stated: "Our objective is to build a centre on the Pacific Rim which will prefigure and help usher in the new age of East Asia. The design of our arts centre must reflect this aspiration" (quoted in the Esplanade Opening Brochure 2002: 16). Whether or not it achieves this aspiration, the design is undeniably distinctive. The two main performing spaces are carapaced with over ten thousand glass panels, each with an elevated metallic sunshade. The overall effect is to give the building an organic, softly spiny look. Common analogies are to flies' eyes, or two halves of the notoriously pungent and locally popular durian fruit, an identification pounced on by Government ministers and the highly regulated local media in an attempt to forge an emotional connection between Singaporeans and the arts centre. Hence the *Straits Times* editorial 'Durian Tasting', published on the day before the opening, described the adoption of the "charming moniker" as evidence of "democratization" (11th October 2002), and shortly after the opening, in a story entitled 'Durians are not that hard to crack', it reported on a press conference held by the then Acting Minister for Information and the Arts:

> Durians and PCs have a lot in common – and not just because they are a devil to break into if you do not know how.
> Those were the images Mr David Lim used to explain how the Durians – or the Esplanade arts centre – might look to many heartlanders at present.

Mr Lim went on to note that many people were initially intimidated by personal computers, until they realized that within three strokes they "could get money from a

teller or send email overseas...Once we overcome that hurdle, the arts will not seem strange and distant" (Cheong 2002).

David Lim's sentiments are indicative, albeit in unusually stark terms, of a broader discursive trend. Having bankrolled the Esplanade on economistic grounds, the government has difficulties conceiving or explaining it in other terms. In the context of the KBE, this means that the performing arts centre itself ironically comes to be valued in terms of *performativity*, in the sense articulated by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*, and glossed by Jon McKenzie as "...legitimation defined as the maximization of a system's output and the minimization of its input. It normalizes activities by optimizing a system's performance" (McKenzie 2001: 163). Since its opening, the performance *of* the complex has taken on a normalizing force across a range of discourses that far outstrips the significance of the performances *in* the complex. Its twin domes appear in product advertisements, tourist promotion literature, websites advertising Singapore as a service industry hub and, most prominently in the local context, in the propaganda that appeared on posters and postcards in the run-up to National Day 2004, overlaid with slogans such as "Our Home, Our Strength" and "A Progressive Society" (figures 5 and 6). Indeed, one might go so far as to observe that the Esplanade has become a national totem of Singapore's aspiration to be, in the words of Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, "a high performance society" (Goh 1999: 40). With a Chief Executive Officer rather than an artistic director, a marbled interior that resembles the lobby of a luxury hotel, a boutique shopping arcade and upmarket restaurants, and a constant trumpeting of the building's technical capabilities – in particular the acoustic canopy and Klais pipe organ in the concert hall – the Esplanade embodies the point at which the "state of the art" flips over into the "art of the state": the degree zero of a modern technocracy.

The distinctive features of Singapore's cultural and political terrain will become apparent over the course of this study. This, however, should not obscure the fact that this distinctiveness is often one of degree, rather than one of absolute difference, and the Esplanade is a good example of the way in which developments in Singapore chime with those elsewhere. In its 11th October editorial, the *Straits Times* noted bluntly that the "billion-plus" price-tag for the Esplanade "...is a necessary investment for a contemporary society, no question about it" (2002). This is because it conforms to a global trend for new, high-profile arts centres, whose architectural individuality and cachet is of a piece with the "brand equity", "cultural capital" and "creative industries"

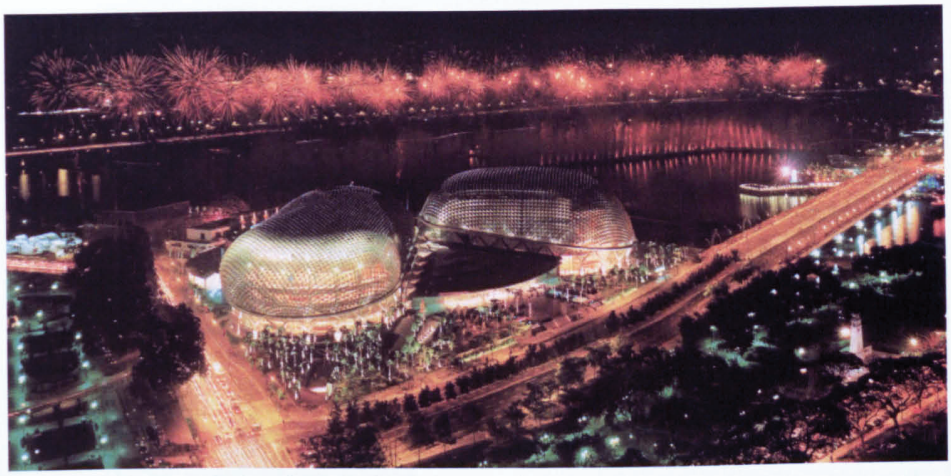

Figure 1. Postcard showing Esplanade opening.

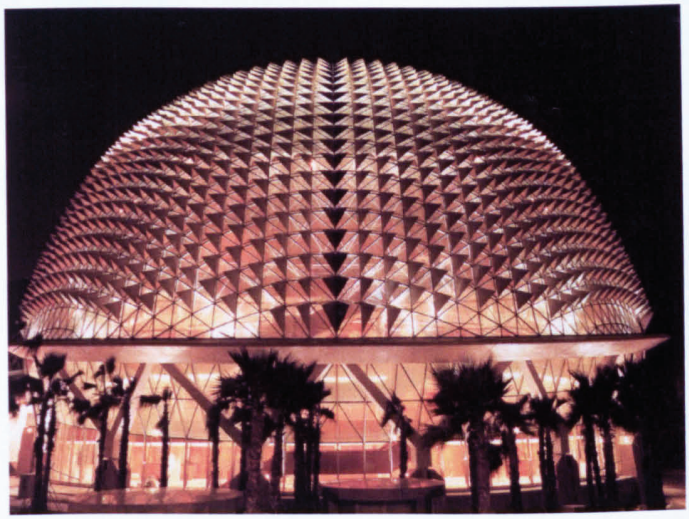

Figure 2. Postcard of Esplanade exterior at night.

Figure 3. Postcard showing interior view of the Esplanade's cladding.

Figure 4. Postcard showing the Esplanade pipe organ

Figure 5. Postcard distributed for National Day, 9 August 2004

Figure 6. Poster in Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) station, August 2004. Photograph: the author.

they promise to generate and sustain.[6] These include Tate Modern in London (2000), the Lowry Centre in Manchester (2000), the Kimmel Centre for the Performing Arts in Philadelphia (2001), the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Arts in Gateshead (2002), the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles (2003), the Shanghai Grand Theatre (2004), the Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff (2004) and the National Theatre in Beijing (2005). Each complex will no doubt take on its own local significance, and may yet achieve an international profile on a par with that holy grail of iconic arts centres, the Sydney Opera House (1973). Clustering around this particular global-economic moment, however, it is clear that they will all encounter, to some extent, this revealing tension between performance and performativity in the global context. This raises the question: what is it in theatrical performance that the establishment of such centres seeks to harness, and how does its explicit re-framing in terms of cultural and economic globalization affect its production and reception? In identifying such features, it becomes possible to think about the theatre in ways that are cognizant of global processes, but operate in critical relation to those elements that may distort its function and effects.

Given the normalizing force that arts centres such as Esplanade set in train, however, such delineations are not as straightforward as the preceding observation may suggest. This becomes apparent if one looks at the way in which David Lim's apparently facile technocratic reasoning concerning access to the arts is reproduced at policy level. In 2003, the Ministry of Finance's Economic Review Committee Service Industries Subcommittee's Workgroup on Creative Industries published its *Creative Industries Development Strategy*, which aimed to expand on the vision outlined by the *Renaissance City Report*. Identifying the potential for "Creative Clusters" in Singapore, it included the initiatives 'Design Singapore', 'Media 21', and 'Renaissance City 2.0'. The primary focus of the latter is:

> ...to ensure that we maximize the potential of the existing and new arts infrastructure by developing our software and enhancing the level of integration with the business and people sectors. At the same time, MITA [Ministry for Information and the Arts] agencies must shift away from the "arts for arts' sake" mindset, to look at the development of arts from a holistic perspective, to contribute towards the development of the creative industries as well as our nation's social development (*Creative Industries Development Strategy* 2003: 14).

[6] The *Creative Industries Development Strategy* defines a nation's cultural capital as "the accumulation and sum of her creative capacity, the people's emotional and social bonds to the country and community, as well as a deep knowledge of the world – its histories, economies, philosophies, societies and arts" (*Creative Industries Development Strategy* 2003: Annex 1.1, 3). The use of the term in KBE parlance is something of a misconstrual. It was originally developed by Pierre Bourdieu as a way of explaining how educational inequalities derived from variable competencies in relation to the basic cultural assumptions that underwrite learning processes and knowledge acquisition.

Once again, the bluntness of the expression may be distinctively Singaporean, but the instrumentalist sentiment is far from unique. *The Renaissance City Report* and 'Renaissance City 2.0' both owe a significant debt to *Culture and Creativity: The Next Ten Years* (2001), a Green Paper published by the British Department of Culture, Media and Sport. The extent to which the championing of the "Creative Industries" proposed by that report was itself consistent with almost a century of official thinking on the role of the arts has only recently been acknowledged by the current British Minister for Culture, Media and Sport, Tessa Jowell, in a "personal essay" entitled 'Government and the Value of Culture'. There, she states that "...[t]oo often politicians have been forced to debate culture in terms only of its instrumental benefits to other agendas...In political and public discourse in this country we have avoided the more difficult approach of investigating, questioning and celebrating what culture actually does in and of itself" (2004: 12).

"Art for arts' sake"; "what culture actually does in and of itself": this is what is lost when performing arts venues outperform what they host. Identifying what these oft-maligned phrases and sentiments mean for theatrical performance is crucial to understanding its place in the context of globalization. And yet, is an argument for the value of "art for arts' sake" not tautologous? If the terms of the debate are to follow those set out by 'Renaissance City 2.0', then the answer is most likely "yes". The phrase itself is unprepossessing, no doubt deliberately chosen for its associations with indulgence and pretension, so that even if one were to adopt the instrumentalist logic of Singapore's policy makers and argue with them on their own conceptual turf for the usefulness of aesthetic experience, one would begin at an almost insurmountable disadvantage. Tessa Jowell's phrasing is more propitious, although even her argument, apparently at odds with that of 'Renaissance City 2.0' on utilitarianism, nevertheless coincides on the question of "defining and preserving" identity: "We are inventing new forms of dance, of music, of drama that transcend traditional boundaries, and help give us a national identity which is uniquely ours. Culture defines who we are, it defines us as a nation. And *only* culture can do this" (17). In response, one might argue for the resistant, even revolutionary potential of artworks, or, at the very least, call into question whether their significance can ever be pegged to national agendas over and above other scales and modes of identification. Again, however, the rhetoric of policy making guides the debate, and pre-determines the form of the outcome, if not its precise content.

To the extent that policy prescriptions (and more tentative proposals, such as Jowell's "personal essay") express actual or desired social consensus on a given issue, and, in line with party manifestoes, enable the suturing together of perspectives on diverse activities to form a cohesive economic, political, and socio-cultural whole, even aesthetic arguments cannot dismiss them out of hand. More specifically, at least in the context of strong states such as Singapore and the United Kingdom, such policy documents represent the clearest articulations of thinking on globalization, and the place and function of cultural and artistic practice within it. The challenge, therefore, is to argue in measured relation to such articulations, while staking out a critical terrain that remains independent of their rhetoric. In this light, one can re-phrase the challenge I am tussling with here – and, indeed, throughout this thesis – as *affirming the significance of contemporary theatrical performance as an end in itself, in such a way that it brings to bear upon the global processes in which it participates* and *which it produces, those realms of experience such processes may otherwise exclude.* On 12th October 2002, this necessarily convoluted formulation took on a too-blunt immediacy.

3.

Fifteen minutes after the end of the Esplanade opening, two bombs ripped through a bar and a nightclub on the Indonesian island of Bali, killing two hundred and two people of a dozen nationalities, and injuring over three hundred. Accurate details came too late for the night editors of the 13th October edition of Singapore's *Sunday Times* (figure 7), and by morning the escalating body-count being quoted on television had thrust the "2am latest" story into a past that already seemed more than a mere few hours old. With the repercussions of the September 11th 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon playing themselves out on the left of the page, the advertisement below unwittingly pre-figuring the economic impact of the Bali attack on the region, and the pre-blast razzle-dazzle of the Esplanade opening still blazing innocuously away, the page captures a radically unstable moment in time, when pasts and futures overlap, events are rendered suddenly porous, and feed into each other in otherwise impossible ways. Within hours, history had been righted. The television focused exclusively upon Bali, likewise Monday's front page (figure 8). And yet, Sunday's newspaper could not be so easily cast aside, not by me, nor, I suspect, by many other spectators who had been on the Singapore harbour-front the night before. For, just as the page itself persists in its jumbled significations despite the massive

Figure 7. Front page of the *Sunday Times* (Singapore), 13th October 2002.

Figure 8. Front page of the *Straits Times* (Singapore), 14th October 2002.

counter-weight of news coverage of Bali that followed it, so the queasy echo of the fireworks I find in the bomb-blast means that my mediatized engagement with the latter is indelibly rooted in my direct experience of the former. Reflecting on the implications of this reveals a way of beginning to address some of the broader points raised above.

One could not help but awake in Singapore on 13th October 2002 to intimations of mortality. Bali is not the nearest Indonesian island to Singapore, but, with significant numbers of Western expatriates and tourists, and sizeable Muslim minorities, both share a demographic and geo-political profile within the predominantly Islamic region that has made them similarly attractive as terrorist targets. In 2001 in Afghanistan, the CIA discovered documents and videotapes detailing planned terrorist attacks on American and local targets in Singapore. Between December 2001 and September 2002, thirty-one local members of Jemaah Islamiah (JI), an Al-Qaeda-linked group instrumental in the Bali attack, were detained without trial in Singapore under the Internal Security Act, and, as of January 2005, so they remain. That the majority of the detainees were Singaporean nationals revealed fault-lines in the multi-racial city-state's much-vaunted (and strictly enforced) ethos of "racial harmony" that are seldom reflected in the reports of the local media.[7] In contributing to, as 'Renaissance City 2.0' puts it in the segment cited above, "our nation's social development", arts infrastructure such as the Esplanade can be seen as having the potential to minimise inter-racial friction by increasing opportunities for the promotion of local cultural forms and collective experience. The aim is to encourage inter-ethnic understanding, and the development of a generalized sense of Singaporeanness over and above specific racialised identifications. Tight security on the night of the venue's opening, however, attested to the fact that the prestige of the project marked it out as a clear terrorist target. To revellers waking the next morning, the fireworks were a reminder of both how little and how great was the risk they had themselves run. It could have been Singapore: it happened not to be. The absolute logic of the bomb blast renders the difference between these two positions disconcertingly small. The irony of Yeow Mei

[7] The irony of enforced harmony is not lost on the population of Singapore. Religious leaders are forbidden by law to engage in politics, and religious sensitivities are seldom addressed by artists for fear of a censorious backlash. The cornerstone of such legislation and its related ideology is a conception of a society that is multi-racial rather than multi-cultural. Or, as PM Lee Hsien Loong put it in an address to a gathering of the Indian community: "Our society is not a melting pot" (2005). Rigid bureaucratic and discursive distinctions between ethnicities are enforced through the broad "CMIO" classification: Chinese (75%), Malay (14%), Indian (7%), Other (4%). However, for many, the CMIO analysis obscures much more complex ethnic, religious, historical and linguistic affiliations on the ground. For a discussion of this see the chapter 'A Place in the Sun: Race and National Identity' in George (2000).

Sin's hopes for worldwide media coverage of the Esplanade's "stunning visuals" sours further when one recalls that a significant part of the "world's press" brought in by the STB may have caught a plane to Bali that very night, to grab what images they could of the tragedy's aftermath. Imagine their confusion – to start the evening snapping fireworks, and see dawn break through their lenses on a body-strewn and blood-spattered bombsite (see the graphic photograph in figure 8). It plays out, *in extremis*, my own befuddlement, and that of many others, as we struggled next morning to reconcile our memories of the night before with the pictures on our television screens. Images of the Esplanade's explosive inauguration, meanwhile, evaporated from global consciousness almost as swiftly as those starbursts into the night sky over the Singapore harbour.

In this regard, the opening of the Esplanade inadvertently served after-the-fact to focus attention onto regional political and ideological currents in a way that was all the more chastening for its frivolity at the time. The Bali bombing occurred at an intersection of global terrorist networks, tourist itineraries, religious and ideological affiliations, and geopolitical tensions and alliances. The Esplanade event sought to open up a new intersection between those same tourist itineraries and regional trade alliances, while disentangling its locale from the terrorist networks and neutralizing the impact of religious radicalism by contributing to greater cultural understanding amongst Singapore's various ethnicities. Indeed, the multi-national make-up of the team that staged the display, and the fact that it was a consortium of Europeans, North Americans and Antipodeans who were contracted to stage a firework display for a predominantly Chinese audience, is evidence of a more benign side of these complex global intersections.

However, that fireworks in one place can be echoed by a bombing in another, shows that the grim ironies of global connectivity are never far off. Of course, this does not translate into an equivalence of significance, and one cannot be too aware of this fact when discussing the theatre: theatre is never, in any direct way, a question of survival. Indeed, in relation to any number of more pressing scenarios, it is rendered almost entirely trivial. Nevertheless, while there is no doubt that decisive factors – such as Singapore's superior security apparatus – influenced how the dice fell that night, the events of 12th October 2002 are reminder enough that, however apparently frivolous or benign a given situation, in a global context, the stakes are always also high.

In this light, my account of the Esplanade opening, which I have taken thus far to exemplify much of what is limited and limiting about an idea of theatrical performance in the service of a globalizing economic-cultural imperative, needs to be re-visited. In so doing, it becomes possible to move beyond the argument that would pitch instrumentalism against art for art's sake, to a more nuanced appreciation of the theatrical event, although, as will be seen, this is not a job the Esplanade opening can do entirely on its own.

4.

As I recounted above, there was a kind of semiotic transparency to the firework spectacular on the Singapore harbour, whose aim was to celebrate the opening of the Esplanade, and all that that suggested in terms of Singapore's entry into the global cultural economy. Revisiting the event in light of the bombing that succeeded it, however, I cannot help but ascribe it a significance – and therefore a value – that did not occur to me at the time. It concerns the function of the performers within the piece, and my relationship to them as an audience member.

Each of the three elements of the performance unfolded in a very different scalar relationship with the audience members, and it was the shift between these elements that made this apparent. The aerialists on the skyscraper were far from the audience, yet they transfixed me. Even though their images were enlarged and projected onto the building below them, it was the tiny bodies I watched. No non-human object of such size would have been included in a performance of such scale, and their movements could only be of the most general and repetitive kind: stretched out, carving through the air. They were crucial, however, in setting the ratio and scale of the performance. Through the inclusion of human bodies in the performance space, the performer-audience ratio, as in all live theatre, was set at 1:1, and every spectator differentiated and cast in an individual relation to the event. However, whereas this ratio is normally of a piece with the scale of the venue (it informs all theatre architecture and the choice of most other performance sites), here, the magnitude of the space was radically at odds with this anchoring relationship, and the other elements of the performance generated other manifestations of space and time, which drew attention to it accordingly.

Heading out across the harbour, the bumboats performed stately choreographies, turning, circling, swerving away and towards each other, their illuminations reflecting

on the water. Inevitably, with such distances to cover, and manoeuvrability to take into account, this was a ponderous affair. If the aerialists sharply distinguished every member of the crowd, the bumboats caused these distinctions to dissipate. It takes more time to pass by so many people than any one person is able fully to concentrate on or derive novelty from the vision. In consequence, it is as if the "boatness" of the boats submerges, to leave only this expanded sense of time taken and space covered, small areas of dark water, briefly lit in passing. In contrast, the fireworks illuminated the entire harbour at once, but for split seconds at a time, briefly occupying both the vertical plane of the skyscraper and the horizontal plane of the water. Some exploded in sequences that marked out the full length of the bank from which they were fired; others attained ever higher and broader reach. In their absolute coverage of the performance arena, they exceeded any previous constitution of the audience. For brief moments, the effect could be posited as the same for every individual simultaneously. And if the aerialists gestured to the vastness of the space, and the bumboats caused a stretching-out of time, the fireworks collapsed both. They were everywhere instantaneously, until, as the finale approached and their intensity increased, they became too numerous and fast to apprehend. They appeared to consume time, because they overwhelmed the sensorium. The attempt to process – visually, haptically, aurally, olfactarily – any one explosion was thrown constantly into disarray by the advent of another hard upon it. The only option was to enter into another level of reception, which grasped the explosions as a singular entity, rather than a series of discrete events. In such situations, one's perception traduces what one knows to be occurring. One has a strong sense of being not "all there", even though one knows where "there" is. On the harbour side, this made the return of focus to the aerialists after the first two rounds of fireworks all the more important: it enabled spectators to recalibrate their sensibilities against the anchoring ratio of the human body, to bring them back to the here and now, and to prime them for the next build-up.

These, the mechanics of the spectacle, were meant to recede, thereby opening to the audience an unmediated experience of spatio-temporal intensification, and indeed at the time I was happy to submit myself to the experiential thrills of the show. In retrospect, however, I find in the contrast between the vastness of the enterprise and the performers' place in it a peculiarly resonant image. Metaphorically, perhaps, it dramatizes the dynamics of theatre in the context of globalization. More directly, however, I find myself unable to disassociate my memories of this performance from my feelings about the Bali bombing. I would schematize this as the result of a twofold

identification with the performers. First, as *participants* in the event, I acknowledge them as one of several elements that made up the semiotic field of the performance, an identification that is predicated on the separability of these elements. In this, I become aware of what distinguishes the firework performance from the bombing, for separation is precisely what was unavailable to the victims of the bomb blasts: bodies, vehicles, explosions, buildings, all in too-close proximity. That there was no room between them means there is no way of interpreting the event, or imagining it appropriately, since one can intuit only the horror of absolute conflation, rather than the conflation *of* anything in particular. Terror is defined in this case by the erasure of the very possibility of participation, and this is why the fireworks cannot "stand in" for the bomb blast in a simple relation of equivalence.[8] In this, the performers distinguish the two events. At the same time, however, they embody a second identification, as *guarantors*, interposing themselves *between* those inorganic elements of the event and the audience, as if on the audience's behalf. At the time of the performance, of course, this function was necessarily subsumed into the smooth unfolding of the event. However, thinking back to it in light of what followed, my memory of the display thickens around this aspect, because in this affective relation with the performers I find a fulcrum for my sentiments, otherwise inconceivable, towards those caught up in the bomb blast. The performers interposed themselves between far more than the audience and the fireworks that night.

The way in which the aesthetic experience of the firework performance intensified an imaginative and affective relation to people and a place elsewhere *on its own terms* relates closely to the problem outlined above of accounting appropriately for the theatre without foreclosing an awareness of its place in the global scheme of things. However, the tragic circumstances out of which this example developed clearly militate against jumping to generalizations, as do the shortcomings of the firework performance itself as an event of aesthetic value. Indeed, while the extreme nature of the correspondence between the events of 12th October 2002 draws attention to this feature of theatrical experience in ways that might otherwise go unnoticed, the fact is that it only remains valid if it can be identified as occurring *more* stridently under *less* fraught conditions. That the bombing focused my attention retrospectively on these

[8] A related point is elaborated by Jean-François Lyotard in his discussion of language games:
> By terror I mean the efficiency gained by eliminating, or threatening to eliminate, a player from the language game one shares with him. He is silenced or consents, not because he has been refuted, but because his ability to participate has been threatened (there are many ways to prevent someone playing) (1984 [1979]: 64-5).

aspects of the opening event indicates that one may derive aesthetic significance from almost any performance, but it does not follow that this is either desirable or sustainable. Any general theory that always reads the aesthetic experience of performance through and in the service of other events is not only instrumentalist, but also threatens to obscure those features that the performance will inevitably fail to account for, with potentially distorting and unethical consequences. What is required, therefore, is that the performance in question itself generates these affective relations to other people and other places; relations that, in globalized contexts, are best described as *cosmopolitan*.

5.

To elaborate on this point, I propose to invoke a different set of correspondences with the Singapore event by looking to another firework performance. Once again, it is not exemplary, this time because there were no performers at all. However, it does serve, as did the Esplanade opening, to highlight key elements in a developing argument, without, for all that, monopolizing the terms of the debate.

Another date, then – 31st January 2003 – another waterfront arts complex – Tate Modern, London – and another firework show – Cai Guo-Qiang's *Ye Gong Hao Long: Explosion Project for the Tate Modern*. At 7pm, Cai ignites a single strip of gunpowder, which snakes from the Blackfriars Bridge end of St Paul's Walk, across the Millennium Bridge, up the façade of the Tate Modern, and round and round its chimney, to explode at the top. The event lasts one minute, and is witnessed by several thousand people, who line the riverbank on either side of the Thames, and throng the grounds outside the gallery. After the show, spectators are invited in for jasmine tea, fortune cookies, and a viewing of firework paintings and videos of other explosions.

There are several pointed similarities between this event and the Esplanade opening that form the basis of their correspondence in this analysis. First, both tapped into the annunciative, performative force of fireworks in order to inaugurate an on-going project: *Ye Gong Hao Long* marked the beginning of Chinese New Year, and was also the opening event in a series of live performances to take place at Tate Modern over the year.

The closing parentheses lend material resonance to an otherwise abstract point.

Second, the waterfront location of the two sponsoring arts complexes is both historically and aesthetically resonant. A trope of the modern global city, river-, dock- and harbour-side regeneration tell a by-now familiar tale of the relationship between modes of production, global trade, and the urban environment. Wharves, warehouses, mills and power-stations – the very fabric of imperialist expansion and the industrial revolution – whose dank shells embodied the decline of manufacturing and British maritime might from the middle of the last century, have since become exemplary sites of urban renewal and, in many cases, gentrification. In London, the controversial Canary Wharf development in the Docklands area most neatly embodies the transition from imperial trade in goods and export manufacturing to a global trade in "virtual capital" and financial services, its highly international workforce drawn in part by the city's "cultural capital". In Singapore, the Esplanade looks out onto the very harbour that Sir Stamford Raffles identified as having entrepôt potential when he stepped ashore in 1819 to negotiate a contract with the Sultan of Johor. Godowns (warehouses) further along the Singapore River, at Robertson Quay, have been given over to local theatre companies, to use as rehearsal and performance space. On the other side of the harbour is Raffles Place, the Central Business District, from whose skyscrapers trade with Canary Wharf, the City of London and the other financial centres of the world, is conducted day and night.

Thirdly, the Tate and Esplanade events seem to be marked by the casual symmetries of cultural difference that are so common in the privileged regions of the globalized world. A French group who came to prominence by illuminating the Eiffel Tower at the millennium is engaged to entertain Singapore, while London presents a Chinese artist, complete with jasmine tea and fortune cookies. However, beyond what is in this context the rather trite notion of cultures "performing for each other",[9] beyond, too, the obvious investments in cultural capital that both arts institutions are making through their international initiatives, Cai's piece presented an aesthetic challenge that was lacking in the Esplanade event. Identifying what distinguished the two works makes it easier to understand how one might meet the challenges, described above, of valuing theatrical experience in the context of globalization.

[9] For a much less trite instance of how certain asymmetrically-constituted cultures "have invented themselves by performing their pasts in the presence of others" in the "oceanic interculture" of the "Circum-Atlantic world", see Roach (1996).

"I do think that art can transcend time and space, and achieve something that science cannot. The job of the artist is to create such time/space tunnels", states Cai (2002: 17). Spatially, *Ye Gong Hao Long* fused various features of the riverbank together to create a hermetic arena where normally there is only through-traffic, with the result that the space felt enclosed and shared. However, in the case of this particular event, it was in reference to temporality that its effects registered most powerfully. After travelling some forty-five minutes to get to the venue, and arriving with another thirty minutes to spare in order to secure a good vantage position and wait in the cold winter weather, I recall the single minute of the firework performance as super-charged. Where the Esplanade fireworks built to a crescendo over the course of a full half hour, here, I had the sense of an intense compression of energy. Unlike more spectacular, airborne fireworks, the explosion and the flash in Cai's "dragon" happened instantaneously, focusing one's attention on the bank, the bridge and the building as they ignited. This sudden focus, after so much waiting time that was, by definition, unfocused, lent the experience a singular density, since all my energies were directed toward the light, and to tracing it as it moved. It is this sense of intensity that persists after the final explosion, and that characterises my memory of the event. A single minute, in which I invested so many others, but one that has somehow embedded itself in my experience of the world in a way that the rest have not. Indeed, in a way that the Esplanade event *had* not, until the Bali bombing caused me to reinterpret its significance.

By contrast with the Esplanade fireworks, then, Cai's piece was both subject and object of the aesthetic provocation that I encountered in it, and the rather daunting question is therefore begged: how has my perception and interpretation of the world changed as a result? The answer can never be given in its entirety. However, in light of the above discussion concerning the value of performance in the context of globalization, certain salient features can be identified.

Of particular interest is the matter of duration. It is difficult to know whether Cai calculated the length and intensity of the charge so that the piece would last a minute, or whether the fact was only highlighted by Tate publicists, eager to exploit the attendant novelty value. Either way, the duration of the event inevitably brought it into the symbolic ambit of the minute in contemporary society: a symbolism largely determined by the measuring of time as a means to commodification, a benchmark against which a range of experiences can be compared, and assigned a value. Like

the artist Tehching Hsieh, who has created a series of monumental works with and on temporality, Cai takes an integral unit of capitalist processes, and invests it with a significance that is so unexpected, it disrupts the chain of equivalence within which relative value conventionally becomes inscribed. *One Year Performance 1981-1982*, in which Hsieh punched a time clock every hour for a year, and documented each punch with a single-framed shot from a movie camera, produced an emptying-out of the hour by his debilitating obedience to the imperatives of capitalist production, and its reduction to a split-second document of repetition.[10] In *Ye Gong Hao Long,* Cai singularised the minute by generating an experiential fullness. These two strategies speak eloquently of the separate historical moments into which they intervened. Hsieh's year-long project of clocking-on referenced a labour system in transition, between the industrial production line, and the emerging phenomenon of "always on" global electronic transactions. While one cannot ascribe to Cai's piece such a high degree of reflexivity vis à vis modes of production, one can nevertheless identify in his intensified, incendiary minute the logical extension of that "always on" culture: a process of pure, undifferentiated consumption. This lack of differentiation is indicative of the ways in which previously distinct periods of "work" and "leisure" have been subsumed in advanced capitalist societies such as Britain and Singapore, under the all-encompassing rubric of "lifestyle", whereby one is seldom absolved from the merry-go-round of earning and spending that make up contemporary consumer culture. In this light, it is easy to see why Cai was *not* invited to celebrate the opening of Esplanade, for his time-based work threatens to subvert the very system whose integrity the arts centre, as an engine-room for the creative industries, is charged with cementing. The aesthetic qualities of the firework performance provoked a critical relation to the mechanics of the global economy within which many of its spectators no doubt participated.

To leave the analysis here, however, would be to ignore other elements of Cai's work and the responses it provokes. It is intriguing to note that, despite Hsieh's Taiwanese origins, his ethnic identity is normally only commented on in terms of what it throws into relief – to note, for example, that he has taken to extremes aspects of a society that those living within it may take for granted. Cai's Chineseness is asserted more explicitly in his work and its interpretations, and it is with reference to this that *Ye Gong*

[10] The resulting film can be viewed on the DVD *One Year Performance Art Documents, 1978-1999*. See Hsieh (2000).

Hao Long guides me to ask what else was at stake in the piece and my encounter with it, beyond a critical intervention into global processes.

Given that I was obliged to invest significantly more time in facilitating my experience of the piece, than undergoing it, in the temporal accounting that asks whether attendance was "worth-while", I am obliged to find other ways of valuing the work. In reflecting on this, I find myself turning to questions of cultural identity. Could it be that the impetus for such an event derives from cultural norms other than my own? Perhaps I have undergone an experience of time and energy that relates to the world, maybe even to the universe, in ways that are proper to a religious perspective such as Buddhism, that does not interpose an omniscient God between humans and the cosmos. It is tempting to respond to the culturally inscribed signifiers – Cai's name, the title of the work, the fortune cookies and the jasmine tea – by making such assumptions and, in so far as these perspectives are "foreign" to me, acknowledging them as beyond my interpretive competence. In this regard, the work would be the opposite of the Esplanade opening. Where its referential blandness derived from the cultural aspecificity of a generically global aesthetic, Cai's piece could be described as the expression of a culturally determined worldview and practice that was incomprehensible to me. However, New York-based Cai is not simply an artisan who has transferred a practice intact from China, and while he does make reference to traditional Chinese metaphysics in interview, he is equally exercised by twentieth-century astrophysics, and ideas about nuclear fission. This being the case, the temporal experience of *Ye Gong Hao Long* is better described as one in which cultural factors play an animating, though not entirely explanatory role. Their presence, both incontrovertible and ambiguous, is indicative of one feature amongst many that artists and audiences alike are able to mobilise in mediating and acting upon their place in the ever-mutating webs of global connectivity. Here, in conjunction with my reflections on the performers in the Esplanade opening, the potential of the aesthetic experience of performance begins to pull into focus. In the context of such webs of connectivity, an event whose value is first and foremost immanent, produces an experience that combines aesthetic and cultural indeterminacy, and provokes a response whose terms of reference, however detailed in themselves, are best described as cosmopolitan in their scope and modes of interconnection.

The implications of this rather condensed formulation will unfold in a number of different ways over the course of the thesis. At this point, however, it is useful to note

that this is the reason for the detailed discussion of the two examples explored thus far. Given the importance I am attaching to the immanent qualities of a given performance, and to locating it within a global context, even the most generalised insights must emerge out of these distinct experiences. Additionally, this process implies a necessary entanglement between the affects of performance, and their interpretation: a multi-modal interaction whose specific manifestations will become apparent in due course, and which I am calling "cosmopolitan aesthetics". Before that investigation can begin, however, it is necessary to consider this rather vague term in more detail.

6.

Standing first on the harbour at the Esplanade and then, three months later and in temperatures thirty degrees colder, on the banks of the Thames, I am aware that my perspective on what I saw was forged in a particular intersection of historical facts, cultural relations, personal and professional affiliations, political realities and global-economic aspirations. Partial, contingent, and expressed in a language and critical vocabulary that marks it with indelible privilege, my responses nevertheless hint at the tangled connections that neither the "borderless world" of globalization's evangelists, nor the "centre-periphery" model of postcolonial orthodoxies can fully account for. Rather, it is in an artwork like Cai's that such connections find their medium. Discussing his installation work *Cry Dragon/ Cry Wolf: The Ark of Genghis Khan* (1996), Cai notes:

> At the time of the exhibition the Asian economy was very prosperous and China was just emerging as a new world power. There was some concern expressed in the American media that Asia might take over as the leading world power in the twenty-first century...Often the dragon was used as a symbol of China and its assertion of power in relation to the West. Of course the title of this work is taken from the story 'The Boy Who Cried Wolf', using a play on words to suggest it might be a dragon that's coming instead of the wolf, and that it may arrive when you're least prepared. Of course the East thought that its time of world dominance had finally arrived, but I felt this assertion was a bit premature, exaggerated and arrogant (2002: 25).

The subsequent Asian financial crisis of 1997-8 notwithstanding, the narrative of China's economic rise is recurrent and increasingly convincing, and while Cai is careful to modulate the symbolic power of the dragon, as a repeated motif in his work, it clearly carries a resonance beyond that of "cultural marker". Echoing the folk-tale reference in *Cry Dragon/ Cry Wolf*, the title *Ye Gong Hao Long*, which translates as "Mr Ye Who Likes Dragons", recalls a Chinese tale in which an artist who liked to paint a particular dragon took fright when it came to visit him. If, in 1996, the Asian economic "miracle" was a case of "crying Dragon", the 2003 piece raises the question

as to whether now is the time for the advent of the "real" dragon, and whether or not Euro-America is prepared for it. These polemical features of Cai's work, shot through as they are with themes of recognition and authenticity, can be read as cautionary, but necessary aspects of academic enquiry, especially (but not solely) where other cultures are concerned. In such situations, the critic runs the constant and inevitable risk of "crying dragon", or of valuing their interpretation or representation of something at the expense of an engagement with the thing itself. And yet, one has no choice but to try.

Within the preceding paragraphs, there are a number of interconnected features, each of which may form the starting point of a substantial enquiry. These include: the diverse circumstances that influence my personal response to the firework performances; Cai's self-positioning as a commentator on the ways in which Asia and the West interpret each other; the cross-culturally enabling potential of his artworks; and the obligation to run interpretive risks in response. Stated more baldly, one could say that in extending this discussion, the role of, respectively, the researcher, the artist, the artwork and its interpretation are all at stake, and are indicative of the fact that, as the complex connectivity that characterizes globalization continues to intensify, so increasing numbers of performances are being made by artists whose cultural affiliations and implicitly informing national imaginaries differ both from their collaborators, and from those of their audiences. Moreover, while this is most explicitly an intercultural phenomenon, it is in fact symptomatic of a more general condition. Indeed, too forthright a focus on the intercultural risks overplaying cultural difference at the expense of understanding the correlating dynamics of familiarity on the one hand, and local distinction on the other.[11] What is more important is that, taken together, even familiarity is experienced *as* familiarity, rather than dissolving into the amniotic fluid of mundane experience. The resulting disposition, a working sense of one's place in the world as relational, however familiar the immediately surrounding territory or faces may be, is captured in the term "cosmopolitan". As a critical concept, it is one of very few available that matches the scope and complexity of the global without entirely

[11] "Familiarity" includes both homogeneity (whether imposed or volitional) and mundane hybridity. By this latter term I mean those ostensibly multi- or inter-cultural scenarios where, whether motivated by the pragmatic need to co-exist and interact, or by force of habit, the markers and practices of "otherness" so favoured by the more self-consciously political strands of postcolonial theory recede before the volume and density of routine, day-to-day interactions. "Local distinction" includes the concept of the "intracultural", whose significance has been most persistently advanced in the context of India by Rustom Bharucha, who describes it as representing "...a complex of very minute differences that are almost indistinguishable but which coexist within the imagined homogeneity of a specific region or cultural space." (2004: 12).

succumbing to the latter's over-determination by economic narratives. As a practice, it manifests itself in lived experience through novel encounters with people, objects, ideas and environments that have clear consequences for the production and reception of theatre. Given the relatively constant dimensions of theatre spaces (pegged, as noted earlier, to the scale and capacities of the human body), new ways must be found of accommodating and articulating the expansive relation to place and people that both artists and audiences are increasingly bringing to them. It is in the hope of identifying such methods and their implications in a necessarily specified environment that I seek in this thesis to relate and reflect on a range of theatrical and performance practices that, with a few qualified exceptions, have taken place in the highly globalized postcolonial city state of Singapore.

"Cosmopolitan" is a term Singaporean politicians and civil servants often turn to when seeking to expand their description of or vision for both state and society beyond hard economic facts.[12] As a port, transit centre, trading hub and regional base for many multi-national corporations, with an ethnically diverse, multi-faith immigrant society, a significant proportion of which is literate, well-travelled and Internet-savvy, in many respects Singapore exemplifies the common understanding of the term as "including people from many different countries" and "associated with travel and a mixture of cultures" (OED). The term is therefore used in official discourse – as in everyday speech – without explanation or qualification, to describe a situation that, because of its diversity, would otherwise require lengthy explanation and, by implication, more precise justification. There is, therefore, a paradox to the common use of the term "cosmopolitan", in that it obscures and/or dedifferentiates precisely that multiplicity of contributing factors or catholicity of experience it is meant to describe.

This normative aspect of the term is what enables it to be used without fanfare in common parlance. However, when it comes to the philosophical tradition (which, in the West, began with Diogenes in the fourth century BC[13]) that underwrites such everyday usages, this normative aspect threatens to develop into a coercive universalism. For

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[12] For example, in the same speech to the Indian community where PM Lee Hsien Loong stated that "Ours is not a melting pot" (see note 7), he also noted that "Indian culture contributes to the richness and vibrancy of the [*sic*] Singapore's cultural scene, and to the cosmopolitan tone of our society" (2005). 'Renaissance City 2.0' cites a "cosmopolitan and relatively sophisticated market" as one of Singapore's strengths in developing the cultural sector, going on to note that "Singapore now has a critical mass of some 250 000 theatregoers" (*Creative Industries Development Strategy* 2003: 11).

[13] For recent explorations of cosmopolitan flourishing in other cultural traditions, see, for example, Sardar (2000), Cheah (2001), Pollock (2002). Sardar's description of an "Indian Ocean World" is discussed in the next chapter.

instance, although Kant, writing in 1795, deplored the "terrifying lengths" to which "the civilized and especially...the commercial states of our part of the world" were going in prosecuting colonial and slave-trading projects, his conception of "world citizenship" and "the common right to the face of the earth" (2001: 103) was based on a legalistic attitude to land rights that continues to be contested by the aboriginal peoples of the world.

Most recently, therefore, a new cosmopolitanism has been proposed, which is mindful of the imperialist and class-based prejudices of Enlightenment exponents such as Kant and Adam Smith. To this end, many formulations have taken on modifying terms, such as "cosmopolitan vernacular", "cosmopolitanism from below", "discrepant cosmopolitanisms", "critical cosmopolitanism", "cosmofeminism", "cosmopolitics", and "cosmopolitical parliament".[14] The aim is to account for differentiated densities of experience and affiliation, while simultaneously practising "an ethos of macro-interdependencies", "global belonging, involvement and responsibility", and "universalism plus difference", to cite but three recent characterizations of the term.[15]

While mindful, in turn, of such precautions, for the purposes of this thesis, the word will remain strategically unmodified. It is my contention that the paradoxical aspect of the cosmopolitan points to an inherent dialectical tension that is too easily defused by qualifications such as those cited above. This tension can be described in a number of different ways, but perhaps the most pertinent in the present context is that cosmopolitanism promotes an openness to difference on the assumption of familiarity. The risks of such a strategy are twofold: on the one hand, the misrecognition of the Same, with all that entails in the way of coercion and co-option, and on the other hand, a chastened turning-away from the Other on the basis of incommensurable difference. What distinguishes the cosmopolitan dialectic from both naïve universalism and reductive particularism is that these risks are run, rather than shied from, through a combination of reflexivity and good faith. That there is every possibility of misrecognition – and being misrecognized – calls not for kneejerk disengagement, but a responsive and responsible approach to potentially flawed interactions (one of whose options may be considered disengagement).

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[14] Discussions of these terms can be found, respectively, in Bhabha (1996), Burawoy et al. (2000), Clifford (1997), Mignolo (2002), Pollock et al. (2002) ,Robbins and Cheah (1998); Stengers (1997).
[15] Respectively, Rabinow (1986: 258), Tomlinson (1999: 185) and Appiah (2001: 202).

This tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar, recognition and misrecognition, the normative and the experimental, is surely what informs the persistent appeal of an otherwise discredited term, and the range of connotations and interpretations it has come to possess. For instance, Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen identify six "rubrics" under which cosmopolitanism might be described: "(a) a socio-cultural condition; (b) a kind of philosophy or world-view; (c) a political project towards building transnational institutions; (d) a political project for recognizing multiple identities; (e) an attitudinal or dispositional orientation; and/or (f) a mode of practice or competence" (2002: 9). One can further observe that any given cosmopolitan project will most likely involve the complex interaction of several of these rubrics, perhaps in conflict with or distinction to each other. However, while this suggests a potentially rich field of interactions, Vertovec and Cohen go on to note a certain lack of dynamism in the current use of the term:

> While the trend towards positively reappropriating notions of cosmopolitanism is to be welcomed for its socially and politically transformative potential, practically all the recent writings on the topic remain in the realm of rhetoric. There is little description or analysis of how contemporary cosmopolitan philosophies, political projects, outlooks or practices can be formed, instilled or bolstered. In short, there are few recipes for fostering cosmopolitanism (2002: 21).

This observation suggests a further tension in the term, between *being* cosmopolitan (or, as in the case of Singapore, being described as such) and *doing* cosmopolitanism, and it is in light of this that I propose the term "cosmopolitan aesthetics". Although Vertovec and Cohen's rubrics suggest several related features, they do not account for cosmopolitanism as an aesthetic practice. To a degree, this is understandable, since the most immediate associations are with an aesthetic cosmopolitanism whose superficial and/or touristic qualities contribute little that the other rubrics do not already offer in more substantial fashion.[16] Beyond the simple description of a given aesthetic practice as cosmopolitan, however, and in light of the preceding discussion of the Esplanade and Tate fireworks, I propose that the aesthetic encounter can be understood as producing cosmopolitanism or, at the very least, of establishing the

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[16] Jean-François Lyotard's 1979 description of the (multi)cultural experience of the postmodern condition as one where "[o]ne listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and "retro" clothes in Hong Kong" (1984 [1979]: 76) is an early instance of a familiar mantra in present-day mass-media and even critical attempts to describe what globalization "is" or "means". Later instances, shorn of Lyotard's political disquiet, have reached their apogee in the taxonomic fetishizing of cultural difference evident in the popular travel writings of Pico Iyer, where lines like "*I hardly notice* I'm sitting in a Parisian café just outside Chinatown (in San Francisco), talking to a Mexican-American friend about biculturalism while a Haitian woman stops off to congratulate him on a piece he's just delivered on TV on St. Patrick's Day" (2000: 11, emphasis mine) are the rule rather than the exception. John Urry makes explicit the touristic aspect of this experience by describing

conditions out of which cosmopolitanism might develop. It is the ways in which I understand this to be manifested in theatrical performance in Singapore, and the broader implications for the production and reception of contemporary theatre in advanced globalized economies elsewhere, that I aim to articulate in this study.

7.

"The phenomenon of fireworks is prototypical for artworks" writes Theodor Adorno, and while his exacting criteria for what an artwork is and does mean that it is with some trepidation one cites his theories alongside work that falls outside the modernist moment and its cultural milieu, the compressed austerity of his thought nevertheless provides a useful way of bringing this introduction to a close: "They appear empirically yet are liberated from the burden of the empirical, which is the obligation of duration; they are a sign from heaven yet artifactual, an ominous warning, a script that flashes up, vanishes, and indeed cannot be read for its meaning" (1997 [1970]: 81). Some of these same characteristics have featured in the preceding discussion of firework performances in Singapore and London, and while I have noted the aesthetic limitations of the Esplanade opening, even there, the liberation from duration is what intensified its experiential qualities (and, retrospectively, the "ominous warning" they gave). However, as Adorno goes on, fireworks are not prototypical of artworks simply because of their afunctionality and ephemerality: "It is not through a higher perfection that artworks separate from the fallibly existent, but rather by becoming actual, like fireworks, incandescently in an expressive appearance. They are not only the other of the empirical world: everything in them becomes other" (81).

Over the course of this introduction, I have established that if one is to value the experience of theatre in an age of globalization, it cannot be done by a direct appeal to its afunctionality, nor, on the other hand, to its instrumental usefulness. One must identify instead those aspects of such experiences that fall outside the imperatives of global economic and cultural processes as they are currently constituted, even as they are implicated with others that establish theatre's participation in such processes. Within this broad aspiration, I have further introduced the particular intersections of places and perspectives that I propose to focus on over the course of this thesis, and in this regard, Adorno's comment on the othering quality of fireworks and artworks takes on a cultural inflection that is not made explicitly in his own analysis. However,

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the assorted semiotic skills, reflexivity and dispositions of modern European tourists as a mode of "aesthetic cosmopolitanism" (1995: 167).

rather than importing Adorno's insights wholesale into a theory of aesthetic production as irreducible cultural difference, my concern is with how, in the current economic-cultural climate, aesthetic experience and human cultural relations interact dynamically *without* collapsing into each other. Similarly, I am less concerned with the aesthetics of cosmopolitanism as they are presented to audiences pre-packaged by the combined vicissitudes and promises of globalized cultural processes, than with interrogating the ways in which certain of the terminologies, concerns and practices that inhere in aesthetic expression and analytical enquiry are best understood in cosmopolitan terms. While my reflections on performance in Singapore are therefore integral to the way in which the broader ideas develop and are articulated, the tensions I have identified within the idea of the cosmopolitan mean that "Singapore theatre" should not be seen either as casual case study, nor the formal object of analysis. Rather, it provides an occasion for enquiry and a situation where the specific examples addressed here are shown to affirm both the (in Adorno's terms) "actual" qualities of their "expressive appearances", and an expansive set of relations to broader contexts.

That one of these contexts concerns my own relation, as a non-Singaporean, with the material, is an issue I shall develop in Part One, along with a number of other conceptual and methodological factors. In the next chapter, 'Default Cosmopolitanism', I explore what might be called the imperatives of cultural cosmopolitanism with reference to Kuo Pao Kun's play *Descendents of the Eunuch Admiral* (1995), whose central themes of belonging, wandering and castration dramatise the tribulations of the cosmopolitan condition in the Singaporean milieu. The generative paradox described in the title of the play is here interpreted with reference to four subtractive processes – detotalize, decentralize, deculturalize and deterritorialize – that aim to undo a range of coercive universals and reductive particularisms. In their stead, a series of affirmative goals are proposed – universality, plurality, disinterest and deterritorialization – which are to be pursued throughout the ensuing study. The chapter closes with a discussion of how these concerns can be drawn together with reference to Edward Said's concept of "worldliness". In so doing, the idea is introduced of cosmopolitan aesthetics as operating between the singularity of the aesthetic encounter, and the social context into which it intervenes.

Chapter 0, 'Singularpore?', carries this discussion over into the specific situation of theatrical production and reception in Singapore. Mindful of the grounds upon which I make interpretive claims about such a situation, the chapter conducts a detailed

enquiry into how certain paradigms of theatricality and performance have exercised the Western imaginary in conceiving of Southeast Asia. Looking first at Bali, and then at Singapore, I identify a tendency towards understanding both as discursive singularities produced with reference to performance, and take issue with this as an appropriate way of articulating the insights into cosmopolitanism that might be provided by the encounter with theatre in Singapore. Developing the methodological issues first raised in the preceding chapter, I propose that the interactions of the singular and the social be supplemented with an understanding of relationality. I discuss what this means for an interpretation of the Singaporean theatre scene, and the works that are produced in and by it. I also give a survey of the current critical literature on theatre in Singapore, and consider what is distinctive about my own contributions, given the complex interplay of factors pertaining to my status as foreigner, resident, practitioner and academic researcher.

Part Two goes on to analyse a range of performance practices and theatrical events, with a view to identifying the ways in which they participate in a complex web of cultural, political, economic and social relations on the one hand, and produce novel forms of human relations on the other. Chapter One, 'Relational Selves', addresses the relationship between solo performance and a state-sponsored project aimed at defining Singaporeanness in essentialist terms. Both developments can be seen as responding to the effects of industrialization and modernization that, even in the eighties, were already highly globalized in Singapore. In the early monodramas of Kuo Pao Kun and Stella Kon, I identify strategies for the production of a relationality that was at odds with the prevailing dictates of the PAP government. These include an increased sensitivity to the experience of performance as one of imaginative co-creation between audience and performers, and how this manifests itself in a direct and dynamic manner. Chapter Two, 'Public Relations', describes the multi-faceted project of theatre company The Necessary Stage, as they have sought to pursue a two-pronged agenda of civil engagement and aesthetic experimentation. While they have not always been successful in achieving a balance between these two aims, I argue that they interact within the company's oeuvre in intriguing ways to produce a number of different kinds of audience-performer relations, particularly with reference to theatrical and social space. I go on to focus on one performance in particular, *untitled man number one*, which I identify as provoking audience members to re-think their sense of the social in ways that are as challenging to the basic tenets of the company itself, as to their audiences. Chapter Three, 'Inter-relations', reflects on an intercultural

workshop conceived and hosted by Singapore's other premier experimental English language theatre company, TheatreWorks. In its diversity and intensity, the Flying Circus Project offered an excellent opportunity to consider the dynamics of intercultural performance making, and to identify where they departed from current orthodoxies in intercultural performance theory. In this connection, I reflect on a number of improvised performances that I observed and contributed to, and propose a practice of "weak interculturalism", which understands substantive intercultural interactions as producing a kind of disinterested and uncompromising aesthetic civility. Chapter Four, 'International Relations', is concerned with the ways in which theatre-makers have re-configured theatrical space in a bid to reflect the contemporary condition and experience of globality. In keeping with the theme of the chapter, I focus on a number of international performances: some have a Singapore connection, some do not, but all offer a perspective on the ways in which the social and the singular simultaneously intertwine in the experience of performance, while remaining continuous with the extensive relations that reach out across the globe. Finally, in Chapter Five, 'Environmental Relations', I return to Singapore, this time with an eye to a more expanded sense of performance, as it obtains with reference to the social and ecological environment of the city. In this, I gesture towards a broader interpretation of the term "cosmopolitanism", which takes the prefix "cosmos" to signify a more inclusive approach than is often accounted for. The ways in which this inclusiveness alters one's relations with objects of study is signaled by a partial shift in style and register, as the chapter intersects the description of a scent trail through the city, with a series of reflections on the kinds of performances that the encounter with nature – in this instance, trees – appears to draw out of us. In the Conclusion, I come somewhat full circle, drawing the various strands of my argument and analysis together with reference to another arts centre opening, this time marking the politically problematic conversion of Singapore's Old Parliament House into The Arts House.

"Relating Singapore" is a phrase that carries many different meanings, and suggests a range of processes, interactions and identifications. At the most basic level, Singapore is a small place, and there is much cross-fertilization between the various practitioners, institutions and agencies about whom I write. It is my sincere hope, however, that the connections that are made – and that make themselves – in the following study are not reducible to a pre-established web of personal and predictable affiliation. The aim in structuring the thesis as it is, and fastening on to diverse practices and discourses as tenaciously as I have, is simultaneously to identify otherwise latent channels and

processes of relationality, and to forge new ones. In this regard, the Esplanade fireworks inaugurated much more than a piece of cultural-economic hardware on that awesome, ghastly night in October 2002.

PART ONE

-1: Default Cosmopolitanism

-1.5

To accept that "we are all cosmopolitans" (Rabinow 1986: 258) is easier said than done, and even the saying is not as easy as it seems. Just as the basic sentiment bears repeating ("In the 1990s everybody is more or less cosmopolitan" (Hebdige 1990: 20), "we are already cosmopolitan" (Pollock et al. 2002: 12)), so it remains hedged around with qualifications. Hebdige sounds an equivocal note: "willingly or otherwise, whether conscious or not" (20); Pollock et al. soft-pedal: "we may not always have known it" (12); while Rabinow cuts to the quick with arch understatement: "*Homo sapiens* has done rather poorly in interpreting this condition" (258). However, if the statement "we are all cosmopolitans" cannot be made unconditionally, it cannot be made at all. True, anyone sensitive to the inequities of the world will instinctively feel the urge for qualification, since it always tempting to argue that some people are more cosmopolitan than others, both to their material benefit, and at the expense of those others. But such statements must be secondary rather than supplementary. Indeed, it is arguably the deepening of these inequities that makes the unconditional assertion of the statement all the more pertinent, and in this regard, the apparently innocuous implications of what could be called "default cosmopolitanism" take on a more critical quality. A default position is conventionally adopted in the absence of any other, but, as Rabinow suggests, that cosmopolitanism *is* the default position is not necessarily obvious, obscured as it has been by *Homo sapiens'* attraction to other interpretations of its condition. Accepting that "we are all cosmopolitans", therefore, is less about basking in the rosy glow of human togetherness than it is making an uncompromising commitment to attaining the default.

It should already be clear that the distinction between "saying" and "doing" made above is more than usually irrelevant in this context, for in committing to default cosmopolitanism, every instance of the former inheres in the latter. The repetition, with only slight variations, of Rabinow's statement across the decades and disciplines could be seen as discharging this performative function. However, what is equally clear is that, at least as far as the theatre is concerned, saying is not enough. In this thesis, I argue that theatre can be interpreted as a form of cosmopolitan *doing*. Reflecting on this involves formulating a critical relation to the phenomenon known as "globalization", of which deepening inequity is one of many manifestations, some pernicious and others benevolent. Inevitably, theatre-makers draw upon a unique

range of strategies to produce such work, and it is in considering these that elements of what I identify as the cosmopolitan aesthetics of contemporary theatrical performance shall be elaborated.

In laying the foundations for such a process, the best place to start is by considering the implications of the statement "we are all cosmopolitans", the first of which is that it is contentiously tautologous. After all, how can there be "cosmopolitans" without a "we" who is an "all"? Anything else is unacceptable qualification, and yet such all-encompassing statements smack of precisely the kind of coercive universalism that postmodern and postcolonial critics have worked so hard to deconstruct. In *Post-colonial Drama*, for example, Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins take issue with "universalist criticism whereby a text is said to speak to all readers all around the world because it espouses, for example, universal principles of life." They go on: "Texts which apparently radiate such 'universal truths' have usually been removed from their social and historical setting. Although it is a favourite catch-cry of theatre critics, the 'universal theme' allows no appreciation of cultural difference" (1996: 10).

As I noted in the Introduction, similar discriminations can be found within the universalist aspirations of cosmopolitanism itself, especially in its Enlightenment formulations. As David Harvey wryly observes, playing the paraphrased prejudices of Kant's *Geography* off and against his cosmopolitan ideals: "either the smelly Hottentots and the lazy Samoyards have to reform themselves to qualify for consideration under the universal ethical code (thereby flattening out all geographical differences), or the universal principles operate as an intensely discriminatory code masquerading as the universal good" (2000: 535). While Gilbert and Tompkins evince barely disguised contempt for the universal in favour of socio-historical specificity, however, Harvey presses on to recuperate it with reference to the particular: "Learning to see cosmopolitanism and geography as internal relations of each other radically reconstitutes our framework for knowledge of the world" (559). In the same way as destructive acts that have been done in the name of universalism discredit but do not disprove its validity, so the "we" in "we are all cosmopolitans", cautiously formed, must nevertheless be uttered – and heard. The tautology must be made good.

Since a default position is the least that can be said about something, arriving at it is necessarily a process of discarding extraneous or erroneous layers of meaning or argumentation. This subtractive logic explains the numbering of this chapter. As the

discussion above suggests, in the case of cosmopolitanism, such layers take two opposing forms: coercive universals, and the over-compensating particularisms posited in response. To this end, I shall address four separate terms that respond to one or both of these aspects: *detotalize*, *decentre*, *deculturalize*, *deterritorialize*. In keeping with Harvey's imbrications of the cosmopolitan and the geographical, the argument will be made through sustained reference to a specific theatrical performance, Singaporean playwright Kuo Pao Kun's play *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* (1995), and Ong Keng Sen's English-language production of it (figures 9-11). My aim is to ensure that the theatre is not merely installed as window-dressing for an otherwise independent theoretical debate. If anything, the play has a more integral role in the development of the argument than any single performance could be expected to yield, a point of methodological order I shall address in due course. Suffice, for the moment, to underline that in the following discussion the theatre functions as a figure *in* the argument as much as an illustration *of* it, thereby providing a metacommentary on what it really means to say: "we are all cosmopolitan".

-1.4: Detotalize

The English and Mandarin versions of *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*, both written by Kuo Pao Kun, premiered two months apart at the Victoria Theatre in Singapore in 1995. The play text consists of a series of sixteen scenes, which fall into three inter-connecting categories. The first are those that describe the exploits of Admiral Zheng He, a Chinese Muslim eunuch who commanded an imperial armada on seven expeditions between 1405 and 1431, sailing at least as far as Africa and India, and possibly America, for the purposes of trade, diplomacy and as a show of military might and cultural pre-eminence. Other scenes are narrated by a contemporary voice, a corporate employee who dreams of Zheng He, and wonders if, paradoxically, she or he is his descendant. Yet others detail a range of castration methods. No characters are assigned to the texts, leaving a great deal of leeway open for directors and performers to determine how the three elements are interlinked, and how closely Zheng He and the employee are identified with each other. On a superficial level, the identification is comprehensive, for both are subject to a combination of global opportunity and personal emasculation. In an early scene, the employee draws a direct comparison with the hierarchical meritocracy in which the eunuchs operated: "Of course, every time they get a promotion, they have to go and show their treasures [amputated penises] again. You know, as when every time we get a promotion or a new job we have to show our certificates, diplomas, degrees and testimonial letters"

Figures 9-11. TheatreWorks' *Descendents of the Eunuch Admiral* (1995), by Kuo Pao Kun. Photos courtesy of TheatreWorks.

(2003: 40). Elsewhere, however, the similarities are not so exact: "Yes, each night, through my own fear and uncertainty, I discover more agony in him, more respect for him, and more suspicion of him" (38). Between the strange paradox of continuity and lack in the play's title, and the completist doubling of its production history, lie the central themes of loss and fulfilment that make of *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* a parable of totalization and its costs. In the disjunctive relationship between the central figures of the play, a corollary dynamic of *de*totalization is activated. I shall treat these two features in turn, and in so doing, consider the ways in which they inflect a central feature of the processes – actual and rhetorical – of the processes collectively described as "globalization".

The totalizing impetus of globalization is one in which a selected aspect of a given situation is either expanded to explain the world, taken to represent the world, or misrecognized *as* the world. The closing lines of *Descendants* succinctly fingers the primary motivation of this dynamic:

> I cannot tarry
> I must Hurry
> The sea, the land, the sky is waiting
> The Market is calling me! (67)

It is a deeply ambiguous ending to the play. In an earlier scene, Zheng He attends a polyglot market-festival, ecstatically described as "a celebration, a meeting of friends thirsting for each other's goods and each others company and the great coming together" (59). However, as the capital letter indicates, the Market alluded to in the final line of the play refers less to such an event, than to an expansive condition of exchange, one that includes the "loyal creature" of the Eunuch himself, who "[h]as always been, and still is, highly marketable" (58), and indeed encompasses the very horizons of the speakers' perceptions, be they the sea, the sky or the land. By contrast with the "great trading festival" in which trade and companionship are sought out and celebrated in equal measure, therefore, the Market submits the entire world to a totalizing logic of exchange value.

In the Singapore context, a distinction can be discerned between the heterogeneous Asian contact zone of the market, and the all-encompassing Market to which the city-state's instrumentalist philosophy, materialist society and homogenous culture are yoked. What perhaps even Kuo could not have foreseen, however, was how closely his description of the Market resonated with the prevailing thinking of Singapore's

government. During his 1999 National Day Rally Speech, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong described Singapore society as made up of two types of people: "cosmopolitans" and "heartlanders". Both were necessary for Singapore's well-being, he said, and the challenge was "...to get the heartlanders to understand what the cosmopolitans contribute to Singapore's and their own well being, and to get the cosmopolitans to feel an obligation and sense of duty to the heartlanders", failing which, "our society will fall apart" (1999: 41). The former, hailing from the government-built housing estate "heartlands" of the republic, played "...a major role in maintaining our core values and our social stability", while the latter, defined by their ability to "...work and be comfortable anywhere in the world", were indispensable in generating wealth: "The world is their market. Without them, Singapore cannot run as an efficient, high performance society" (40).

Whether or not this is an *accurate* analysis of Singaporean society is a moot point.[1] What is significant is that Goh reiterates and – given that the speech is the most important annual statement of government rationale and policy – to a certain extent *enacts* the totalizing process whereby the world becomes nothing *but* a market. The Singapore position underscores a more commonplace rationale: as much as globalization may entail many kinds of exchange and interaction, they are consistently subsumed within a discursive project whose motivations are economic.

This being the case, it is tempting to conceive of the Market as a singularity. However, the salutary lesson of Kuo's play, with its obsessive, recurrent descriptions of castration techniques, is that totalization comes at a price. "To keep my head/ I must accept losing my tail" begins one meditative scene in the play (Kuo 2003: 54), but while the economistic narrative may itself be one of profit and loss, it is not one that can account for this more profound sacrifice. The fundamental irony of totalization is that it is primarily a process of occlusion or exclusion, predicated as it is on the misrecognition of a part for the whole. In consequence, it is never complete, driven as it is by the anxiety that derives from an unacknowledgeable lack. This anxiety is evident in the apocalyptic undertone to Goh's analysis of Singapore society, and it is what accounts for the need to "hurry" in the closing lines of Kuo's play. Whoever

[1] Eugene Tan sees the distinction as reinscribing old and unproductive binaries when, in his analysis of Chinese identity in Singapore he writes: "The attributes ascribed to the two groups mirror those of the Chinese-educated and the English-educated and their relative adaptability to globalization. Ultimately, the heartlander-cosmopolitan distinction does not assist in bridging the differences in a globalized world.

speaks those lines is driven by the imperative to compensate for what the Market has subtracted from the world in order to *be* the world; but it is a Sisyphean task, since their very entry into the system is at the personal cost of that which might otherwise plug the gap.

Predicated on exclusion and lack, the process of totalization exemplifies the way in which discriminatory and invariably coercive universals take hold, and the question arises as to whether a properly universal scenario is possible, or at least conceivable. While *Descendants* ends on the rather downbeat depiction of someone in the grip of a totalizing process, and obliged to conspire in its propagation, along the way, a key distinction opens up between the Eunuch and his Descendants, which points the way to this latter possibility.

While it is unclear that whoever speaks at the end is *not* the Eunuch, *as well as* his Descendants, what is important is that by this point, they are differentiated. The difference lies in the ways in which they relate to the constitutive lack that drives the totalization process – how they "plug the gap", as I put it above. Throughout the play, what might plug that gap is allegorized as the penis (regardless of the Descendants' gender), and it gradually emerges that, although both castrated, the Eunuch and his Descendants shall suffer different fates because of the different ways in which the procedure was carried out, be it literally or symbolically. Zheng He, we are told, had his penis "cut, fried and dried" (40), a technique that traditionally ensured it could be sutured back to its original place between a eunuch's legs upon his death, to ensure he could return as a man in the next life. By contrast, his Descendants are subject to a more "sophisticated" method, by which a nanny regularly massages the testicles until they are completely crushed. This retains the penis in place, and "it is received by the subject as comforting, enjoyable and even highly desirable" (64). However, since nothing is severed, nothing can be returned upon death: "Nothing is missing; everything looks normal and untouched. The only difference is that life will come to an end after he [the subject] has lived his own; there will be no afterlife..." (65). According to the hallucinatory logic of the play, therefore, the Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral will not, themselves, have descendants: acquiescence to the most pleasurable means of castration comes at the ultimate price.

Instead, it hardens the supposed differences and preserves the cultural-economic divide within the Chinese-Singaporean community in stark terms" (2002: 124).

In the local context of its production, the lesson of the play was pointed. By entering into a social compact with the "nanny state", in which an economically competent government acts with limited accountability in the interests and on behalf of a quiescent and constrained populace, Singaporeans of both genders are identified by the play as having chosen the latter method of emasculation. In consequence, they are trapped in and by the totalizing logic of the Market. By contrast, the possibility of an afterlife means that Zheng He has a different relationship with the whole. His lack is less an impediment, than an animating agency, and in this he is a figure of *de*totalization.

If totalization comes at the price of a lack, it follows that detotalization has an affinity with universalism. Even though the "de-" prefix conventionally denotes removal or reversal, a law of double negatives comes into play, suggesting a restoration of previously obscured or occluded parts to the whole. This is not to say that the two components of the double negative cancel each other out, leaving the totalizing impetus intact. Rather, a detotalized universalism is defined by a resistance to the affirmation of any single discourse at the expense of others. Similarly, if the Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral identify only with him, he himself has multiple identifications:

> Stop asking, stop
> Ma He, Zheng He, Sampoh Gong
> Cut and dried, plugged and exiled
> Orphan, wanderer, eunuch, admiral
> Yesterday, from Liu Jia He to the Western Ocean
> Today, from Longyamen to the Suzhou Park
> Tomorrow, the Earth, the Moon, Mars and the Sun
>
> Nameless, sexless, rootless, homeless
> Everyone's a parent to the orphan
> Every god's a protector to the wanderer
> Every land and sky and water is home
> It's forever *Zaijian, Selamat, Vanakkan*, Farewell (66).[2]

In this passage, Zheng He describes the dynamic of universality, which is simultaneously unfettered and unfinished. He is not bound by cultures or places, and yet his journey is never complete: he is constantly animated by the promise of a restoration to plenitude, but will never attain it, because he will never die. "I felt I had

[2] Ma He was Zheng He's original name; Sampoh Gong is the name given to him by Chinese Indonesian Taoist devotees; Liu Jia He refers to an "east river"; Longyamen, meaning "Dragon's Teeth Gate", refers two rocks that stood at the mouth of the Singapore River, until they were demolished by the British to widen access; the Souzhou Park is a Singapore-backed industrial park in China; Zaijian, Selamat and Vanakkan mean "farewell" in Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, respectively.

come closer and closer to him, closer to this 600-year-old legend of a molested and incarcerated man", confesses his Descendant (38), and the slippage between "him" and "this...legend" is no accident. Zheng He is a chimerical figure, who enables, but does not name. His significance lies more in his movement than in his identity, and the way in which the unpredictability of the future inheres in his present. This sense of futurity is integral to conceiving of a detotalized universality. As Judith Butler writes:

> To claim that the universal has not yet been articulated is to insist that the "not yet" is proper to an understanding of the universal itself: that which remains "unrealized" by the universal constitutes it essentially. The universal begins to become articulated precisely through challenges to its existing formulation, and this challenge emerges from those who are not covered by it, who have no entitlement to occupy the place of the "who", but who nevertheless demand that the universal as such ought to be inclusive of them (2002: 356)

Detotalization is the first step in affirming a default cosmopolitanism, because it concerns the importance of cosmopolitanism itself as a properly universal project – universal, that is, in its abdication of totalizing ambitions – in contrast to the coercive and exclusionary discourses of globalization. In so far as this is a fundamentally affirmative project, it is perhaps worth re-framing Butler's negatively-defined "not yet" in more positive terms by recalling Appiah's definition of cosmopolitanism as "universalism plus difference" (2001: 202). There remain, however, two contrasting reasons why detotalization falls short of achieving this on its own. The first concerns a disjunction between the rhetoric and reality of globalization, where the much-touted desire for "free trade" in a "borderless world" is given the lie by protectionist economic policies and stringent border controls on the part of rich nations, who nevertheless angle for preferential access to the markets of developing nations. In so far as globalization as it is currently manifested actually thrives on such blockages and structural inequalities, the totalizing move covers a much more finely differentiated reality, one that detotalization alone cannot address.

Returning to *Descendants of the Eunuch* Admiral, a second limitation of detotalization arises from the aching sense of loss that Zheng He expresses, even as he names his own multiply enabling identities ("Ma He, Zheng He, Sampoh Gong"). As an embodiment of pure detotalization, Zheng He has no home ("Departing is my arriving/ Wandering is my residence"), a situation that chimes ominously with Goh's description of those "cosmopolitans" who can work and be comfortable anywhere in the world. The lack of territorial – in recent centuries, national – affiliation has historically gone hand in hand with the epithet "cosmopolitan", whether as a self-description (on the part of the Enlightenment *philosophes*, for instance), as a slur (upon European Jews of the

nineteenth century, for example), or as political critique (such as that by Marx and Engels[3]). Goh's attempt to forge a mutual sense of obligation and dependency between "cosmopolitans" and "heartlanders" is a transparent, but nevertheless intriguing attempt to act upon this age-old anxiety. Zheng He defines "home" by its exact opposite, and, as the ultimate cosmopolitan, he is, in the end, no cosmopolitan at all; forever bidding farewell, his homelessness translates into an inability to build or maintain substantive human relationships.

In order to overcome both globalization's structured inequities, whereby detotalization becomes merely another means to ensure the restrictive, uneven flow of trade and capital, and the perils of what might be called overcosmopolitanization, in which the very possibility of "home" is absent, it becomes necessary to multiply the sites at which such activities can take place, and in which identities can be anchored.

-1.3: Decentre

In Ong Keng Sen's English language production of *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*, two male and two female performers shared the text of the play. Initially dressed as "Shentonites", office workers from Shenton Way, Singapore's Central Business District, they were gradually divested of their clothes by a silent, white-haired figure, and dressed, as he was already, in flowing robes. The text was delivered in a keening, declamatory style, that seemed to owe something to Chinese Opera, and each scene was based on a series of choreographed movements, often accompanied by music. In the market-festival scene alluded to above, Gabriel Fauré's *Pie Jesu* played as one of the Descendants walked slowly across the back of the stage, while the other three spun on the spot for approximately ten minutes. In an ecstatic tone, one of them delivered a long speech, which included the following description:

> Zheng He's armada, and the festivals and markets and gatherings brought together all sorts of people: there were Buddhists, Muslims, Hindis and Taoists; children of parents of a good description of people...They brought fabrics made of jute, of cotton, of silk; they brought metalworks made of gold, of silver, of bronze, copper, iron and steel; they brought products made of roots, of wood, of leaves, of flower, of seeds, of coral, of pearl, of fish bones, of turtle shells, of bird's feathers, of stones and of earth. All of them were priced beforehand and the gentlemanly exchange which takes place becomes more a festival, a celebration, a meeting of friends thirsting for each other's goods and each other's presence and the great coming together (59).

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[3] "The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country...All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilized nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe" (2004 [1848]: 7-8).

In the whirl of the performance, things go too fast to apprehend in isolation, just as the words above tumble over each other as one reads them, and blend into one another when spoken. A blurring takes place, a deliquescence. As the performers spin unwaveringly on an axis, words become flesh and flesh, words, but never completely. Although it may be the case that, as Don DeLillo puts it, "whirl is the drama of shedding everything" (2003: 138), paradoxically it is not only that. The same centre that anchors the commingling of these elements also holds them apart, generating a dynamic of centrifugal *and* centripetal force, a simultaneous giving-out and drawing-in. Into this space, this in-between, the audience member is invited, and an image of decentring can be identified.

The experiential level is only the first at which this happens. As a figure in this analysis, the reach of the performers' spin far exceeds the theatre walls. Consider it historically. The scene describes a visit to the Malaysian port of Malacca in an evocative, utopian account of what Ziauddin Sardar has called the "Indian Ocean World", which stretched from India and Arabia, round the Malaysian peninsular, through the Spice Islands of Indonesia and north to China. This world, shaped by trade winds and maritime technology, flourished, interacted and enriched itself "without reference to Europe", with inevitable social and political implications: "along trade routes ideas, knowledge and cultural patterns found their own niches" (Sardar, 2000: 25).

There have been and are multiple cosmopolitanisms, and the whirling performers, speaking in English to a multi-ethnic Singaporean audience signal this, too: "cosmopolitanism is not a circle created by culture diffused from a center, but instead...centers are everywhere and circumferences nowhere" (Pollock et al. 2002: 12). Cosmopolitanisms overlap, spin into each other, give out and draw in. While Pollock et al.'s prescription may be rather too diffuse, not least given the historical affinity between cosmopolitanism and metropolises, at the very least one can acknowledge that to decentre in this context is to acknowledge multiple and proliferating centres. It is this that promises to counter the "one way street" of economic globalization, which otherwise enacts a covert *re*totalization under the guise of an apparent detotalization.[4] In the pluralizing of cosmopolitanism, therefore, there is

[4] Another ocean world to match that of Sardar's is the "circum-Atlantic", fascinatingly drawn by Joseph Roach in his book *Cites of the Dead*, Roach writes: "Texts may obscure what performance tends to

also a marking of ongoing social, political and economic inequities, indicative of what Pheng Cheah calls "the uneven force field of the cosmopolitical" (1998: 36). Describing the fate of the Indian Ocean World, for example, Sardar tells a familiar story. When the Portuguese arrived in Malacca in 1511, they enforced a rigid system of licenses and tariffs that flew in the face of previously informal trading practices. These had developed in the context of a whole intercultural aesthetic:

> Malacca was not rich and glorious because it was the source of a specific product. Its glory was founded on its openness and hospitality, the service it rendered to the ceaseless stream of peoples who were constituent parts of its *convivencia*; this was an art, a skill, which Europeans neither recognized nor knew how to approximate (42).

To decentre holds a particular challenge to the western beneficiaries of the Enlightenment and colonialist projects, because, as has been noted in passing, cosmopolitanism remains implicated in the dynamics of contemporary global capitalism. Walter Mignolo articulates this problematic by observing that although "cosmopolitan projects" (by Francisco de Vitoria, Kant and Marx) have often proposed an emancipatory corrective to the managerial priorities of "global designs" (Christianity, nineteenth-century imperialism and late-twentieth-century neo-liberal globalization respectively), in so far as they arose from within modernity, "they have failed to escape the ideological frame imposed by global designs themselves" (2002: 160). The "critical cosmopolitanism" that Mignolo proposes in response is a mode of border thinking that will bring about "the recognition and transformation of the hegemonic imaginary from the perspective of peoples in subaltern positions" (174), whose "ground" will be diversity as a universal project, or "epistemic diversality".

Mignolo's argument is a provocative one. He makes a compelling case for a cosmopolitan decentring of power away from the single, abstract universal point of view he identifies in the Greek tradition towards a situation "in which everyone participates rather than 'being participated'" (182). Moreover, it bears noting that the most trenchant critiques of global processes in relation to theatrical performance have emerged from writers, such as Rustom Bharucha, Guillermo Gomez-Peña and Coco Fusco, whose cultural and geographical affiliations render them particularly sensitive to both the vicissitudes and possibilities of subaltern and border identities. However, Mignolo's enthusiastic valorization of the subaltern perspective threatens to reify subject positions on either side of the thought-border. And while the current

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reveal: memory challenges history in the construction of circum-Atlantic cultures, and it revises the yet unwritten epic of their fabulous cocreation" (1996: 286).

dominance of the global design of neo-liberalism may suggest that in the immediate future, the "projecting and imagining" of diversality is already something of an uphill struggle for the subaltern, one is left wondering whether the only option that remains in the West really is, as Mignolo seems to suggest, to be an agent of the "benevolent form of control" that defines contemporary "managed cosmopolitanism" (179).

This challenge is all the more complex when one considers how one might figure a spinning Singaporean actress in a spirit of critical cosmopolitanism. She embodies and participates in a response to coloniality that bears little relation to Mignolo's subaltern perspectives, not least in its nuanced relationship to modernity. While Mignolo clarifies that the subaltern position representing the "exteriority of modernity" does not mean "something lying untouched beyond capitalism and modernity, but the outside that is needed by the inside" (160), the worlds invoked in *Descendants* cannot be easily described in these terms. After all, the allegorical aspect of the market scene derives from the way it plays the process of intercultural exchange described off and against those that drive modern day Singapore: the critique, such as it is, lies in the tonal disjunction between the two. The play is in English, and its form owes much to the Euro-American tradition of avant-garde performance. Indeed, in the spinning scene, the slow-walking fourth performer is more directly a reference to the dramaturgy of Robert Wilson than it is the techniques of *Noh* to which he, in turn, makes reference. Nevertheless, both the spoken language and aesthetic forms of the performance proved sufficiently familiar to or resonant for a local audience to support two separate runs at one of Singapore's largest performance venues, the 800-seat Victoria Theatre. While the name of the theatre hints at the republic's colonial past and neo-colonial present, however, it does not follow that "Singapore" can be absorbed into the terms of western modernity in any straightforward way as the periphery become slavishly surrogate centre. On the contrary, while key aspects of the production would be recognisable to those hailing from the metropolitan centres of the West, they function to relocate the audience in a distinctly non-western historical trajectory: that of the pre-colonial Indian Ocean World.

In spinning, therefore, the actress calls in the representational legacy of her nation's colonial past, but as a postcolonial dynamo she generates another take on modernity, speaking it into being, embodying it, drawing her audience along in its slipstream. This is a decentring proposition, knocking the singular power of the latest global design of the West out of kilter, without simply instituting a new centre in its place. The so-called

"thesis of reverse convergence", which argues for a "Pacific Century" in which the "West" will look to the "East" as the "East" once did to the "West" has been discredited in favour of what Tu Wei-Ming calls "plural modernities" (Tu 2001: 112). This calls for a particular kind of critical cosmopolitanism that not only activates the border between modernity and coloniality, where cultural difference and economic disparity are held, as in Mignolo's and most other such analyses, to march in lock-step, but between *multiple* modernities, where economic and cultural discrepancies operate in more variable relation. Moreover, it is here that the "westerner", condemned in Mignolo's eyes to a complicitous, co-opted managerial role, finds another opportunity.

While it may, then, remain the prerogative of the subaltern, if he or she wishes so to describe her/himself, to play the deconstructive agent as outside-insider, there is just as much work to be done from within modernity, where relationships are increasingly defined by a mixture of cultural decentring and economic parity. After all, if we are all cosmopolitans, we are all equally beholden to engage critically with the global designs of the day, however complicit we might otherwise be in their propagation. In other words, while it is right to be sensitive to the structural inequities that may underwrite any invocation of plurality, it should not be assumed that these will always determine the resulting interactions at the expense of other, more nuanced dynamics.

-1.2: Deculturalize

It is worth explicitly noting here an assumption concerning the relationship between culture and modernity that has crept in to the preceding paragraphs, that is potentially limiting and requires further investigation. In the case of *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*, for instance, it is tempting to identify the pluralizing cosmopolitanism that it describes as an articulation of "East Asian modernity". This is a phrase that became increasingly common in political, economic and cultural discourse as the economic success of the four Asian "Tigers" (Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan and South Korea), the four "Dragons" (Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam), and the incipient powerhouse of China continued to gather momentum through the eighties and early nineties. It sought to explain such developments with reference to cultural factors, granting them a qualitatively different mode of genesis, execution, and therefore future, from their western counterparts. While the more chauvinistic manifestations of this thinking, apparent in the so-called "Asian Values" debates of the last decade (discussed in more detail in Chapter One), cooled off somewhat following the economic crisis of 1997, the culturally essentialist (and latently Confucian)

underpinnings of the theory have continued to be influential. This influence can be identified, for example, in the way Tu develops his "plural modernities" analysis:

> The challenge ahead is the need for global civilizational dialogue as a prerequisite for a peaceful world order...The paradox, then, is our willingness and courage to understand 'radical otherness' rooted in the primordial ties of concrete living communities as an irreducible step toward true communication, without which basic trust and fruitful mutuality between us and them can never be established, and the global community, indeed communities, will remain disintegrated and dangerously conflictual (113).

While one cannot dispute Tu's good intentions, there is a troubling, implicitly agonistic, logic in the argument that unfolds from "global civilizational dialogue", through "radical otherness" and "primordial ties", to a desire for "fruitful mutuality between us and them". Moreover, as the term "global civilizational dialogue" suggests, this totalizing interpretation of culture is not unique to articulations of East Asian Modernity, even if it was primarily invoked as a way in which the *second* geo-political entity to attain high levels of economic development might be distinguished from the *first*. Rather, it suggests an understanding *of* the world, *by* the world.

To concede that *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* is primarily an expression of East Asian modernity, therefore, would be to subscribe to a culturally essentialist analysis at odds with the basic aspirations of cosmopolitanism, which dictate that no "we" should be so comprehensively reducible to Tu's "us". Nevertheless, one cannot very well ascribe to the play and its performances a decentring, pluralizing agency, and then deprive them of positive value, just as one cannot discount the distinctive qualities of cultural forms and historical conditions that may be described as Asian, simply because totalizing arguments have been made in their name. It is with the aim of finding a more appropriate way of articulating the significance of the play, both in and of itself, and in relation to its context, that one must make the ostensibly counter-intuitive move to deculturalize.

Culturalism, the reduction of all phenomena to cultural explanations, is of concern to the cosmopolitan not only because it threatens to misrepresent cultural enterprises in the global arena, but because of its prevalence, in recent years, in critical thinking across the political spectrum. Samuel Huntingdon's infamous 1993 essay 'The Clash of Civilizations', and subsequent book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the New Word Order* (1995) were both notable for propounding the thesis that the post-Cold War political environment would be characterised by ongoing conflict between the "West" and one or several parts of the "Rest", be that Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu,

Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American or African. The future, therefore, would consist of the struggle to gain strategic advantage in a continuing battle between culturally distinct and internally homogenized ideologies, for economic and political superiority. Such sentiments gained notoriety, but were also subject to stringent critique by, amongst others, Edward Said, who noted of Huntingdon: "He writes as a crisis manager, not as a student of civilization, nor as a reconciler between them" (2002: 366). Following the attacks of 11 September 2001 on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, however, the phrase "clash of civilizations" (which Huntingdon borrowed from the polemical arabist Bernard Lewis) has come to be repeated *ad nauseam* by pundits and politicians alike in an attempt to explain the newly charged geo-political landscape. To be sure, Islam is treated as somewhat less monolithic than it was during the last decade. However, global political discourse arguably remains disproportionately focused on the battle of ideas and ideologies to the potential exclusion of both historical and material explanations.

In response to Huntingdon's thesis, Said wrote:

> The more insistent we are on the separation of our cultures and civilizations, the more inaccurate we are about ourselves and others. The notion of an exclusionary civilization is, to my way of thinking, an impossible one. The real question, then, is whether in the end we want to work for civilizations that are separate or whether we should be taking the more integrative, but perhaps more difficult, path, which is to try to see them as making one vast whole whose exact contours are impossible for one person to grasp, but whose certain existence we can intuit and feel (378).

In so far as Said's terms resonate with the discussion I have pursued up to this point, he offers a succinct, if inadvertent, argument for the significance of theatre as a place of cosmopolitan mediation, which can distil the vastness of the whole and amplify the phenomenal realm of the individual without either of these suffering undue distortion. In this regard, it is no coincidence that one of the most distinctive sites at which theatre can be said to operate, by contrast with other art forms, is precisely where the "contours" of the whole take shape: the intercultural. This can be discerned, for example, in the fact that intercultural performance theory is one of very few discourses that could be described as proper to the form, rather than derivative of literary, film or fine art theories.[5] Unfortunately, recent developments in the theory have risked entrenching monolithic cultural identities every bit as much as the conservative foreclosures they are invariably attempting to counter.

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[5] There is also a strong strand of intercultural theory in Communication Studies, but since this is primarily focused on business-to-business interactions, research from the field is rarely, if ever, cited in Theatre Studies literature.

Crudely put, many theatre-makers from Europe, America and other parts of the world have been drawn to intercultural experiment because of the importance attached to interpersonal interaction through gesture, often over and above language. It is in significant part the transformative potential of gesture that Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud responded to in Chinese and Balinese theatre respectively, and it is in similarly significant part language *as* gesture that Peter Brook was pursuing in early intercultural experiments such as *The Ik* (1977). At the heart of the subsequent critique of these and other modernist and humanist experiments lay the charge that gesture, as a specific instance of cultural expression, had been so violently wrested from its broader cultural context as to constitute an arguably inadvertent theft (or misappropriation) akin, according to certain reviewers, to colonial plunder (see in particular Bharucha 1993 [1990]: 13-90). Such critiques (of this 'neo-colonialist' appropriation) were necessary and significant, but what ensued can be identified as a failure of nerve and imagination on the part of those who subsequently took it upon themselves to re-envision the dynamics of intercultural performance. Rather than seek to articulate the way in which a "thicker" sense of culture might be understood to be both embodied *and* challenged in the theatrical gesture and its passage across contexts – thereby holding true to the distinctiveness of the act – there has been a marked tendency among theorists of interculturalism to defer to more generic analytical frameworks such as feminism and postcolonialism. In so doing, they have replicated precisely the "emptying out" of the theatrical gesture they aim to critique, because the arguments for the political valency of these broader – invariably textualist – frameworks have been made at the expense of the critical force of the gesture itself. This is evident, for example, in Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert's response to Patrice Pavis' assertion that the primary site of "resistance to standardization" is "the inter-corporeal":

> The hourglass model is premised on aesthetics rather than politics.... By locating the potential for agency at this microscopic level of actor training, Pavis reveals the limitations of the hourglass model as an effective template for a politicized theorization of the entire field of interculturalism (2002: 43).

The response is an appeal to culturalism, and a concomitant lack of attention to theatrical processes. Simultaneous with the denigration of "aesthetics" in favour of "politics" is a shift in focus from "Culture" as a form of artistic expression to "culture" in its broadest sense, understood sociologically as: "...the ways in which people make their lives, individually and collectively, meaningful by communicating with each other"

(Tomlinson 1999: 18). With a counter-hegemonic political agenda placing the two in an agonistic relationship, the effect is deleterious. Take, for example, Lo and Gilbert on multicultural community theatre:

> The focus on cultural activism is seen as an oppositional practice concerned with subverting those 'dominant cultural practices which render people passive [as] consumers' of imposed cultural commodities (Watt 1991: 63). A commitment to cultural democracy distinguishes community theatre from other types of community-generated performances that go under the general rubric of 'amateur' theatre (34).

In so far as "cultural" would seem to have a different meaning in each of the four instances it is used by Lo and Gilbert in this brief passage, the term seems highly ambiguous, while its indiscriminate proliferation as a qualifier suggests that there is little in social existence – be it actions, objects or ideologies – that does not dwell wholly or primarily in the cultural realm. The result of this combination of ambiguity and ubiquity is the presence of a discursive field both differentiated and singularized along cultural lines, where the primary focus of writers such as Lo and Gilbert seems to be on distinguishing the "oppositional" from the "dominant". However, if cultures are to be viewed as singular, and internally riven with conflict, then something of the same order must apply to relations *between* cultures. This is the clear implication of Eelke Lampe's statement that interculturalism is characterized by "the tension between common goals and clashing cultures", cited approvingly as an epigraph by Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins in their *Women's Intercultural Performance* (2000: 7). A similar dynamic inhabits Lo and Gilbert's sustained rhetoric of counter-hegemonic struggle. In what I identify as a telling phrase, they lament that the politically repressive contexts within which some postcolonial theatre is made mean that "resistance is not conceptualized as pure or simply there" (35). Now, one can by and large agree with the adage that conflict is the basis of drama, and, more specifically, that it is desirable (as Lo and Gilbert suggest) that intercultural performers make a virtue of their differences. However, this hankering after "pure resistance" betrays an assumption that conflict inheres in a much more fundamental level of human interaction. On this matter, there is little distance between the agonstic focus on "power relations" promoted by self-styled "political" intercultural theorists, and the "culture is destiny" conservative culturalism inherent in Tu's "us" and "'them", and Huntingdon's "clash of civilizations". I would argue that Tu's aspirations are strikingly reflected, for example, in Una Chaudhuri's enthusiastic support for "...all theater dedicated to the principle of observing and honoring cultural and historical specificity, theater that refuses every temptation to universalize, generalize, and allegorize the specific cultural crossings from which it arises" (2002: 36). Once again, if one cannot quibble with the basic

sentiment, as the theoretical basis of global inter-relationships this observation is problematic, and as the starting point for intercultural performance practice it is a recipe for creative inertia.

In this regard, recent trends in intercultural performance theory have pursued an argument whose logical conclusion is antithetical to the cosmopolitan potential of the theatre I am seeking to identify. The seeds of a different perspective can be found – for those who are attentive to its message – in a single line from *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*:

> ...children of parents of a good description of people...(59)

This non-sequitur is from the description of Zheng He's visit to Malacca. Its logic is circular, but it does not quite join up. Children of parents of a good description of people *should* be simply a good description of people, but something else accumulates in the line that resists such reductive self-cancelling. The *meaning* of the line is somehow exceeded by the way in which each element appears to beget the next. This resonates with the fact that the "good description of people" are children, and the rhetorical inference of the line is that they will in turn become parents of an even greater description of people. The contrast with a notion of cultural clash recalls Michel Serres' vignette of how "...the intermixing of human beings makes their history":

> Invisible, dazzling. Everyone thinks that war and battles are what make history: the likes of the Horatii against the Curiatii...And nobody ever notices Sabina and Camilla, two victim women, loving their adversaries, and bearing their children by them: there you have blending, time, evolution, advance and progress (1995: 257-8).

If, as Hannah Arendt has claimed, natality promises new and previously unanticipated beginnings, then in the "children of parents of a good description of people" lies the possibility of a collective whose concerns exceed both conflict and the pious activity of "honoring cultural specificity". Indeed, the implication is of a proliferating hybridity – evidence not of an agonistic relation of Bhabha-esque incommensurability as Lo and Gilbert prescribe, but an instinctively affirmative, if theoretically more recondite, phenomenon: love.

Love is seldom formalised in discussions of cosmopolitanism, but it is nevertheless a recurrent theme, which suggests to me that its *proximity* to theoretical analysis is more

important than its direct application or characterisation. By contrast with romantic or erotic forms, the love commonly invoked in such contexts is disinterested. "Always rebirthing and productive of time", writes Serres, "love is an angel-child; it is the only thing which does not become worn out with duration, whether we live in it or it lives in us" (273). "*Caritas* is infinite, it grows, goes beyond itself and ourselves, thus welcoming foreigners who have become similar in their very distinction" notes Julia Kristeva (1991: 85), glossing the cosmopolitanism of Paul (with an Arendtian inflection). From Arendt, "[w]hat love is in its own, narrowly circumscribed sphere, respect is in the larger domain of human affairs...a regard for the person from the distance which the space of the world puts between us" (1998 [1958]: 243). In light of such observations, the culturalist valorisation of conflict proves to be a profound limitation, and it is no coincidence that in his recent critique of culturalism, Terry Eagleton, too, looks to love to articulate an alternative:

> Love is no respecter of persons. It is remorselessly abstract, ready to attend to the needs of any old body. In this, it is quite indifferent to cultural difference. It is not indifferent to difference in the sense that it is blind to the *specific* needs of people. If it was, it would not be attending to *them* at all. But it is quite indifferent as to whose specific needs it attends to. This is one way in which it differs from friendship, which is all about particularity...[T]he paradigm of love is not the love of friends – what could be less demanding? – but the love of strangers. If love is not just to be an imaginary affair, a mutual mirroring of egos, it has to attend to that in the other which is deeply strange, in the sense of being fearful and recalcitrant (2003: 167-8).

Indeed, one might go so far as to note that one cannot talk about love without, at some point, professing cosmopolitanism, even if, as Eagleton does, one expresses reservations about the term itself.[6] More generally, the point is that disinterested love and its derivatives (such as respect) represent an affirmative force, similar in its effects to the lack that drives detotalization. However, where lack counters the subtractive aspect of totalization, in the case of a totalizing culturalism at least, love dissolves the internal homogenizations and essentialisms that conventionally structure and legitimate it.

One further aspect of the deculturalizing process needs to be noted here, for if love sets into play the internal dynamics of cultural processes, thereby effecting a detotalization, the question is begged as to what lies outside the cultural, and how one

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[6] The Left's traditional wariness of the term "cosmopolitan" stems from that of Marx and Engels, cited above in note 3. However, as Mignolo notes, Marx's own project was itself cosmopolitan, and it is just such ambiguities that cause Marxist and post-Marxist critics to fight shy of it. Eagleton writes: "Universalism belongs to high culture, cosmopolitanism to the culture of global capitalism, while internationalism is a form of political resistance to that world" (2000: 78). For an argument that proposes the productive interaction of "cosmopolitan democracy" and the "diverse solidarities" of internationalism, see Calhoun (2002).

should conceive of it. After all, if it is unsatisfactory to reduce all phenomena to cultural explanations, neither is it desirable that cultural events and experiences can be entirely hived off from other discourses and realms of activity.

In this connection, it is instructive to revisit Lo and Gilbert's survey of intercultural performance theory. Casting around for a term to describe the opposite of "intracultural", and having already used "intercultural" as a broad sub-heading, they light briefly on the term "extracultural". In somewhat deterministic fashion, this is to be the name for theatre "conducted along a West-East and North-South axis" (38). It takes a particularly conscious effort, however, to (mis)read "extracultural" as the opposite of "intracultural", when all one's critical faculties are pointing to the "extracultural" as that which exceeds or lies outside culture in some way. Little wonder, then, that Lo and Gilbert drop the term within a paragraph, and, in what could be described as an attempted culturalist cover-up, reinstate "intercultural" as a catch-all phrase. But the cat is already out of the bag: the instability of the term "extracultural" undoes cultural determinism both within and without the cultural realm. In a previous study to that in which he discusses the significance of love, Eagleton provided a sharp reminder of all that an over-valorisation of the cultural might obscure:

> The primary problems which we confront in the new millennium – war, famine, poverty, disease, debt, drugs, environmental pollution, the displacement of peoples – are not especially 'cultural' at all. They are not primarily questions of value, symbolism, language, tradition, belonging or identity, least of all the arts....Like any other material issues, these matters are culturally inflected, bound up with beliefs and identities, and increasingly enmeshed in doctrinal systems. But they are cultural problems only in a sense which risks expanding the term to the point of meaninglessness (2000: 130-31).

Eagleton's sobering analysis puts the realm of the cultural in its place by listing significantly – and often literally – more contested terrain than that with which interculturalism conventionally deals. This does not mean, of course, that the cultural realm has no role to play, and in his polemical zeal Eagleton arguably overstates the "meaninglessness" of culture. Moreover, the kinds of highly politicised critiques of interculturalism exemplified by Bharucha (his own theatre-making expertise notwithstanding), threaten to throw the whole process into reverse by emphasizing economic and social factors at the expense of any sensitivity to the experiential qualities and possibilities of the theatrical event.

The more enduring, if somewhat unspectacular point, therefore, is that cultural processes need to be conceived in a balanced relation to those others where they can

prove informing and illuminating, rather than explanatory, just as a range of factors must be brought to bear on the understanding of cultural experience, without overwhelming or obscuring what remains distinctive about it. As the somewhat normative tenor of this statement should indicate, aiming for this balance brings one into the ambit of the cosmopolitan, especially from the perspective of artistic practice and interpretation. Historically sympathetic to the realm of the cultural, the breadth of enquiry and insight that cosmopolitanism has provoked (most recently in the discourses of sociology and political science[7]) ensures that it is never reducible to it. And if "love" is too strong a prescription for such a catholic contagion, then we must at least settle for a healthy dose of disinterest. This sort of shift is key to developing a critical relation with globalization, from within theatre studies as much as from any other perspective, and it is to a specific focus on the theatre *as* theatre that I now turn.

-1.1: Deterritorialize

Over the course of this chapter, I have used *The Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* as a springboard for exploring a range of conceptual issues that need to be addressed before a properly cosmopolitan exploration of theatrical performance can begin. I want at this point to turn my attention to the theatre itself – to use my observations of the theatre to reflect discursively *on* the theatre, as it were. Accordingly, the imperative that I shall be investigating is not of quite the same order as the three that precede it. While totalization, centralization and culturalism are all quite unambiguously anti-cosmopolitan, "territorialization" is a much more complex phenomenon. At one extreme, many of the most perplexing and brutal conflicts that played out over the course of the last decade in particular stemmed from a potent mix of territorial disputes and nationalist and/or ethnic chauvinisms. For some proponents of cosmopolitanism, such as Pollock et al., the viciousness that characterized events in Bosnia and Rwanda provided incontrovertible proof of inherently coercive and oppressive flaws in the concept of the modern (and in many instances post-colonial) nation state. Such sentiments might be seen as the most recent manifestations of a long-standing tradition of cosmopolitan antipathies. However, while the nation as a begetter of nationalism is a common target for cosmopolitan critics, it is by no means a universally or even consistently defining feature, and across a range of contemporary cosmopolitan articulations, the territorial integrity of nation states and other "imagined communities", to use Benedict Anderson's resonant phrase, is by turns assumed,

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[7] See, for example, Ulrich Beck's 'Cosmopolitan Manifesto' in his *World Risk Society* (1999) and David Held's *Democracy and the Global Order: From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance* (1995).

tolerated, and celebrated. In this regard, "*de*territorialization" must be seen not so much as a rejection or critique of territorializing processes, as an expression of the complex and sometimes contradictory dynamics that link these processes with issues of identity, belonging and displacement. I shall therefore be less concerned in this section with deriving from the term a more demonstrably cosmopolitan formulation, than with extending its analytical reach. This requires a tight focus, and to this end I propose to look to a very concrete instance of theatrical experience, one that, in the terms of more self-consciously "politicized" performance theorists might initially seem overly "aestheticized", or at the very least, pedantic. Etymologically, if nothing else, they would be right.

At the opening of Ong's production of *Descendants*, the four Shentonites walk out of the auditorium, pause at the lip of the stage, then drop to all fours and crawl onto it. Once there, they stand and look around them as though in a daze, as if they do not recognize their surroundings, while a voiceover recounts an oneiric fantasy of affiliation with the Eunuch. The white-robed, white-haired figure enters – an avatar, we presume, of Zheng He – and very slowly proceeds to remove their shoes and (in the case of the men), socks. He places them in a transparent box, and meticulously performs the action of washing their feet.

The simplicity of the action belies the complexity of what it performs and signifies. Within the narrative of the play, it marks the transition into the "nightly unknown" (Kuo 2003: 38) where the encounter with the Eunuch takes place. However, this is only the most immediately apparent of the available thematisations, and even that is further layered by references to cleansing and purification and, more explicitly, to religiously inscribed acts of humility. If this latter identification is something of a red herring, however, given that it is not explicitly developed, one image that becomes increasingly resonant over the course of the production is the removal of clothes as a kind of castration. The divestment of shoes and socks can be seen to inaugurate this process. In accordance with the detotalizing logic of the narrative, the act is first debilitating – rendering the previously "power dressed" characters vulnerable – and subsequently enabling, granting them access to the realm of the imaginary in which the Eunuch wanders.

In addition, there is a metatheatrical significance to the opening sequence, which inaugurates not only the narrative and thematic strands of the play, but the

performance itself. Stepping out of the audience, garbed in conventional business clothes, the identification of the performer-personae with audience members is unambiguous. Their transformation as they cross the threshold of the stage, however, first to a position on all fours, and then barefoot, sharply distinguishes them as performers who inhabit a charged space. There is a cultural element to this development that needs to be acknowledged, without its significance being overstated. A large number of Asian performance traditions – in particular from India and Southeast Asia – are practiced in bare feet, and taking one's shoes off before entering domestic and sacred spaces is even more widespread. In this regard, the fact that the performers' shoes barely touch the stage serves to imbue a "westernised" proscenium performance space, with a generically Asian quality (while retaining the implications of its status as construct). Equally, the characters can be said to cast off some of the markers of their transnationalized cosmopolitanism (in Goh Chok Tong's sense of the word), in favour of entry into the Eunuch's historically-inflected pan-Asian dream-world.

At a yet more basic level, this opening action draws at least some spectators' attention to a fact whose implications are universal, even if their significance varies greatly: the dynamic relationship of the performer with the stage. In *Descendants*, this dynamism is expressed as a tension, which is why it is of exemplary interest in considering the ways in which the theatre intersects with deterriorialization. In bare feet, the performers are at once more "grounded" on the stage, and yet less constrained in their movements. Shoe-shod, they look dazed, but as they find their place through the soles of their feet, their movements, voices and interactions become both authoritative and fluid. The combination renders the performance compelling to watch, and, in so far as deterritorialization names a dynamic interaction between identity and place – a defining feature of cosmopolitanism in all its forms – the stage can be recognized as a significant site for its practice and investigation.

The theatre practitioner who has drawn attention to the possibilities of theatrical deterritorialization in this most concrete of its manifestations is the Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki, whose work derives from the dictum that "the basic physical sensibility of any stage actor depends on his feet" (1995: 158). More specifically:

> A performance begins when the actor's feet touch the ground, a wooden floor, a surface, when he first has the sensation of putting down roots; it begins in another sense when he lifts himself lightly from that spot...The various pleasures that an actor feels as he comes in contact with the ground – and the growth in the richness of change in his bodily responses when he is in contact with the ground – constitute the first stage in his training as an actor (1986: 8).

Often described as an interculturalist, whose writings and practice owe much to the Japanese performing traditions of *Noh*, *Kabuki* and *Kyogen*, Suzuki has nevertheless repeatedly stated the universal applicability of his ideas regarding what he calls the "grammar of the feet". Leg length, he notes, with reference to differences between Japanese and American performers, is irrelevant; the same principles apply in classical European ballet as in his own work.

One can be wary of Suzuki's culturally-transcendant comments regarding "innate expressive abilities" and loose talk of moving "from the personal to the universal", and still find general merit in the observation that theatre performers are deterritorialization specialists. Their skills lie in harnessing and energizing the push-pull dynamic of a process that might otherwise immobilize them. This is embodied in Suzuki's image of the foot that puts down roots and then lifts lightly from the spot, but it can be discerned at all levels of a performer's development and in her or his presence on stage. Simply put, the performer who works at the craft, does so with the aim of consolidating her or his sense of place, the better to interpret the variously transfiguring demands that any given performance will make of them, be it the formation of a character, the realization of a choreography, or the execution of a task or technique. Moreover, while Suzuki states that the desired result of such training is a *transformation* from "the raw, unconcentrated body of everyday life" (1995: 159), one might note that in the experience of performance, it manifests itself as an *intensification* of the condition of deterritorialization that increasingly pervades *all* social existence in an age of globalization. In this connection, a particular significance is attached to the so-called "actuals" of theatrical performance, identified by Bert States in his observation that "...[t]he actor takes us *into* a world within the world itself. At bottom, it is not a matter of the illusory, the mimetic, or the representational, but a certain kind of *actual*, of having something before one's vision – and in the theater one's hearing – to which we join our being" (1986: 46-7). The audience shares the world with the actors because they share the same ground, and the theatre, more than most art forms, draws attention both to the inviolability and the contingency of that fact.

This necessarily ambivalent position is exemplified in cultural theory by James Clifford's discussion of the inter-dependencies of dwelling in place, and what he calls "dwelling-in-travel". While the latter incorporates "cultures of displacement and transplantation...inseparable from specific, often violent, histories of economic,

political and cultural interaction" (1997: 36), just as importantly, the former can be seen as "a particular worldliness rather than a narrow localism" (5). In *Descendants*, a single image dramatizes this dynamic, and again, it concerns the relationship between the performers and the stage. Initially, when the white-haired performer lays out a large number of red stiletto-heeled shoes on stage, they represent the ships of Zheng He's armada, their actual "shoeness" and symbolic "shipness" collapsing into each other in a distinctly apposite image of the unmooring to which that first deterritorializing step can lead. These simultaneous scales of phenomenal and imaginative experience established, the performers then step into the shoes, and begin a jerky, disconnected dance. The shoes first appeared in Ong's production of Leow Puay Tin's play *The Yang Family* (1995), in a scene where three male performers (playing women) performed t'ai chi in them. The image and the action dramatised the impossible balancing act between tradition and modernity, and between necessity and gender expectations that were the play's two main themes. The shoes intervened between the traditionally grounding and centring practice of t'ai chi, and the ground itself, setting the performers at an angle to the floor, in the same way that the characters lay in a skewed relationship to their expectations, and cultural identities.

In *Descendants*, the characters are most in harmony with the figure of the Eunuch in this tottering identification. Inclined in high-heels, they stand in a tangential relationship to both the earth and the sky, neither grounded nor elevated. The result is both enabling and disabling: the performers increase in stature, but movement is a strain; their voices change; they and their characters are oddly, foolishly sexualized; spectacularized but hobbled. In a play about the desire for home and the need to wander, these uncertain individuals come closest to finding a resolution only in so far as it promises to be consistently destabilizing. In this regard, the deterritorialization that is initiated when the shoes come off at the beginning reaches its climax in this scene. Conversely, when the high heels come off, the closing reterritorialization of the production begins. The Descendants crawl off stage at the end of the play, leaving the Eunuch alone to continue his wanderings.

Descendants' materialization of the ambiguous dynamics of deterritorialization is suggestive, but a question remains about the ways in which it might be identified in other instances. While the heightening or compromising of a performer's physical relationship to the stage can carry a forceful, even iconic force (and every regular

theatre-goer may be surprised at the ease with which examples can be recalled[8]), this does not mean that deterritorialization must always be practised or interpreted so literally. Indeed in one of the very few analyses of theatre and cosmopolitanism published thus far, Una Chaudhuri identifies a potentially useful structural congruence between theatre and cosmopolitanism when she writes that: "...the theater is a space of creative reinscription, a space where meaning, like deterritorialized identity, is not merely made but *re*made, negotiated out of silence, stasis, and incomprehension" (2001: 174). However, Chaudhuri's primary focus on cosmopolitanism as a new way of understanding the staging of identity politics inevitably delimits her choice of examples, as well as the conclusions she draws from them. Many of her more insightful comments recede before a negative critique which returns so consistently to the ways in which narratives of diaspora put pressure on "the protocols of realism" (189), that the very real possibilities new theatrical forms may offer *on their own terms* become obscured. A more productively ambivalent perspective on the relationship between the figure and actuality of deterritorialization is suggested by Brian Massumi's discussion of the mechanics of walking as a parable of the interplay of continuity and discontinuity:

> Much useless theoretical fretting could be avoided by deflecting issues customarily approached by critiquing or deconstructing the subject-object "divide" onto pragmatic enquiry into modes of *continuity* and *discontinuity*...It is a contemporary proverb that walking is controlled falling. Continuity embraces discontinuity as walking includes falling. The momentum of walking is the excess of its activity over each successive step. The ongoing quality of walking is that trans-step momentum. Each next step is momentous, in its own little way: it is the event of a caught fall. The catch renews the walking's functional context. The rhythm of falling and catching organizes an indefinite series of varying contexts for the walking-event's continuation (2002: 218-8).

Neither metaphorical nor literal, Massumi's analysis instead posits a constitutive relationship not only between walking and falling, but between considering the act of walking and conducting a more general practice of pragmatic enquiry. A similar combination of continuities and discontinuities between the actor's actual relation with the stage, and the deterritorializing potential of the theatrical endeavour as a whole

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[8] In addition to the use of high heels in *The Yang Family* and *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*, my own, incomplete, list would include: Hamm and Clov in Beckett's *Endgame*; Emma Thompson's Fool piggy-backing on Richard Brier's Lear in the Renaissance Theatre Company's staging of *King Lear*; the limping man at the end of Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening* (a role originally played by Wedekind himself); the paraplegic dancers of Candoco and actors in Greae Theatre Company; Akram Khan's steps in dialogue with the tabla player in *Polaroid Feet*; Michael Clark pirouetting in Doctor Marten boots in *Before and After: The Fall*; the African off-beats to the English folk-steps in the choreography of Henri Oguike; Ron Vawter's foot-stool in The Wooster Group's *Brace Up!*; the performers of Goat Island's *It's an Earthquake in my Heart* executing an exhausting dance in heavy clogs; the young man's broken leg in Richard Maxwell's *Drummer Wanted*; the effect of the water-logged stage on the actors in Robert Lepage's *Midsummer Night's Dream*; the tip-toe walk of the Devil in Lepage's *Geometry of Miracles*, and the Devil's cloven-hoofed shoe in Kombat Opera's *Jerry Springer – The Opera*.

suggests an important way in which one might identify the cosmopolitan charge and/or potential in a given event. In contrast to the "aesthetics/politics" dichotomy of current critical intercultural performance theory, Massumi's insight draws attention to the way in which what takes place between each step taken on stage, be it the lifting of the performers' foot from the floor or any other thematic, symbolic or affective movement in the performance, holds the promise of a "momentous" discontinuity, an "excess" wherein a cosmopolitan aesthetics – the possibility of relating otherwise to the world – also resides. Inevitably, every discontinuity is ghosted by a countervailing continuity, and the "functional context" of the event will invariably be reasserted, just as the Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral are ultimately brought to their knees. At that point, it falls to the will of the audience member or critic to follow the deterritorialization through, and mediate as best they can between its discontinuous trajectory, and the normative environment into which, however briefly, it intervened.

-1: Worldiness

By way of concluding this chapter, and of leading in to the next, I need to revisit the points made in the preceding paragraph, and to re-frame them in terms that relate not just to specific strategies of deterritorialization, but to the various other terms and ideas that have been considered up to this point. In so doing, my aim is to begin the process of channeling what has thus far been a primarily conceptual discussion in the direction of a methodological one.

First, to expand some of the points that are made in a rather condensed and terminologically specific form above, I am concerned in particular with the idea that, as a site of deterritorializing agency, theatrical practice is predisposed to the emergence of the new; of novel experiences that are at odds with the world as it is known. As such, these affective events elude easy description and discursivisation, being experienced first and foremost as, in Massumi's terms, an "excess", which is discontinuous with the conditions that preceded it. However, if such an excess is to resist re-capture by the continuous and pre-established processes of meaning-making that will almost inevitably ensue, then some form of interpretive practice must be mobilized that can respond pragmatically and inventively to the emergent experience at hand, and it is here that the phrase "cosmopolitan aesthetics" comes into play. This is not to say that the event is cosmopolitan at its point of emergence, for this would be to succumb firstly to a pre-emptive interpretation in terms of an already-existing understanding of cosmopolitanism based on its prior representations, and secondly to

the notion that the cosmopolitan as such can precede (as something like directorial intention) the (theatrical) events of its possible realisation. Rather, the event can best be described as *incipiently* cosmopolitan, in that the encounter it provokes requires that the spectator account for the appearance of the unfamiliar within the previously familiar. That this experience corresponds with the cosmopolitan is underscored by the striking use of associated terms, at least among European thinkers, to describe the othering force of the artwork. Hence, Adorno speaks of the "art-alien" and of that which "manifests foreignness at the same time that it seeks to make experiential what is thing-like and foreign" (1997 [1970]: 84); Steiner, domesticating Heidegger, (1989) unfolds a veritable declension of suggestive terms – stranger, strangeness, unhousedness, *cortesia*, tenancy, hospitality. In a different conceptual vein, Deleuze describes the "continuous variation" that characterizes the effect of a deterritorializing artwork as "a line of variation that will make you a foreigner *in your own* language or make a foreign language your own or make your language a bilingualism immanent to your foreignness" (1997 [1978]: 247).

That this cosmopolitan correspondence is more than metaphorical becomes apparent when considered in relation to the work of Edward Said, for whom vocabularies such as those cited above are avowedly and explicitly the stuff of the aesthetic encounter. In Adorno's writing, for instance, he has identified an "exilic consciousness" that suggests references to foreignness derive *as much from lived experience* as from a convenient turn of phrase. Moreover, this ostensibly biographical quibbling is indicative of an overriding concern with the worldliness of *all* artworks and the responses they provoke, a concept initially elaborated in Said's essay 'The World, the Text, and the Critic' (1983) and revisited in his final, posthumously published book, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004).

At the heart of an artwork's worldliness is a dialectical tension between the fact that it is both *of* the world, and *in* it. In so far as it is something newly created, it is first and foremost encountered in isolation, and is therefore *of* the world: irreducible to any pre-existing set of circumstances or conditions. At the same time, this act of creation is inevitably bound up with and informed by such circumstances, as are the processes of reception that it subsequently provokes, and it is in this sense that the artwork is irremediably *in* the world. This tension has important methodological implications for the ideas introduced above, since it offers a way of drawing together the separately-discussed themes of universality, plurality, disinterest and deterritorialization, and of

considering their implications alongside the more pointed issues of agency, intentionality and particularity.

"Texts have ways of existing", writes Said, "that even in their most rarified forms are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society...The same implications are undoubtedly true of critics in their capacities as readers and writers in the world" (1982: 35). It follows that any process of interpretation must be cognizant of both sets of circumstances and their interactions, and this is the point that has been most heavily stressed by postcolonial theorists such as Gilbert and Tompkins, who are cited near the beginning of this chapter. However, rather than simply "honoring cultural specificity" as Chaudhuri puts it, in Said's complementary engagement with what he calls "the supervening reality of the aesthetic work" which exists "intensely in a state of unreconciled opposition with the depredations of daily life" (2004: 63), emerges a significantly more dynamic relationship between circumstance and interpretation. Acknowledging first and foremost that the work will never submit completely to interpretation, it nevertheless demands a response that is detailed and focused, and produces thereby a commitment to its meaning and what that meaning might attach itself to. Said writes:

> Reception is submitting oneself knowledgeably to texts and treating them provisionally at first as discrete objects (since this is how they are initially encountered); moving then, by dint of expanding and elucidating the often obscure or invisible frameworks in which they exist, to their historical situations and the way in which certain structures of attitude, feeling, and rhetoric get entangled with some currents, some historical and social formulations of their context (61).

This is a two-way process, which highlights those circumstances that influenced the production of the work, even as the irreducible features of the work focus renewed attention on their contingent nature. Moreover, as the critic proceeds, in Said's terms, "integratively and synthetically" (61) from the work, so there is a movement from the specific to the general, the part to the whole, which, even if it never achieves completion, is premised on its possibility and desirability. Taken together, these two factors mean that the critic's own work is one of invention (in the rhetorical sense of the word), simultaneously discovering and understanding interpretive frameworks. As such, the critic enacts a deterritorialization from their own situation which, in so far as it sets them at odds with the previously familiar, requires a process of analysis and differentiation that is ultimately political: "The task of the humanist is not just to occupy a position or place, nor simply to belong somewhere, but rather to be both insider and

outsider to the circulating ideas and values that are at issue in our society or someone else's society or the society of the other" (76).[9]

This approach is useful in summarizing many of the points discussed in this chapter, because it offers a non-prescriptive way of harnessing the cosmopolitan potential of aesthetic experience, such that the capacity for artists to provoke, and interested spectators to develop, a cosmopolitan critical practice is enriched as a result. It variously draws on and is informed by concepts of universality, plurality, disinterest and deterriorialization, and therefore provides an important point of reference for the conceptual and methodological thrust of the enquiry to follow. In the next chapter, I shall go on to consider in the ways in which the material discussed in this thesis conforms to the "worldy" as Said describes it, while operating in a context that exists at several removes from that to which Said refers in his own theorizations, namely Singapore, rather than America.

Prior to that, however, it is important to acknowledge that, as Said's frequent references to "the text" amply demonstrate, his concern is first and foremost with literature and the experience of reading. While he is consistently sensitive to the literary performative, the terms in which he discusses the textual encounter nevertheless differ in important ways from those that characterise theatrical experience. Most significantly, Said sets great store by the solitary conditions of the production and reception of literary texts – he refers to "authorial heroism" and "the original privacy of the writer" (2004: 67, 75) – and the meticulous philology that he champions requires "first putting oneself in the position of the author, for whom writing is a series of decisions and choices expressed in words" (62). While part of this process involves an appreciation of the author's historical circumstances, it remains a far cry from the inherently social and sociable qualities of the theatre, and while one need not rehearse all its differences with literature here, it does no harm to remind ourselves of the significance of this fact. The theatre is actively relational from its inception, meaning that audience members are presented with a product of dialogue,

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[9] Said's pointed use of the term "humanist" here is in line with his broader aim to reclaim a humanism that is simultaneously resistant and emancipatory. "I believe", he writes, "that it is possible to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism and that, schooled in its abuses by the experience of Eurocentrism and empire, one could fashion a different kind of humanism that was cosmopolitan and language-and-text-bound in ways that absorbed the great lessons of the past...and still remain attuned to the emergent voices and currents of the present..." (2004: 10-11). While I do not have the space to assess the extent to which the argument I am making above conforms to what Said proposes, in this particular context it suffices to note that "humanist" can be replaced by "cosmopolitan critic" without thereby compromising the basic point.

as well as a host of non-verbal, embodied, technical, emotional and affective interactions. While the performance may emerge out of and sustain something of the "primary drive and informing power" that Said identifies in the work of literature (68), the source of these qualities, collectively generated and dispersed, will evade the critic, who must assume a degree of givenness to the material that is less likely to yield to the philological than to the phenomenological, and then far from completely.

Said quotes Leo Spitzer on the perplexing experience of staring blankly at a page "that would not yield its magic" until a detail stands out, a relationship is established with the text, and "the characteristic 'click' occurs, which is the indication that detail and whole have found a common denominator" (65-6). By contrast, the shared time of the theatrical encounter is fleeting, and whether the "click" occurs immediately or later, the performance can only ever be a point of departure. All subsequent reflections distance one from the event, even as they appear to bring one closer to its proper force or meaning. When Said writes, as he describes it, "metaphorically", of the need to take seriously "the closeness of the world's body to the text's body" (1983: 39), then in terms of performance the first task must be to acknowledge its literal connotations as they pertain to the co-presence of audience and performers in the theatre. The second is to note that that "theatre's bodies" cannot be ascribed specific intentions as well an author's, nor can what they produce be reconstituted as "discrete objects". In so far the world's body overlaps with all those in the theatre, and the text's body with those on stage, then the reifying term "body" is revealed to be of less use than an account that understands their "closeness" as one sustained and produced by a processual series of experiential intersubjective interactions.

Taking this into account while retaining Said's basic insights concerning the place and time of the artwork's production and reception highlights the issue of intentionality, and the weight of interpretation a given performance can support. My use of *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* in the present chapter, for instance, raises questions about the relationship between the creative frameworks within which Kuo, Ong and the performers were operating, and the interpretive framework I have sought to construct in response. I am aware that the result has been an analysis that exceeds any theoretical reach the artists – inevitably focused as much on the pragmatics and practicalities of public performance and on internalizing its conceptual elements, as on the broader significance of the play – would have envisaged, yet it barely amounts to even a rudimentary study of the play as a whole. On what grounds, therefore, do I

base the insights I have apparently derived from it? In this particular instance, I would point to my assertion, stated earlier, that the play and Ong's production of it provides a focused metacommentary on what is at base the critical literature review of an extremely diffuse field. If anything, therefore, the aim has been to read the field *through* the play, rather than the more usual process of bringing theoretical perspectives to bear upon the play as an object of study.

In this, I find an intriguing resonance with Said's suggestion, cited above, about being both insider and outsider to the ideas and issues of one's own or other societies. It is important to note that my use and understanding of *Descendants* here is influenced in part by my reflecting on Singapore as a non-Singaporean. In addition, in this process of working *through* the play and production I also recognize an approach which, although phrased here in an academic register, resonates with my experience of creative practice as a theatre director. In this connection, the play is not only a metacommentary, but also the *medium* of my enquiry. The importance and influence of these dual identifications will be developed in due course. First, however, and in a spirit of Saidian attention to detail, it is necessary to take a conceptual and bibliographic detour – pertinent to my own research practice – through a twentieth century Euro-American trend for interpreting first Bali and then Singapore in terms of theatre and performance.

0: Singularpore?

1.

What are the mechanics of the paradigm? Approaching performance in Southeast Asia, especially with a passport, language and conceptual vocabulary of Euro-American provenance, it is not a question that can be ignored, for it is often by means of such figures that knowledge of "other" places and practices comes to be known. The answer, meanwhile, requires patient exegesis, since a "top down" approach risks reproducing the paradigm, rather than investigating its workings. Better, instead, to identify the source of a paradigm as best one can, and work outwards. With regards to Southeast Asia, there is only one place to begin.

At the opening of *Negara: The Theatre-State in Nineteenth Century Bali*, Clifford Geertz outlines what he calls "the doctrine of the exemplary centre":

> This is the theory that the court-and-capital is at once a microcosm of the supernatural order and the material embodiment of political order. It is not just the nucleus, the engine or the pivot of the state, it *is* the state...[B]y the mere fact of providing a model, a paragon, a faultless image of civilised existence, the court shapes the world around it to at least a rough approximation of its own excellence. The ritual life of the court, and in fact the life of the court generally, is thus paradigmatic, not merely reflective, of social order (1980: 13).

There are two pertinent points to be made here, and I want to make the least immediately apparent first. Setting the precise *function* of the *negara* aside for one moment, one can observe that Geertz's description of its *place* in relation to the state in the nineteenth century is echoed in Bali's relation to the world – particularly the western world – in the twentieth. Bali, too, has been a kind of exemplary centre, not only because its distinctive modes of social organisation, cultural practices and coastline have proved of enduring interest to anthropologists, artists and tourists respectively, but because the first two of these groups at least have derived theories and practices from their experiences that they have held to be of broader interest, relevance and application. Taken together, in the slowly percolating way that influential analyses come, over time, to be, a paradigm has taken shape that concerns "Asia" and theatricality in equal measure: necessarily nebulous, by definition generalized, but nonetheless with Bali, or a certain idea of Bali, at its core.

It is no coincidence that it is Geertz who should describe an Indonesian phenomenon in the terminology of the paradigm, for he has himself played a central, if complex, role in both its propagation and investigation. Firstly, there is no doubting the importance of

his contributions within anthropology to the detailed study and enumeration of Balinese social, religious, political and agricultural structures and practices. In a related area, C. W. Watson noted in 1992 that Geertz's writings on Indonesia in general and Java in particular, "now translated into the Indonesian language articulate for Indonesian students, as much as for American ones, the regnant paradigms for an understanding of the Javanese" (135). On the other hand, Geertz's assertively comparative approach to anthropology (his other primary area of field work has been Morocco, and he makes frequent reference to Euro-American cultural forms in his analyses), and broad theoretical reflections on the structural basis of culture, have provided a touchstone for the further theorising of anthropological enquiry, and have played a role in what might be termed the "culturalisation of experience" more generally. For example, in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), a collection of poststructuralist critiques of structuralist anthropology whose influence has been long-lasting and wide-ranging, Vincent Crapanzano takes Geertz to task for methodological shoddiness in his well-known account of the Balinese cock-fight, 'Deep Play' (1971). Specifically, he claims that although Geertz represents himself and his wife as individuals, he provides only a generic account of the Balinese and the cock-fights in which they participate, stating: "His constructions of constructions of constructions appear to be little more than projections, or at least blurrings, of his point of view, his subjectivity, with that of the native, or, more accurately, the constructed native" (74). In response, Fred Inglis defends 'Deep Play' as "a striking addition to English literature". He goes on: "This is not a report of one particular cockfight, but an essay, like essays on football, weddings or cowboy movies, on the value and meaning of cockfights in Bali in general. It is, precisely, its own evidence" (2000: 85, 155). Suffice to say that the relative validity of each perspective is of less interest in the immediate context than the fact that they, in turn, produce a series of generalisations and critical locations that further entrench Bali as paradigmatic for the theorisation of culture, even as the theorisations themselves begin to migrate to new objects of study. Indeed, Inglis makes a virtue of this fact, and the broader relevance of his point for Cultural Studies is clear.

The second point that can be made about the "doctrine of the exemplary centre" described by Geertz, above, is that it concerns theatricality, glossed in its most expansive form as the "theatre-state" of *Negara's* subtitle. In itself, the book is a specialized historical ethnography, which the lay reader would be hard-pressed to

penetrate with anything like the ease of Geertz's more descriptive works.[1] However, even here, the theoretical concerns of the book far exceed the specific context, concerning as they do the broader relationship between power and spectacularity. Once more, this slippage between precise detail and general reflection has proved contentious. For Inglis, it is the book's great strength, while for Fredrik Barth, it is evidence of a flawed conception of the individual, insufficient attention to local variations in perceptions of power, and, at least in part, the attribution of a "Western sensibility" to Balinese behaviour.[2] Again, regardless of which position is most persuasive, what is clear is that *Negara*, as with many of Geertz's other writings, is intimately bound up with the reigning cliché of twentieth century Bali: that art – particularly theatre – and life were so inextricably intertwined as for there to be no substantial distinction between the two. Geertz himself has reflected on this, describing himself as "merely one of the latest" in a long line of Bali's "Western unriddlers", and noting that: "The most prominent role the island has planted in our imagination has been to serve as an aesthetic Arcady: a natural society of untutored artists and spontaneous artistry, actually existing in appropriate garb on a suitable landscape" (1983: 50-1). His own response is to temper this idealised vision with a darker one characterised by a wide range of phenomena:

> [N]ot just cremation, but the witch and dragon dance, with its ravaging hag and tranced youths attacking their chests with daggers; sorcery, which is endemic in Bali and filled with images of perversion and wild brutality; the purified animal hatred of that popular enthusiasm, craze even, cockfighting—have conduced to a less genial view of things. So have similar looks at the social life out of which the creativity grows—pervasive factionalism, caste arrogance, collective ostracism, maternal inconstancy. And at some of the transforming events of recent history—the mass suicide with which the ruling classes greeted Dutch takeover in 1906 (they marched, blank and unseeing, dressed like cremation sacrifices, out of their palaces, directly into cannons, rifles and swords); the mass murder, peasants killing peasant in a cry of "communism," after Sukarno's fall in 1965...Helms's flames still exist alongside his towers, his falling wives alongside his rising doves, his barbarous spectacles alongside his gay picnics. And they seem as inseparable from one another as ever" (1983: 53).

However, the half-hearted attempt to differentiate between different genres of violence does little to de-theatricalise the image of Bali. Indeed, the highly evocative

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[1] See, for instance Geertz (1983), (1995) and (2001).

[2] Inglis: "*Negara* matters so much because, at a time when the engines of privilege command these instruments of spectacle we designate the mass media, then more than ever a poetics or a semiotics of power is called for...in order to discover what on earth is going on" (2000: 170). Contrast this with Barth on Geertz's interpretation of the *puputan* (the suicidal march of the Balinese court, ceremonially dressed, into the bullets of the Dutch army):

> When Geertz chooses the theatre model to interpret this self-destruction of Balinese kings and retainers, I submit that the reasons have little to do with a Balinese construction, but derive from Western sensibilities: we are invited to see pageant because we cannot be made to feel fear.

descriptions and closing sentiments only serve to recuperate these widely divergent phenomena into a grislier, but no less exotic corollary of the paradigm of the aesthetic idyll. Arguably, the whiff of danger actually enhances the mystique, and leaves the reader all the more convinced of Bali's beguiling powers of performance.

Having noted Bali's significance for the way in which culture has come to be studied and understood – primarily but not solely in Euro-America – in the last half-century, and the importance of theatricality in its characterization, this latter aspect now reveals itself to be doubled. For if Geertz's work on the infusion of theatre into life and spectacle into government largely traces a unidirectional process, then the other side of the road has been no less well traveled. That journey began at the Exposition Coloniale in Paris in 1931, when Antonin Artaud saw a programme of Balinese performance at the Dutch pavilion, and had a vision of life coming crashing into art.

'On the Balinese Theatre', the first article to be written in a series that would become *The Theatre and its Double*, is a highly impressionistic account of a performance form whose effects and dynamics Artaud held to lie in direct contrast to those of the Western theatre he so reviled:

> "Those rippling joints, the musical angle the arm makes with a forearm, a falling foot, an arching knee, fingers that seem to come loose from the hand, all this is like a constant play of mirrors where human limbs seem to echo one another...Our theatre has never grasped this gestured metaphysics nor known how to make use of music for direct, concrete, dramatic purposes, our purely verbal theatre unaware of the sum total of theatre, of everything that exists spatially on the boards or is measured and circumscribed in space, having spatial density (moves, forms, colours, vibrations, postures, shouts) could learn a lesson in spirituality from the Balinese theatre with regard to the indeterminable, to dependence on the mind's suggestive power" (1970 [1938]: 38-9).

Needless to say, Artaud's analysis is an orientalist fantasia, whose more egregious qualities have been neatly parsed by Rustom Bharucha in *Theatre and the World* (1993 [1990]).[3] More recently, Nicola Savarese has contextualised Artaud's experience at the exhibition, noting that the dance that so entranced him was most likely the *Janger*, a relatively simple and unrefined popular form.[4] However, in addition

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These gentle-looking persons do not frighten us, and so we do not pay them the respect of taking their fury, desperation and honour seriously (1993: 223).

[3] While Bhurucha remains sympathetic to Artaud's "rare vision of the theatre" as manifesto, he nonetheless takes it to task for its ahistoricity, reductivity, mystification, misreading, misrepresentation, and fingers it as responsible for the very concept of "oriental theatre", where "performance traditions of the East [have] become mere presences in an amorphous system" (1993 [1990]: 15).

[4] See Savarese (2001). Indeed, writing in the mid-nineties, I Madé Bandem and Fredrik Eugene deBoer go so far as to state that: "*Janger* is a choreographed, rehearsed presentation, in which a variety of

to containing some remarkable performative writing, Artaud's analysis needs to be taken seriously because it contains within it the seeds of a vision of the theatre that was to prove highly influential. In the passage cited above, for example, he draws a series of distinctions that are ostensibly quite pedestrian – verbal theatre versus gestural, musical, "spiritual", in short, *total*, theatre – and represent some of the characteristics that he would go on to enumerate in his practical manifestos of the Theatre of Cruelty. More importantly, each of the qualities Artaud identifies in Balinese theatre *also* speaks of cruelty in the profound sense, as, in his own terms, an "implacable necessity" (1970 [1938]: 80). Hence when he applauds the Balinese use of music for "direct, concrete, dramatic properties", one should not be fooled by the term "dramatic" into thinking he simply means more effective melodies. Instead, Artaud was articulating a theatre in which nothing exists but what is presented on stage, as phrases like "spatial density" and "the mind's suggestive power", testify. What Artaud experienced before the Balinese dancers in 1931 crystallised a crucial point in his vision of what theatre might be: what performs, is.

The influence this insight had on the development of Euro-American theatre practice throughout the twentieth century is documented well enough, and I need not dwell on it here. Needless to say, they have been every bit as influential in this field as Geertz's writings in theorising culture. By way of a brief example, however, it is interesting to note how the Balinese performers who have worked with some of Artaud's most important disciples recount their experiences. I Wayan Lendra, for example, describes three similarities between his own practice and that of Jerzy Grotowski: first, the intimate relationship between people and nature; second, the routine of religious rituals and custom:

> [and] last the way the Balinese people consider art, besides being an entertainment, as a medium of true inner expression, connecting the gods to their worshippers. This is similar to Grotowski's work, in the manner in which he examines how performative arts have the potential to generate higher awareness (1995: 141).

Elsewhere, I Nyoman Catra has written about the process of "dynamic equilibrium" that derives from Balinese cosmology and that he brings to workshops with Eugenio Barba. Whether or not Barba appreciates this quality is unclear, however, in Catra's description of his modus operandi:

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elements from many sources – some Balinese, some pan-Indonesian, and some Western – are brought together" (1995: 97).

> He never tells us what to show him, he just asks us to keep showing him things, until he finds the elements of our work that can be joined together and which fit in harmony with the work of the other artists. This is the mosaic process that leads to the creation of the *Theatrum Mundi* at ISTA (with Ron Jenkins 2002: 60).

What is immediately apparent in both accounts is that the specific skills of the Balinese artists are set to work within the much broader context of a search for universal values of performance and expression. As Grotowski's and Barba's choice of collaborators indicate, the Balinese are perceived as somewhat specialised in this realm.[5]

Between them, then, the work and influence of Geertz and Artaud exemplify the closing of the circle: in the "aesthetic Arcady" of the Western imaginary, life is permeated by theatre, and theatre by life. Such has been the take-up of these ideas in how culture is conceived and theatre made in the West and other parts of the world, that the initial debt to Bali is seldom acknowledged outright. Indeed, in the current critical climate, it is tempting to claim that the suggestive orientalism that underpins the paradigm is enough to discount its relation to a specific source altogether, and it would be preferable simply to let its ever-evolving manifestations in theatre and theory set their own course, untroubled by fast receding matters of provenance. After all, paradigm formation is defined by what Jon McKenzie calls a "movement of generalisation" (2001: 29), and this was unarguably the fate of theatricality over the course of the twentieth century. However, if one looks more carefully at the make-up of the paradigm, two further observations can be made that nuance this response. First, it consists of two parts. The aspect that is reducible to the life-theatre/theatre-life hermeneutic represented by Geertz and Artaud might be termed its *conceptual mode*, and this is by definition generalised. But it should not be forgotten that in Geertz's characterisation of the "exemplary centre", another usage is at work, which concerns the paradigmatic instance, or *paragon*. It is tempting to assume that the process of generalisation enacts a necessary occultation of the paragon, which persists in only the faintest of traces. However, this gives rise to the second observation, which is that, *within* the movement of generalization, there is scope for a range of different relationships between the two components of the paradigm, and this may be what makes it possible to distinguish one paradigm from another. This observation is particularly pertinent in addressing Singapore, which I shall do shortly. Before that,

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[5] Richard Schechner critiques the aspirations of such work in the following terms: "Neither Grotowski's performance archaeology...nor Barba's comparative analysis of Asian and Western genres is likely to come up with anything other than preferences for, and techniques to acquire, specific styles of performing. These may be of artistic merit, but they are not universal in themselves or founded on universal aesthetic principles" (2002: 247).

however, it is important to follow through the implications for the initial example of Bali, since to stop short of identifying the dynamic and developing relationship between the paragon and conceptual mode is to overlook what is one of the most obvious features of its paradigmatic status: its basis in actuality.

Earlier, I distinguished anthropologists and artists from tourists by observing that the first two had extrapolated broader, generalisable theories and practices out of their experiences of Bali. However, it should not be surmised that the essentially commercial interactions of the latter fall outside the purview of the paradigm. Geertz himself admits that Bali's aesthetic reputation "has rather more truth in it than I, at least, professionally immunised against noble savageism, would have thought at all possible" (1983: 53), and it is in tourism that this finds its most complex configuration, as evidenced by the status of local performance in many of its forms.

Tourism took off in Bali in 1924, with the introduction of a regular steamship service from Java, and a determination on the part of the Dutch colonial administration to compensate for Bali's lack of natural commodities (such as spices) by developing a tourist industry. Over the years, the complex interplay of economic, cultural and political imperatives has resulted in what Michel Picard calls Bali's "touristic culture", whereby "culture" has become both the "brand image" of the island, *and* the "identity marker" of its inhabitants: "that which characterises them as a particular ethnic group within the Indonesian multiethnic nation" (1997: 184). In the process, the notion of "culture" has come to refer primarily to aesthetic practices, such as dance performances, in turn leading to modifications in their form and staging context. This process has a long history, as exemplified by the role played in what the Dutch termed the "Balinisation of Bali" (*Baliseering*) by expatriate artists such as the German Walter Spies, in the 1920s and 1930s. Many artists, writers and scientists came to stay with Spies, who regularly commissioned performances in the local villages, and it was in response to such demands that the *Kecak* or "Monkey Dance" was devised. In his own book on dance and drama in Bali, co-written with Beryl de Zoete, and published the same year as *The Theatre and its Double*, Spies notes simultaneously that the *Kecak* "is known to every tourist in Bali" and that "it has lost nothing of the ecstatic ritual character which it had as an accompaniment of the trance-dance *Sanghyang*" (de

Zoete and Spies: 1982 [1938]: 80).[6] I Madé Bandem and Fredrik Eugene deBoer capture the ongoing ambiguity in the status of such work (of which the *Janger*, so captivating to Artaud, was another early example):

> New composite genres were developed in response to the need for intelligible, fast-moving, hour-long performances which did not require the use of actual sacralia. These 'imitation' traditional forms have assumed a life and place of their own in the spectrum of Balinese performance, and have been, to some extent, authenticated through constant repetition (1995: 128).

The way in which the Balinese accommodate the secular and persistent demands of the tourist trade, while retaining the sanctity of their Inner Temple dances and carrying certain authenticating elements over into "new composite genres", is an important example of a people struggling to balance the demands of the market, the state and a sense of identity. It also suggests a mutation of the paradigm of theatricality, where the modernist trappings of "noble savageism" have been fed back into a more reflexive, postmodern paradigm of performativity. This is exemplified in the island's diversified marketing strategy, whereby it has been able to give parts of itself up to rampant commercialisation without compromising the "aesthetic Arcady" brand, a combination that has successfully pulled in both Antipodean sun-seekers and global New Agers on the lookout for a yoga retreat. In consequence, notes Graham Huggan in *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, many Balinese participate in a process of "reciprocal exploitation" within the tourist system by "dramatising their backwardness as a way of fitting themselves in the total design of modern society as attractions" (2001: 196, citing Urry). Huggan goes on to analyse two Australian works of fiction from the early 1990s, both set in Bali, that he characterises as "anti-tourist tourist novels", thereby demonstrating the complexity of the kinds of discourses a varied tourist industry sets in play for all involved.[7] Far from detracting from the "aesthetic concerns" of artists and anthropologists, therefore, the tourism issue has only served to thicken the paradigm of theatricality in Bali with complex and inter-locking layers of self-referentiality on the part of both the Balinese and non-Balinese alike.

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[6] Of the various forms of "*Sang Hyang*" performance, Bandem and deBoer write: "All involve putting one or more dancers into trance by means of incense, chanting and prayers, in order to receive possessing divinities. Inhabited by either divine or demonic spirits, the performers then improvise with the audience, and occasionally with each other, dancing, mimicking animal movements, and in some localities speaking as oracles" (1995: 10).

[7] The novels are *Troppo Man* (1990) by Gerard Lee and *The Edge of Bali* (1992) by Inez Baranay. Huggan writes: "By a law of double negatives, the anti-tourist tourist is reinstated as a tourist *avant la lettre* – one for whom the experience of tourism, conscripted into the service of invoking an exoticist lost past, both legitimises and perpetuates its own 'semiotics of nostalgia'" (199).

On October 12th 2002, when the bombs went off in Kuta, this paradigm suffered a devastating blow. Indeed, it is tempting to write that the paradigm of Bali as exemplary theatrical centre was destroyed on that day, but this is not how paradigms work. All the perceptions and misperceptions described above will continue to hold sway. Indeed, the attempted revitalisation of the tourist trade will most likely redeploy it with renewed vigour, and new manifestations can already be discerned, such as the much-publicised purifying rituals that were enacted at the site in the days following the disaster. However, there is no doubt that something has changed. The "aesthetic Arcady" image has been compromised, and will henceforth always be protested too much.[8] "Paradise Lost" ran the headlines in the days following, and, for all the spurious sentimentalism, they were right. "The ground bass of passionless horror" described by Geertz, "that all but the most sentimental sojourners to the island hear moving amid the loveliness" (1983: 53) made its presence felt in a way that renders even Geertz's portentous prose superfluous, overwhelmed by the politico-religious complexity of the attack and its context, to say nothing of its sheer terror. And while this does nothing to compromise the island's actually existing cultural vivacity, the less fanciful contexts from which the Western imaginary has tended to hold it immune, but within which it has always also participated, have been called to the fore.[9]

2.

If, at this point, my lack of empirical expertise in the Balinese context limits what I am further able to say about it, in light of the present study, reference to the events of 12th October 2002 seems to be an appropriate point to switch focus, and consider the implications of paradigm-formation for Singapore. More specifically, one might ask: if one of the dominant twentieth century paradigms of theatricality has been compromised, what new paradigms are arising to take its place? More pointedly: on October 12th 2002, did Singapore become the Bali of the twenty-first century?

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[8] See, for example, this telling extract from an interview with a Balinese hotel magnate that appeared in the business magazine, the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, two weeks after the bombing: "'I still hope the tourists come back,' says Wiranatha quietly, almost as though trying to convince himself. 'Terrorism can destroy a building, but it can't destroy the calm, culture and beauty of Bali'" (Dhume 2002: 63).

[9] Writing in 2001 with some prescience, Huggan analyses the tourist dynamic in Bali as follows: "Tourism creates the illusion of converting suffering into spectacle – even death can be aestheticised, treated as a spectator sport. Yet tourism, far from protecting its paying customers, makes them vulnerable; it creates an environment of misunderstanding that can easily transform into conflict. The 'exotic' world of Bali is thus a world on guard, on *edge*" (2001: 203). For an authoritative survey of the complex political and ideological context of the Bali bombing, see the essays collected in Ramakrishna and Tan (2003).

For reasons already discussed in the Introduction, the question is not as outlandish as it may otherwise appear. The coincidence of the Esplanade opening and the Bali bombing marked a moment of historical instability, as the mixed messages on the front page of the next day's *Sunday Times* amply demonstrate. There, in that complex, multiple, disjunctive space that the newspaper almost materialized, in the vague, still unfocused blur of history, I want to posit that something new is taking shape: "theatricality" in Bali is becoming "performance" in Singapore. If this is so, then it has significant implications for understanding Singapore theatre.

That the Esplanade subsequently became totemic of national performance and performativity has already been discussed: but how does this fit into the broader idea of paradigm-formation? Picard's analysis of Bali's "touristic culture" suggests that a superficial, compromising and limiting brand *also* gives rise to a sense of identity, the valuing of artistic prowess, and the ongoing vitality of indigenous cultural forms. In Singapore, however, it is the Esplanade itself, and a nebulous concept of "the arts", that perform. The precise form the work takes is subservient to the "buzz" it can generate: "performance" in this regard is less concerned with the aesthetic merits of a given event, and more with the extent to which it synthesises a sense of generic creativity. Whereas performativity in Bali is grounded in theatricality, in Singapore, it is performance *in general* that counts: its referent is almost entirely without consequence.

This would suggest an expansion of the Balinese paradigm into a qualitatively different realm of socio-economic activity, where performance does not simply underpin a single industry, but is figured as the basic criterion of survival in a globalised economy. This is nothing new: it forms, for example, one of the key insights in Jean-François Lyotard's 1979 analysis of knowledge production in *The Postmodern Condition*, where he notes that the humanist question "Is it true" is no longer as important as the inherently performative "What use is it?": "In the context of the mercantilisation of knowledge, more often than not this question is equivalent to 'Is it saleable?' – having a performance oriented skill is saleable, being right is not" (1984 [1979]: 51). However, where Lyotard's "report on knowledge" is illustrated largely through abstract "language games", Singapore appears to represent a concrete example, indeed, a paragon, of performativity. Rather than debating the validity of this interpretation directly, however, I wish to cast a critical eye over the ways in which it has recently been formulated, as with Bali, in the Western imaginary. In the closing decade of the last millennium, a

number of western cultural pundits turned their attentions to Singapore in an effort to understand what lessons the scope, pace and ambition of its socio-economic development held for Euro-America. Their designations inevitably postmodernised in preparation for the twenty-first century, in place of Geertz came architect and urban theorist Rem Koolhaas; in place of Artaud, celebrated cyberpunk novelist William Gibson.[10] Between them, they outlined a paradigmatic perspective on Singapore – complete with catchphrases on a par with Geertz's "aesthetic Arcady" – which is consistent in structure with that associated with Bali, while superceding it in both focus and scope.

Accompanied by a host of associatively selected photographs, Koolhaas's "Singapore Songlines" owes a significant debt to Roland Barthes's classic semiotic analysis of "a system" called "Japan", *Empire of Signs* (1970). Indeed, Koolhaas aims simultaneously to update and trump Barthes by identifying Singapore as "perhaps the first semiotic state, a Barthian slate" (1995: 1039). Where Barthes's Japan is above all an intellectual conceit, a fantastical non-West in which the conventional relations between signifier and signified, surface and depth, inside and outside are withheld, Koolhaas ascribes Singapore the realisation in actuality of these ostensibly superficial properties. Tracing urbanisation and development from independence in 1965 onwards, he identifies a project of radical modernisation which, over a period of thirty years, replaced all "contextual remnants" with a "potemkin metropolis" driven by "pure intention". It was precisely Singapore's pitiful social state at independence, he argues, that encouraged and enabled then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's government to envision the island as a "theatre of the *tabula rasa*" and build the nation as if from scratch. The result is a city whose radical beginnings have left it haunted by its own potential impermanence. As such, it is "a city without qualities", entirely subject to the whim of its leaders and planners: "if there is chaos, it is *authored* chaos; if it is ugly, it is *designed* ugliness; if it is absurd, it is *willed* absurdity" (1011). Geertz's Balinese "theatre-state", Koolhaas's analysis would seem to suggest, has become a Singaporean "performance-state". Where the ritual life of the Balinese court was paradigmatic of the social order, so the many projects of the Singaporean government

[10] There have been others. In addition to Phillips (2000), discussed later, one can cite Sudjic (1994), 2Less (1998) and Forbes (1999). It is interesting to note the range of publications in which these articles have appeared, from High Street bi-monthlies (Gibson), specialist magazines (Sudjic) and academic/coffee table hybrids (Koolhaas) to conventional academic collections (Phillips, Forbes) and the online bible of high postmodern theory (2less). While an argument might be made as to the superficiality of the more journalistic examples, I would argue on the contrary that their similarities with conclusions

and its attendant bureaucracy – from social engineering, infrastructure development, and disciplinary hygiene campaigns through to the current push to generate cultural capital – might be said to have produced a population who only become citizens by means of participating in the exemplary performances that are scripted by the state.[11]

Just as Artaud articulated the flipside of Geertz's "life is theatre" coin, so Gibson's observations compliment Koolhaas', although in this case the "performance is life" thrust renders the argument practically double-headed. Experiencing Singapore courtesy of a press junket – the modern equivalent, perhaps, of the Dutch East Indian pavilion at the 1931 Exposition Coloniale – Gibson, like Artaud, is struck by an "implacable necessity" in what he experiences. However, where Artaud saw in the Balinese performance the seeds of a fundamentally liberating Theatre of Cruelty, Gibson sees in Singapore only the oppressive cruelty of bland pragmatism: "There's a certain white-shirted constraint, an absolute humourlessness in the way Singapore Ltd. operates; conformity here is the prime directive, and the fuzzier brands of creativity are in extremely short supply" (1993: 52). Mooching around the city in search of culture, Gibson draws a blank. CD shops could have "been vetted my Mormon missionaries"; bookshops look "as though someone had managed to surgically neuter a W.H. Smith's"; newspapers are "instruments of only the most desirable propagation" (54); the restored Bugis Street area, formerly renowned for its transvestite prostitutes now "has all the sexual potential of 'Frontierland'"; and municipal sculptures "resemble Henry Moore as reconfigured by a team of Holiday Inn furniture designers" (114). It is but a short step, therefore, to concluding that Singapore is its own creative product, or, as Gibson describes it, in simulacral terms, "Disneyland with the death penalty" (52).

While an ability to capture the *zeitgeist* is to be taken seriously in a context such as this one, Gibson's journalistic reportage is inevitably unrefined, and it is necessary to look elsewhere for an articulation of this position that is both logically consistent and

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drawn in the academic investigations points to a widespread consensus on Euro-American interpretations of Singapore's cultural landscape.

[11] This is exemplified by the Singapore government's propensity for educational campaigns, of which there were over two hundred between 1958 and 1995. In a *Straits Times* article on the subject by Susan Long, entitled 'Welcome to Campaign Country', former head of the government press department Basskaran Nair is quoted as saying: "From 'Family Planning' to 'No Spitting' to 'Planting Trees', it was really to socially re-engineer people to become responsible citizens. It was to make them behave and to understand that the law will be enforced fairly and harshly if they did not comply" (Long 2003). The Sars epidemic in 2003 led to a raft of new campaigns, from "Don't Spit" and "Wash Your Hands" through "Eat With Your Family" to "Step Out Singapore" and "Singapore's OK". Other campaigns were launched as correctives to the success of previous ones, as when the "Stop At Two" campaign to encourage

more nuanced, such as that provided by the Singapore-based British academic, John Phillips. Noting of Gibson's critiques that he "fails to really think them through" (2000: 194 n. 25), Phillips nevertheless constructs a similarly imaginative topography of Singapore's socio-cultural landscape, and concludes:

> If there is an essential Singaporean identity apart and distinct from any other, it is that there is manifestly no essential Singapore identity apart and distinct from any other. But this is not to be found expressed, at least not in any direct way, in the writings, the fiction and poetry, the plays or the cinema, the music and dance of Singaporeans. Singapore is rather its own performance. No 'text' from Singapore should be regarded as simply representing Singapore's urban space, for urban space itself in Singapore's chief mode of representation (188).

And there we have it.

3.

Or do we? By using the events of 12 October 2002 as a hinge, it would appear that the paradigm of theatricality in Bali is on its way to being reproduced as a paradigm of performativity in Singapore. However, as the socio-political complexity of the Bali bombing demonstrates, one should always be circumspect about what paradigm formation obscures. In Bali, the attack came as such a shock because the dominant terms of the paradigm were so well established: in Singapore, where the paradigm is arguably in its germinal stages, there remains scope for resisting the over-simplifications that can come with the movement of generalization. To better understand how this might be done, it bears recalling the observation made above that the mechanics of a particular paradigm can be discerned in the relationship between its two components – the paragon and the conceptual mode – and in this regard what is most intriguing about the analyses of Koolhaas, Gibson and Phillips is not that they are insufficiently sensitive to the local conditions of social existence in Singapore, but, on the contrary, they appear to *fit too well*. All three seek, in one way or another, to get some critical purchase on the policies and practices of the PAP government (incumbent since 1959), and by extension on the costs of pegging a sense of humanity and identity so comprehensively to market forces. On Singapore's aspiration to be an information hub without being affected by the content, for example, Gibson writes: "if they prove to be right...They will have proven it possible to flourish through the active repression of free expression. They will have proven that information does not necessarily want to be free" (1993: 115). However, the basic thrust of all three arguments coincides all too closely with the very rhetoric it is aiming to undo.

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population control became "Have Three or More – If You Can Afford It", and, as of the time of writing,

Singapore as a performance paradigm for the twenty-first century? One has only to invoke Goh Chok Tong's reference in his 1999 "Heartlander/Cosmopolitans" speech to Singapore as "an efficient, high performance society" (1999: 40). A more succinct imbrication of performance into the unforgiving networks of the global economy would be hard to find. Indeed, if anything, Goh's invocation of the term far outstrips that of Singapore's Euro-American exegetes, for he skilfully combines economy of usage with a multiplicity of inferences. What, after all, *is* a "high performance society"? One might dismiss it as mere rhetoric: a flashy phrase, full of aspiration, but with no substantial meaning or clear definition. But consider the resonances in context, and it becomes apparent that all the modes of performance that make up what Jon McKenzie calls the three "research paradigms" – cultural, technological and organizational – of the twenty-first century power/knowledge formation known as the "performance stratum" (2001: 18-20), can be discerned. "Performance" suggests a cultural event, a people on display, such as in the spectacular National Day Parade which accompanies the speech; "high performance" suggests a smooth-running top-of-the-range machine, such as the deluxe Mercedes Benz and BMW cars that are so popular amongst the conspicuous consumers of Singapore; "high performance society" suggests a motivated, well-run and efficient social unit, such as that which the PAP aims to produce and govern over.

In this context, *all* performance is bent towards the unambiguous demands of the global economy, such that, when it comes to articulating the dynamics of Singapore, it is striking how the PAP's imperturbable pragmatism comprehensively outstrips more abstracted attempts at theorisation. It is this phenomenon that lies behind Singaporean sociologist Chua Beng Huat's observation that "outsiders don't seem to have a problem reading Singapore, it is the ones who live here who have problems reading this place" (cited in Bharucha 2000b: 7). Moreover, the performance paradigm is particularly susceptible to such elisions, since the performativity that it both presupposes and entails is perfectly matched to an ethos that values deeds so highly above words. As Koolhaas observes, 1965 represented "a showdown between *doing* and *thinking*, won hands down by doing" (1995: 1033). The emergence of the performance paradigm threatens to repeat the feat.

"Romancing Singapore".

The difficulty with theorising Singapore, therefore, is that one runs the constant risk of reproducing the ideological operations of the state, whose primary function, regardless of one's political perspective, has been to generate a highly singularised environment. In such analyses, generalisable conditions spring forth fully formed from Singaporean soil, such that Koolhaas is able to state: "the city represents the ideological production of the past three decades in its pure form" (1011), sentiments that can only vindicate former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's revisionist 1965 statement: "Over 100 years ago, this was a mud-flat, swamp. Today, this is a modern city. Ten years from now, this will be a metropolis. Never fear!" (in Han, Fernandez and Tan 1998: 311).[12] Gibson, meanwhile, is driven to employ ever more rococo similes in a doomed attempt to get a grip on the place ("an infinitely more liveable version of convention-zone Atlanta, with every third building supplied with a festive party hat by the designer of Leow's Chinese Theatre" (1993: 53)), just as the government has figured Singapore as a conglomeration of a whole host of incommensurable – not to say fanciful – precedents, including Sparta, Athens, Venice, Israel, Switzerland and now, a "Renaissance City". Finally, Phillips's claim that nothing represents Singapore but Singapore itself chimes perfectly with the aspirations of the government's "Remaking Singapore" committee to effect qualitative socio-political renewal from the inside-out.[13]

What is distinctive about the paradigm of performance in Singapore, therefore – and by contrast with the example of Bali – is that it is unitary: instead of a split between the paradigm as paragon and as conceptual mode, it is instantiated in the form of a *generalised specificity*. Koolhaas writes:

> In a delirium of transformation the island is turned into a petri dish: gigantic clearances, levelings, extensions, expropriations create laboratory conditions for the importation of social and architectural cultures that can be grown under experimental protocols, without the presence of anterior substance. Singapore is turned into a test bed of the *tabula rasa* (1995: 1035).

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[12] The enduring rhetorical power of these sentiments was underlined in August 2003 by their *re*-revisionist usage in Goh Chok Tong's National Day Rally Speech: "Out of nothing, we have created a miracle. Out of a barren piece of land, we have created a thriving global city. We will never let Singapore return to nothing." (Goh 2003)

[13] Explanatory remarks from the Media Release of the Remaking Singapore Committee, June 2003:

> The Remaking Singapore Committee (RSC) was formed in February 2002 with the objective of complementing the Economic Review Committee's (ERC) work through a review of social, political and cultural policies, programmes and practices...[T]he Committee consulted extensively with people from all walks of life...This was to fulfil the Committee's aim of engaging all Singaporeans and harnessing their ideas to remake Singapore...The Committee was involved in over 65 consultation sessions, reaching out to more than 10,000 Singaporeans. The Committee also received over 1,200 inputs over e-mail (RSC 2003: www).

The key phrase here is "without the presence of anterior substance", which is indicative of the perception of Singapore both by its "Western unriddlers" and own ideologues as a singularity: something that generates the medium of its own existence, to the eventual exclusion of other existences. In official narratives, this is exemplified by the 'Singapore Story', which is both the title of the first volume of Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs, and the name of an interactive exhibition held at the Singapore History Museum in 1997, which narrativized Singapore's national development, and was compulsory viewing for all school children. The exhibition was launched in conjunction with a "National Education" curriculum, whose content and implementation was overseen by then Deputy Prime Minister (now Prime Minister) Lee Hsien Loong. At its inception, he noted that National Education "is to do with a special story, our story. It is the story of Singapore, how we came to be one nation. We did not start off with this goal, or even as one people. Nobody imagined this would be the outcome" (1997: 4-5). The implicit tension in this observation lies at the heart of Singapore's exceptionalism. The Singapore Story back-forms history such that the present is understood always to have been its teleological end-point, while the need constantly to re-affirm this condition is derived from it having emerged against the odds, and being continuously under threat. Hence, when Lee Hsien Loong explained that the Story was not "an idealised legendary account or a founding myth", but "objective history, seen from a Singaporean standpoint" (11), the broader and much more difficult question that arises is whether the word "Singaporean" can be understood independently of party-political interests – specifically, those of the PAP. If not, then it is both objective history (because there are no alternative perspectives) *and* an idealised founding myth.[14]

In all three of the analyses of Singapore discussed above, there is a complicity with the rhetoric of performative pragmatism propounded by the PAP, which raises the question arises as to how much they *produce* the situation they apparently describe.

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[14] The gradual erasure of alternative historical narratives is evident in many aspects of Singaporean life, from the razing of much of the historical built environment, to the highly partisan priorities that govern the content of the oral history documentation stored in the National Archives. Little wonder, then, that this figure of hermeticism extends through a range of discourses on Singapore. Michael Leifer's analysis of Singapore's foreign policy takes his cue from Lee Kuan Yew to state that the "pairing of vulnerability with excellence serves to register the basis of Singapore's exceptionalism and its distinctiveness" (2000: 12). In an analysis of the PAP government's unwillingness to reveal financial data regarding national savings-based investments and the earnings of Government Linked Companies, Hugo Restall of the *Asian Wall Street Journal* wrote: "It won't be easy to change this preference for secrecy, because Singapore's system is an organic whole. There is no viable opposition in parliament to hold the government's toes to the fire and force it to divulge information. And secrecy and control over the economy helps the government maintain its political control" (2003: www). Meanwhile, Janadas Devan has identified a tension between Singapore's history as city and nation which means that: "Singapore occurred, and continues to sustain itself, as a result of recurrent acts of forgettings. Forgetting is the condition of Singapore" (1999: 22).

Koolhaas's evocative language ("delirium", "gigantic") and present tense narrative betray a performative quality to his analysis that suggests it is more than interpretive. In this regard, there is a certain rashness in attempting to trump Barthes, since in ascribing to the very social and physical fabric of Singapore the kinds of superficialities that Barthes is careful to ascribe only to himself, Koolhaas removes the safety check that would prevent him misrecognizing his own act of theorizing for the thing itself. Koolhaas projects onto Singapore precisely the abstracting agency he himself employs. The "theater of the tabula rasa" is simply his architect's-eye view across the drawing board, the "test bed" nobody's but his own. Gibson suffers a cruel fate, as the science-fiction writer who, confronted with a vision of the future in the present, is unable to see it for what it is. As his similes proliferate, he betrays a desperation to liken Singapore to somewhere he already knows: and yet Singapore is not Disneyland with the death penalty – America is. Another foreclosure is enacted by Phillips's analysis, when he writes: "My approach in this article is to read Singapore's text not as a representation of Singapore itself – the text of Singapore – but rather it is to read the text that Singapore is" (2000: 189). This begs the question: *is* Singapore a text? Again there is misrecognition. Phillips takes the totalizing process of textualization to be an effect of his object of study, rather than the somewhat limiting interpretive method he brings to bear upon it.

4.

Towards the end of the previous chapter, I noted the usefulness of Edward Said's concept of worldliness in providing a coherent interpretive framework for addressing the aesthetic encounter with art in cosmopolitan terms. One of the necessarily paradoxical conditions for making reference to Said's theories is that they are most valuable when held at a distance. Having now put some ground between his reflections on humanist literary criticism in America, and my own concern with theatrical performance in Singapore, we are now in a position to specify the conditions under which what I am calling cosmopolitan aesthetics might be identified and articulated in the cultural and aesthetic context that this thesis addresses.

The first point to be made is that, taking the broader view, "Singularpore" is not as comprehensively singular as an analysis of its cultural and domestic political profile

may suggest. As the academic and former Nominated Member of Parliament[15] Simon Tay points out: "In many respects, globalization in the Singaporean context has emphasized and indeed welcomed external influences in the spheres of trade, investment and commerce. In contrast, influences on politics and society have often been subject to criticism and screened out as being 'interference' in the state's domestic and internal affairs" (2001: 304). This is well illustrated by the official attempt to reconcile two global reports that were published in the same week late in 2004. That year's A. T. Kearney/*Foreign Policy* Globalization Index named Singapore as the second most globalized nation in the world (after Ireland), while the other report, by Reporters Sans Frontières placed it 147th out of 167 nations in terms of press freedom. Responding to a question from a Non-Constituency MP in Parliament,[16] Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts Lee Boon Yang noted that while the result of the first demonstrated "high regard for Singapore as a cosmopolitan city on the global stage", the second misunderstood Singapore's "media model". Echoing Lee Hsien Loong's 1997 assertion of the National Education programme's objectivity, Lee Boon Yang noted: "Our model is that of a free and responsible press whose role is to report news accurately and objectively to Singaporeans". The *Straits Times* article in which he was quoted went on: "The model had evolved out of Singapore's special circumstances, he said. It had enabled the media here to strengthen the resilience of Singaporeans in the face of intense economic competition, terrorism [*sic*] threats, infectious diseases and social ills". Finally, and somewhat at odds with his comments on Singapore being held in high regard on the global stage, Lee stated that the media's role in the national effort was more important than "to gain the favours of international ranking associations" (Latif 2004).

The fact that such inconsistencies can happily co-exist within the same *Straits Times* report, and that Lee Boon Yang can use the coincidence of the reports to imply a *causal* link between economic openness and media control, demonstrates that Singapore is most intensively singularized in the realm of culture, politics and society precisely because that it where the bulk of the city state's significations and representations are forged. Singapore's economic profile may be more transparent,

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[15] Recognising the shortcomings of almost total parliamentary dominance, the PAP introduced the Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) and Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) categories in a bid to compensate for a lack of opposition voices in debates. NCMPs are the "first runners-up" in elections, and the scheme ensures a minimum of three opposition MPs in Parliament. NMPs are public figures representing a range of interest groups, and there can be a maximum of nine. Both have limited voting rights.

[16] See note 15.

dynamic, cosmopolitan (in Adam Smith's sense of the word) and relational, but the fact that it is expressed primarily in statistics and the minutiae of Free Trade Agreements means that it does not carry the same weight in the realm of meaning-making. This is borne out by the fact that the government has been most willing to make concessions on social control where the markets have required it. For instance, the Censorship Review of 2003 was notable for liberalising the media industry (for example by introducing a new "18" minimum age certificate for some films that would previously have been classified as "21"), while failing to make any substantial changes to the restrictions on locally-produced artworks such as plays, despite a 750-signature submission to the Panel by the Arts Community.[17]

"Singularpore" is therefore *sui generis*: it eschews comparison, and allows only the highly regulated interpenetration of other, necessarily more gregarious discourses. It follows that, instead of falling in with the discursive exceptionalism propounded by Koolhaas et al. and the PAP, "Singularpore" must be understood as one of several features that constitute Singapore as a nation state. In other words, the task is to *relate* Singapore, and to explore how this has been done by agencies other than those of the singularizing state. In this study, those agencies take the form of Singapore's theatre-makers, and, in so far as I have identified the centrality of the idea of performance to the constitution of "Singularpore", their work may be said to carry a distinctive force. It is certainly the case that, since the beginning of the nineties, the theatre has been the most high profile and well-attended local art-form, and the primary artistic (in some regards, civil) arena for aesthetic experimentation and the exploration of issues of national and personal identity, social relationships, and sexual and ethnic difference. In the chapters that follow, I trace these and other concerns in the work of a range of artists, through a scalar expansion of forms of social organization, from the nature of the individual and selfhood, through social space and then regional intercultural interactions, to the figuring of the global, and finally to encounters with the environment.

Before that, however, and if my simultaneous and inter-dependent enquiry into "cosmopolitan aesthetics" is to remain viable, it is important to consider in more detail

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[17] The submission was written by Tan Tarn How, then a playwright with TheatreWorks, and circulated online on the local Arts Community egroup. The submission argued for zoning and against pre-performance censorship for plays, and can be accessed on TheatreWorks' website at http//:theatreworks.org.sg

the nuances of the phrase "relating Singapore" and, thereafter, my own role in such a process.

In the doubled and overlapping meaning of the phrase "relating Singapore" lies a description of what the relating agency both *is* and *does*. In turn, this recalls the dialectic of worldliness, as Said describes it, between an artwork being *of* and *in* the world. In so far as a performance relates Singapore to its audience, it does so by bringing something new into their experience that is irreducible to "Singapore" as it existed prior to that performance taking place. In this, the performance is *of* Singapore and, by extension, the world. At the same time, in relating Singapore *to* a range of reference points that may otherwise be circumscribed by the disciplinary mechanisms of "Singularpore", a given performance draws attention to the ways in which Singapore is *in* the world.

At this point, three caveats need to be signalled, whose pertinence will become apparent as the chapters unfold. The first is that to say a given performance relates Singapore to an audience does not necessarily mean that it tells a story *about* Singapore. Rather, that it is made, if not wholly, then at least to some significant degree, in Singapore, for a Singaporean audience, by artists who live and work there. This is in contrast, for example, to an international touring performance, which primarily relates "the world" or another, specified national, ethnic or cultural imaginary, and relates Singapore only tentatively or associatively in the form of thematic or aesthetic resonances (Chapter Four addresses some of these issues in more detail). Second, while I am wary of privileging the relationship between art and the national, there are several reasons why I continue to make reference to Singapore over and above greater and smaller units of discursive and affective identification. These include: the on-going vitality of "Singularpore" as a foil against which alternative renderings need to be articulated; the self-identification of many of the artists discussed here as Singaporeans addressing Singaporean concerns, be it in local, regional or (as in Ong Keng Sen's case, though negatively defined), international contexts; the fact that "Singapore" also names a metropolis (indeed, a "world city") whose discursive and physical boundaries overlap but are not coterminous with those of the nation state (and whose history is longer); and my own foreignness, which, despite my credentials as an "insider" (discussed shortly), means that I will always also perceive the work as if from the outside, and defined by that which I am not, which is, first and foremost, Singaporean. The third caveat acknowledges that the condition of

being both *in* and *of* the world is by no means peculiar to artworks, since the same could arguably be said of all human (and indeed non-human) labour and invention. Rather, it is a case of appreciating that successful and/or provocative artworks – in this case, performances – work to animate rather than subsume that dialectical tension, and in so doing draw attention to the ways in which it is constituted, and hold open the possibility for otherwise habitually suppressed perspectives and experiences to materialize.

Returning now to the implications of "relating Singapore", a number of further points can be made. Although, above, I propose that the best way of countering the totalizing operations of "Singularpore" is by submitting it to relationality, this is not to say that the concept of the singular should be jettisoned altogether. This is because, while one can take issue with, for instance, Phillips' intention to "read the text that Singapore is" for precluding a proper sensitivity to the ways in which social relations, lived experience and artistic (even writerly) expertise play out in the place that Singapore *actually* is, the basic intuition that singularities produce their own terms of reference is one that remains central to an appreciation of aesthetic experience. The singularity of the performance is what constitutes it as *of* the world. Nor, on two counts, does the singular performance (unlike the discursively singularized ideological state) preclude relationality. First, it can be said to operate by a process of self-relation, in which each component is determined by an immanent interaction with those that preceded and those that will follow (and retrospectively delineate) it.[18] As I discussed with reference to Massumi's example of falling and walking, such immanence cannot, however, be sustained indefinitely, for it will invariably be subject to a signifying capture and the re-assertion of the work's "functional context". Rather than seeing this in a negative light, however, it is at this very point of intersection that the cosmopolitan – with all its aforementioned internal tensions between the normative and the experimental, the familiar and the unfamiliar, recognition and misrecognition – begins to take shape. The cosmopolitan mediates between the singular (the *of* the world) and what, for want of a better word, might be termed the "social" (that which is *in* the world), where a different set of externally determined relations comes into play.

In general terms, therefore, one can say that the cosmopolitan potential of a given performance lies in the ways in which this passage from the singular to the social is

negotiated, and whether any aspect of its initially immanent relations is able to renew or invent relations in and with the broader context into which it intervenes. More specifically, where that "broad context" is the highly globalized and partially singularized city state of Singapore, those theatrical performances that can be described as most sensitive to such possibilities operate a twofold process. In relating Singapore (to an audience) by generating an aesthetic singularity, they avoid determination by the social terms of reference laid out by trade-focused "Singapore". In relating Singapore (to independently determined points of reference and comparison) by signalling the local contexts of the work's production and reception, they avoid reproducing the civil and political enervations of ideologically-determined "Singularpore".

Expressed in this abstract and perhaps rather idealised fashion, it might be objected that few theatre practitioners in Singapore (or indeed elsewhere) can reasonably be expected to have either the desire or the *sangfroid* to engage with such apparently stringent processes or to bring about their effects. However, I would reiterate that the interplay of singular and social relations can take many forms, depending on the disposition of a given artist or group of artists, and that it can be investigated, materialized, staged and responded to by audience members without reference to the abstract terminologies I have employed here. Worldliness remains, despite all else, the thing, and in the coming chapters I shall refer only infrequently to such general frameworks. Nevertheless, my concern throughout is guided by a desire – perhaps, an obligation – to explore both the affective force of the performances that have, for one reason or another, provoked me to the extended engagement that a written response represents, and to return constantly to the question of what it means for such performances to take place where and when they do. The ways in which each practice or event develops and deploys different kinds or styles of self- and social relations will become apparent in due course.

That my study considers a range of performance styles, as well as touching on events and practices that are performative in a more diffuse sense of the term, is, in itself, evidence of the catholicity of experience in which the cosmopolitan, as an expansive relationality rivalling the global, necessarily inheres. However, in light of my discussion of totalization in the preceding chapter, I cannot be too wary of the risk of instituting a

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[18] This rather compressed point is explained in more detail in Chapter One, with reference to a Ivan

similarly comprehensive or over-determining theory. While it is my intention, therefore, to assess the ways in which the singular and the social are mobilised to produce a cosmopolitan aesthetic in the work I shall address, I equally need to register that this is not all they do. To do so by seeking to explain what else they do would again be totalizing folly. A more manageable and appropriate tack is to consider in more detail the factors that cause my own analyses to be partial. In considering how I relate and relate *to* the relations I am myself identifying in this thesis, I am less concerned with showing that all roads lead to a cosmopolitan aesthetics, than, on the contrary, that cosmopolitanism begins at home (wherever, or whatever, that may be).

5.

It is customary, at moments such as these, to enact the ceremonial performance of positionality. And yet, in the broader context of exploring cosmopolitanism, and in light of the specific project of articulating theatre's relational potential, a direct answer to the question of "where I'm coming from" cannot and should not be given. This ritual profession, with which the critically literate are advised to preface their analyses, strikes me as too often being an empty one: writing with an eye to performance, it is invariably revealed as a *mea culpa* that leaves the subsequent analysis untouched and uninflected. Arguably, however, the problem is not that such a practice is unnecessary, but that it suffers from not being taken seriously enough. It is for this reason that when it is, it appears disingenuous in intention, and clumsy in execution. Positionality tends only to be professed when there is a demonstrable difference between the identity of the writer and the location of their objects of research – in other words, in scenarios that are to a greater or lesser degree *ethnographic*. However, as L. P. Hartley famously reminds us, the foreign is not alone in being "another country": the past is, too, and so are aspects of the present, with aesthetic experience no exception. Cosmopolitanism sometimes ends, as well as begins, at home, and is no less transformative for so doing.

In my own case, citing my nationality, gender and class in isolation from other factors and circumstances addresses just one aspect of my investigation into theatrical performance in Singapore, and that only superficially. Meanwhile, the phrase "cosmopolitan aesthetics" contains at least two sites of enquiry whose conditions and effects I would wish to comment on without co-opting, *and they cannot be separated.*

Heng's performance in *Emily of Emerald Hill*.

This is not to say that the encounter with a foreign place and the encounter with performance practice are the same. But in so far as I am writing about both of them in this thesis (and that, at some level, both are on display in my choice of the accompanying images), then it is my writerly identity and practice that requires most careful attention: out of that, it is my hope that the intertwined objects of my enquiry will emerge with sufficient sensitivity to the ethics of address.

To achieve this, I wish to start by considering the conundrum of a situation that I have found myself in several times over in recent years, both in contexts that are framed as academic (for instance, research seminars) and creative (such as practical workshops). The situation arises when I am introduced to other people (foreign and Singaporean) by Singaporean friends or associates as "more Singaporean than the rest of us". The description is double-, maybe triple-edged. First, the joke (such as it is) rests on the fact that I do not *look* Singaporean. It is a visual gag that implicitly acknowledges the inalienable (felicitous term!) fact of my foreignness. In this, I am reminded that I am always encountered first as a foreigner (and on top of that, as an *ang moh*,[19] and on top of that, as a national of the former colonial power), even if subsequent interactions cause a modification of the initial judgement. But then, what is it that makes a foreigner "more Singaporean than the rest of us"? I speculate that in my own case it refers to one or several of the following; a detailed interest in Singapore's domestic affairs; a relative fluency in common conversational topics; a facility with Singlish[20] and ability to code-switch according to the social situation; a reasonably comprehensive knowledge of the geography of the city and its bus routes; the frequency with which I initiate conversations about things, events and identities Singaporean; the corresponding (and somewhat lamentable) frequency with which I will offer my own *opinion* on things, events and identities Singaporean; Permanent

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[19] *Ang moh*, meaning "red hair" in the Hokkien dialect, is local slang for "Caucasian". Inevitably, certain stereotypes are attached to the figure of the *ang moh* man, often concerning a causal relationship between his perceived wealth and attractiveness to local women. Other stereotypes and/or prejudices are particular to specific ethnicities or dialect groups: amongst the Cantonese, for instance, it is widely held that *gwai lo* ("White devils") smell. Perhaps more interesting, however, is the way in which such stereotypes mix with a postcolonial sensibility to influence Singaporeans' self-identity. In early 2005, a letter to the *Straits Times* complaining of preferential treatment for "Caucasians" elicited a number of sympathetic responses. One respondent wrote: "Why the bowing and scraping before Caucasians? I suspect that it is because we suffer from, if I may coin a word for it, Caucasianphobia. It is time to expunge the phobia. After all, we are citizens of a First World nation, no longer the diffident, cringing people we used to be during colonial times. We should be proud of our social standing" (Oei 2005).

[20] A widely used local pidgin combining English with Malay and Mandarin vocabulary and grammatical constructions. It is most commonly manifested in the use of emphatic additions to the beginnings (for example, aiyah, aiyoh, wau lau) and endings (lah, leh, lor, ma, meh) of sentences. Later chapters include lines from plays that include these terms. For a more comprehensive usage, see the excerpt of *untitled man number one* in Chapter Two, note 21.

Residency visa status, a Singaporean wife and a daughter with dual British/Singaporean nationality; a history of involvement in and attendance at theatrical performances; and a specialised knowledge of Singapore theatre and the critical literature on Singapore in various fields. All this, of course, qualifies me as "Singaporean" in an inevitably superficial way. For here the joke turns back on itself: the descriptive, fact-based and analytic components of my cultural competence are arguably *compensations* for those more properly Singaporean attributes that I lack: not only the memories, *habitus*, lived and shared experiences and ethnic and national identifications, but also the stereotypical traits that Singaporeans ascribe themselves: *kiasuism* [acquisitiveness], *kiasi-ism* [risk aversion] and a studied political apathy.[21] In contrast, my ability to reel off the names of the Singaporean Cabinet and write play-scripts that make reference to arcane details of Singaporean social life (that I must then clarify for the performers) is what marks me as both outsider and insider: "more [and therefore less] Singaporean than the rest of us [and therefore not one of us]".

That there are degrees of Singaporeanness, and that these can be determined by a range indexes of familiarity and association is of less importance here than this unresolvable paradox. Rather, therefore, than going on to assess the extent to which my cultural competence justifies my analyses, I would like to focus on my relationship with the two complementary areas of activity that are most pertinent to the study at hand: the theatre scene, and the critical environment that arises from it. In line with the imperatives of a "cosmopolitan aesthetics", I find myself simultaneously implicated in and at odds with both fields in ways that cause these multiple identifications as foreigner and Permanent Resident, practitioner and writer, to intertwine in a fashion that is both instructive and salutary.

What is this entity I have called "Singapore theatre"? Is the play the thing? Susan Melrose has taken issue with such reifications and the textualist assumptions upon which they are rhetorically based, in favour of understanding theatre in the professional sphere as a "heterogeneous assemblage" (2002a: 7), whose apparatuses and operators work over time and through a series of combinatory intersubjective encounters to produce a live event. Moreover, although the foregrounding *in* the event of "irresistible" aspects of live human performance tends towards the erasure of "other *work* vital to theatre production" (8), this does not, for all that, reduce such systems to

[21] In the Hokkien dialect, *kiasu* means "afraid to lose", and *kiasi*, "afraid to die".

"the show", whose effects are so often misrecognized in performance analysis as causes. Referring to the "writerly-readerly 'textual turn'" of late twentieth century critical orthodoxies, Melrose writes:

> Can we imagine, in its place, a genuinely scenographic and company-specific mise en scene, which invents itself in the workshop or rehearsal processes, responding to emergent premises specific to the logics of theatre production and the factors contingent upon the workshop situation and its participants themselves, to insights emerging "on the ground" and "in the event" with a production date in view? (9).

Given my already-stated concern, at least in part, with the singular qualities of theatrical performance that exemplify those erasing tendencies of the event described by Melrose, and with the subsequent responsibilities of the critic-as-spectator, it is clear that Melrose's exacting criteria lie somewhat outside this thesis' terms of reference. This is not to say, however, that the practices and situations to which Melrose draws attention are absent from the "assemblage" that I am calling "Singapore theatre", and in terms of my own writerly engagement with the material, I am thereby challenged to acknowledge at least some of the guiding circumstances.

With this in mind, I propose to invoke a set of relations whose vagueness in constitution is matched only by their importance in determining the means by which a given performance is produced and received in Singapore. This is the complex web of relationships between the many actors (in both the theatrical and sociological senses) involved in the on-going – and often rather mundane – task of sustaining and developing what might now be termed that *process* that I have been referring to as "Singapore theatre". While the boundaries are indeterminable and the mutability and connectivity of the relations unquantifiable, their identifiable extensivity approximates to what is known in casual parlance in Singapore, as elsewhere, as "the scene". These connections are inevitably more dense amongst those whose professional status, social capital, longevity or peer esteem locates them at the nominal centre of the scene, and are sustained by a host of occasions for interaction, including: collaborations, rehearsals, performances, openings, social events both informal (parties) and formal (fundraising drives, award ceremonies), Internet discussions, publicity stunts, and collective advocacy. What is most important is that each new performance acts upon this situation in such a way as to be both informed by it, and to alter its constitution. Indeed, viewing a given performance in terms of this web of relationships means that rather than conceiving of it as an entity in its own right, the performance is understood as an occasion for the strengthening of some relationships,

the weakening of others (which is also a form of strengthening, in so far as all developments are accretions) and the forging of new ones. While such a perspective obscures many of the affective and signifying qualities of the event of performance, it nevertheless draws attention to the ways in which any new production is automatically subject to a kind of interpretive bleed, whereby its significance always-already exceeds what is given to be seen on a particular night in a particular theatre. It is by means of such networks of affiliation and influence that the interpretive scope of a given production comes to be extended into otherwise unforeseen areas.

Conceiving of Singapore theatre in this way obliges me to acknowledge that my own engagement with a given performance (such as those discussed in the coming chapters) is based first and foremost on my participation in this network as a practitioner. In my creative work with spell#7 and TheatreWorks, I have collaborated with a range of artists, and encountered many more, such that my own practice constitutes an integral part of the scene that I now address as a writer. This has a number of implications for the writing process itself.

First, to a significant degree, I encounter performances and performers as an "insider": a fellow practitioner, subject to the same administrative and creative vicissitudes and opportunities as I see being played out on stage. "The process of reading begins and ends in the reader", claims Said (2004: 66), but what he does not develop is the fact that it does not end in *reading*. Interpretation marks the process by which the putative reader becomes a writer, and it is at least partially *as* a writer that the reader reads. I am keen to avoid lengthy speculations on exactly what it is about my directing experience that determines how I watch theatre. On the other hand, it does not do to mystify such processes, and it is with a view to elucidating a general point about their influence that I return to Spitzer's account of the "click" that announces the falling-into-place of the material under analysis. Once that has happened, he writes, "we see indeed, that to have read is to have read, to understand is equivalent to having understood" (in Said: 66). Again, what is omitted is that such understandings only properly come to fruition in the writing. Once *this* is understood, it can be posited that the "click" emerges as much out of writerly empathy as readerly attention. Indeed, might not the interpretive "click" reproduce or resonate with that which initiated the

original process of creation on the part of the artist or artists?[22] Watching a performance, I recognise certain actions or structures as solutions to problems with which I myself am familiar, am surprised by unexpected outcomes, or am thrilled when the sense of propriety I bring to my own work is transgressed in that of others. Moreover, this recognition is more often than not experienced as a pleasurable intensification of my engagement with the work, with analysis ensuing only if a second point of recognition, a period of contemplation, or an unforeseen connection draws the moment back to my reflexive attention.

At the same time, the very awareness of my insiderness also draws attention to the ways it is compromised. I often attend events – including several discussed in this thesis – as an invitee. It is as a potential hirer that I was invited to the Esplanade opening fireworks, for instance, and it is as a fellow artist that I get complimentary tickets for performances (and return the favour when I have the opportunity). Since I am never invited to an event on the strength my writing a thesis, to then go on to reflect on them in this context is already to set myself somewhat at odds with the scene, since I am using its combination of vested commercial interests and sincere goodwill for "outside" purposes. I am not alone in this, for there is no doubting that everyone turns the scene to their "outside" advantage in one way or another. In so doing, however, I cannot help but be reminded of the other ways in which I am an outsider, even when treated as an insider, and this is where an awareness of my foreignness resurfaces. Although I have watched and made theatre in Singapore since 1997, I cannot count what I have seen as my heritage, nor can I assume that my future has as much in common with my collaborators' as theirs with each others'. I cannot write Singlish dialogue, and my cultural sensibilities are severely curtailed by my monolingualism. That these observations are self-evident is of less importance than that they remind me of all the "unknown unknowns" that I come up against or see through without realising. In many of the performances that I go on to discuss in this thesis, there comes a point of resistance to or tension with my analysis. I have sought to mark them where I can: it would be inappropriate to try and do more.

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[22] A related point is touched on by Susan Melrose when, addressing "professional or expert art-practitioners" and considering how they might respond to the published output on so-called "practice theory", she identifies "a moment of recognition, when something you sense, in reading practice-writing, seems to *achieve for you a degree of empirical fit with your own experience of complex arts-expert practices*" (2004: www).

In light of such associations and interactions, it is to the figure of the invitee that I am drawn in my writerly identifications. Redolent of the cosmopolitan tropes of hospitality and refuge, framing myself in such a way allows for the interaction of several dynamics that characterise my engagement with and responses to Singapore theatre. I am invited (by administrators, by artists, by the work) primarily in my capacity as a practitioner, but this does not mean I respond in kind. I am not writing here "as a practitioner" or "in a director's voice", but rather, following Gregory Ulmer, as "tourist-theoretician". As Melrose notes, Ulmer claims that the Greek figure of the *theor* was first of all a kind of tourist, who would return from distant lands to deliver an oral performance detailing all that he had observed, and speculating upon its meaning. Developing this, Melrose proposes "that we interpret 'theory' as a set of actions, performed by somebody competent, which are themselves complex *acts* of contemplation, speculation and reflection, and attributable to a particular signature, rather than the outcome of these" (2002b: 4). Melrose's own concerns lie with re-valuing the work of the performer in less divisive and more appropriate terms than the theory/practice binary. However, the implications hold equally for writing: I need not write here "as a practitioner", for to "theorize" the events to which I have been invited (both literally and figuratively), is already to express a response that is informed by a practitioner's sensibility. It is such a sensibility that I hope emerges over the course of the following chapters: not in a way that is identifiably a "directorial insight", but rather in certain persistent concerns and sensitivities, in the personal voice and writing style that threads through the material, and in the register- and tense- shifts that perform a range of responses, depending on my understanding of my own relation to the work at any given moment.

Lest the persistence of the style once again threaten a covert totalization, a further point to make about the figure of the invitee is that it entails humility. For while one is invited not only as a guest, but as one who brings with them certain qualities, these qualities will never amount to a repaying of the debt incurred by the inviter's hospitality. Nor can one claim that a written response such this one settles the score. On the contrary, the most it can achieve is to give a better accounting of what I owe. At the same time, there are other grounds on which, rightly or wrongly, I feel some degree of identification with the inviters, for the inextricable fact of my creative involvement in the Singapore theatre scene has an inevitable bearing on how I read the critical literature that addresses it. There are three broad areas into which this literature falls, and each

offers a different configuration of the writer-resident-practitioner-foreigner relations that have exercised me thus far.

First, and in addition to practitioners inviting each other to watch their performances, there is a general trend amongst the more established and critically engaged companies for inviting writers to write on or around the work. Locally-produced discourse for primarily local consumption takes many forms that are often less formal than academic protocols demand. This includes not only programme notes and informal commentaries, but also coffee-table books like Clarissa Oon's informative but inevitably partial *Theatre Life! A History of English-language Singapore Theatre in Singapore through the* Straits Times *(1958-2000)* (2001), and the collection of tributes, images and archival material that make up the commemorative book *Kuo Pao Kun: And Love the Wind and Rain* (Kwok and Teo 2002). More academic approaches are found in two books edited and published by theatre company The Necessary Stage (TNS), and a non-peer-reviewed journal, *focas: Forum on Contemporary Art and Society*, whose first three issues (out of the current five) were funded by the company.[23] As the subtitles of the two collections of commissioned essays – *Nine Lives: 10 Years of Singapore Theatre* (The Necessary Stage 1997) and *Ask Not: The Necessary Stage in Singapore Theatre* (Tan and Ng 2004) – indicate, the aim of the company has been simultaneously to invite reflections on their own artistic practice, and to have it contextualised in relation to broader trends in Singapore theatre. As such, both books include valuable essays on a range of local topics, and the shift from a preponderance of round-table and interview transcripts (along with several essays) in the first book to a full complement of fifteen academic essays (and three interviews) in the second, reflects the growing professionalization and/or specialization of critical practice in Singapore, and the ways in which, while artists continue to take the initiative in commissioning analysis, they are increasingly leaving it to writers to articulate. Nevertheless, such conditions of production suggest a degree of continuity between creative practice and critical reflection that includes a strong sense of how issues raised in the theatre connect with those in other realms, such as in civil society. In consequence, the writers evidence a strong sense of being answerable to both the work and the artists, and while this runs the risk of sycophancy or a softening of critical positions, it also produces a sense of active engagement and dialogue.

This is well illustrated by a series of exchanges across the publications that address the process, pertinent to many companies in Singapore, by which "invitation" slides into "coercion". In *Nine Lives*, for instance, TNS artistic director Alvin Tan described the company's collaborative processes as a "methodology of resistance; resisting the rationalised mindsets ingrained in cultures of both contemporary urban lifestyles and the production structure of the traditional Western theatre model" (1997: 266). In the same publication, Lee Weng Choy critically assessed this claim, noting the ways in which TNS tended to ascribe collaborative status to communities (such as the elderly or the mentally ill) whose voices they had appropriated, and concluding that they had yet to "fully confront what it means to represent others, what it means to represent oneself" (1997: 223). In an interview with Lucy Davis in *focas 2*, Alvin Tan articulated a development of his position, noting that "there are larger goals than the collaboration process itself" (2001: 135), and went on to expand at length about TNS's interactions with a range of civil society groups, and their work in "capacity building" and mediating and negotiating between artists, audiences and government agencies. However, he also acknowledged that the company's less vocal politically oppositional stance by comparison with past years could lead some observers to conclude that "we may appear compromised today" (147). This shift from initiating collaboration to being collaborat*ed* by the state is one taken up at Alvin Tan's request in *focas 3* by TNS board member Tan Chong Kee, who asserted that TNS's "co-option" following their climb-down in a stand-off over Forum Theatre[24] merely dramatised a situation that all artists (and audiences and critics) find themselves in in Singapore, and the aim must be to work towards "artistic autonomy" from within "the reality of co-option" (2002: 322). Tan sought to identify a range of aesthetic strategies by which the company addressed this situation, but his observation that the critic must assume a sympathy with the "always already co-opted" audience member so they can discover their "own private meaning in a moment of vulnerability" (321), along with his statement in a later essay in *Ask Not* that the company's "aesthetic realisation that the state can be absent" represented a "psychological maturity...akin to the moment when a child realises that she can live independently on her own" (2004: 87) is evidence enough that the rhetoric of "co-option" may be actively reproduced by the writer *on* co-option to an unsettling degree. Taking issue, in turn, with Tan Chong Kee's analysis, Ray Langenbach argued in *Ask Not* that while "artistically autonomous space" had not existed in Singapore civil society since the seventies, state agencies were equally

[23] *focas* is now published annually on an independent basis by its original editor, Lucy Davis.

subject to the constraining logics of their own censorious actions, thereby making them vulnerable to a kind of counter-co-option "based on the contiguity of autonomous agents in a circulating economy of cultural commodities" (2004: 217).

These kinds of on-going debates between artists and writers who, as the theme of co-option amply demonstrates, often write from "inside" the issues under discussion, clearly function in a different way from the second category of critical literature: the two book-length studies of contemporary Singapore theatre, which were both written and published outside Singapore by non-Singaporeans. In the early pages of *Theater and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore*, the American Bill Peterson, who lectured at the National University of Singapore from 1992-1995, is at pains to distance himself from the "minutiae" of "the relatively small field of theatre in a small island nation" to look instead "at a particular developmental model through the lens of culture and, more specifically, through theater" (2001: xi). In a series of themed chapters, he goes on to survey a range of performance trends from the mid-nineties, and explores the ways in which they brought to light issues of national identity, gender and sexuality, commodification and cultural negotiations. As such, Peterson's achievement is to provide a systematic demonstration of the ways in which theatrical practice and political discourse were intertwined during a period when there was an official tendency to separate out "economic necessity" and the "luxury" of culture. However, in combination with the conditions of Peterson's writing, the systematic approach is also the book's main weakness. Watching Singapore – as the "lens" metaphor suggests – from a distance, his engagement with the performances recedes before the more orderly and easily accessible wealth of written and electronically-available information about them and their context. As the bibliography reveals, Peterson's primary source of information from the late nineties onwards was the *Straits Times* website, and accordingly, as the book progresses, the "politics" loom ever larger and at the expense of the "theatre". "In a case of art imitating government policy..." begins one paragraph (114), which in many ways exemplifies the fact that in Peterson's estimation, Singapore theatre is less "lens" than supplementary illustration. Arguably, therefore, Peterson succeeds in granting political legitimacy to theatre as cultural production at the expense of legitimating what the theatre-makers about whom he writes, actually produced.

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[24] For more information on this, see Chapter One, note 5.

Staging Nation: English Language Theatre in Malaysia and Singapore (2004), by the Malaysian-Australian academic Jacqueline Lo, is a more tightly-focused study, which bookends four detailed case-studies of key plays from the mid-eighties (including *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* and *Emily of Emerald Hill*, both discussed in Chapter One of this thesis) with more general discussions of the social and political contexts within which the plays were produced, and a survey of current trends in both countries. Her stated aim is "an in-depth analysis of power relations operating at both textual and social levels" (5), and to this end she affirms the importance of attending to the plays' conditions of production and reception, as well as their textual significations. Lo presents a lucid overview of the Malaysian and Singaporean political landscapes as they pertain to issues of language, multiculturalism, nation-building and state repression. Describing her chosen plays as "paradigmatic examples of a politicised theatrical renaissance in the mid-1980s" (5), her concern is "the ways in which identities are played out within the complex ensembles and discursive flows that produce a multiplicity of subject positions which enable us to survive and even work towards changing our society through various modes of resistance, subversion, compliance, complicity and oppositionality" (7). As Lo's terminology here and throughout the book demonstrates, she is an extremely obedient student of Michel Foucault and related writers, and her analyses are remarkable for the consistency with which they demonstrate the ability of the plays both to teach and enact "the negotiation between and within contending power discourses as a necessary condition to subject formation" (189). Once again, it seems that the writer's distance from the encounter with performance has given rise to a compensatory, but ultimately distorting, reliance on more readily available material: in this case, poststructuralist theories of the subject. The result is an intriguing fudge, whereby the aforementioned focus on conditions of production and reception grants the plays agency as performances (for instance, by their designation as "acts of oppositonality" (189), and through lines such as "Kon's play nonetheless refuses..." (135)), without any reference on Lo's part to having seen them. Oddly, this apparent squeamishness about the direct encounter extends even into the accounts of more recent performances, where it is never made clear in what context the work under discussion was viewed, if at all. Her three page analysis of TheatreWorks' *Lear*, for instance, includes sentences such as "...it appears that Ong [Keng Sen, the director] was able to deliver 'a purposeful sense of unity'" (180): the quotation is from Peterson, who himself only saw the production on video.

The third area of critical literature is made up of journal articles and related essays produced primarily for an international readership. Some simply reflect the gradual shift of academic attention towards Asia in line with its increasing global economic, political and cultural significance. Hence James Leverett notes of the themes he identifies in a number of Singaporean plays that "these are the ineluctable energies of sexual and ethnic identity and subjugation now at work altering every aspect of today's Asia" (2002: 70). However, the vast majority of international publications on Singapore theatre focus on its entry into the international arena, chiefly in the form of Ong Keng Sen's touring intercultural performances and workshops. This doubling of aesthetic form and context of enquiry extends into the concerns of the writers, many of whom focus on the ways in which Ong's work problematizes the dominant paradigms of intercultural performance theory, which are based on an auteurist and often one-way model of East-West interactions. Occupying the "middle ground" on this issue is Helena Grehan, whose articles on *Lear*, the *Flying Circus Project* and *Desdemona* (based on rehearsal observations as well as performance spectatorship) acknowledge that the performances reproduce many of the discredited tropes of earlier intercultural performances, while complicating "questions of positionality, location and subjectivity" (2001: 117) in ways that call for more nuanced critical frameworks. A possible response to this is suggested by the Singaporean academic Yong Li Lan, who sees in the aesthetic failings of Ong's *Desdemona* (2000) that Grehan worries over, a reflexive instance of the ways in which the performance staged the necessary failures of any intercultural project. Given the "varied cultural positions and tensions" of Singaporean and other audiences, Yong claims that "[t]he performance enacted the cultural dislocation and a dissolution of context which, I would argue, are not simply an unavoidable contingency that obstructs an audience's understanding, but intrinsic to what it performs" (2004: 255). A much less forgiving view is proposed by Rustom Bharucha, who states that in *Desdemona*, as in Ong's other works, "the projection of failure becomes a disguised success, and the acknowledgement of inadequacy becomes a smug way of not working things through or arriving at an alternative" (2004: 15). For Bharucha, this "postmodern Asian antispectacle", based on the "hurtful and wasteful appropriation" (15) of Asian forms by Ong, is consistent with a more general tendency by Singapore to manufacture cultural credibility at the expense of "local cultures and communities" in favour of "New Asian global capitalism" (5).

A less fretful perspective has been outlined in a range of international *and* locally produced publications by the Singaporean academic Wee Wan-ling, whose thematic

analyses of Singaporean theatre performances have informed a sustained investigation into local cultural production as continuous with the political and economic discourses of Asian modernity. In assuming the givenness of whichever performances he addresses as expressions of an emergent socio-cultural condition, Wee brings an almost sociological approach to bear upon questions of aesthetic practice. For instance, he notes that up to the early nineties the "pragmatic, philistine modernity" of the Singapore government "allowed space for artistic growth, as such growth generally was not considered important enough to warrant attention" (2003: 86). More recently, however, the rise of "creative industries" rhetoric "poses challenges for those very same innovative artists that the state professes to want to foster" (85), since "beauty", "once a subversive protest against the markets' instrumentalism", can be "made to be the gloss of the established order" (92). In this and other analyses (2001, 2002, 2004), Wee coolly avoids both the subjective assessments of other local writers, the compensatory tendencies of Peterson and Lo, and the critical anxieties of many international commentators. As yet, however, he seems unable to reconcile his comments on the instrumentalization of "beauty" (or aesthetic experience more generally) with a response to aesthetic effects in anything other than the same, ultimately instrumentalizing, register as his contextualising sources.

I only know Wan-ling watched the performances he discusses because I saw him there, and this makes his dispassionate professionalism as much a problem for me as I believe it to be for him. That he, a "local" is able to write himself out of his analyses causes me to question whether I am only *unable* to do so because I am a foreigner. On the other hand, it would be disingenuous, if nothing else, to say that I therefore recognize the foreigner's point of view as it is expressed with somewhat despairing candour by Sue-Ellen Case at the end of her analysis of directing students at the National University of Singapore in a Brecht play:

> By the time the production opened, I had spent enough time in Singapore to realize that my first impressions of signifying systems there were generally misperceived...However, I had not spent enough time there to understand what was actually taking place. Therefore, I do not know how the play was received by the general audience, how the cast really felt about their work, what they finally decided I was trying to do with all of the alterations of the text and music, or even what I thought I saw on opening night (2000: 91).

Between Wee's pellucid prose and Case's anxieties even before what she actually directed, it is tempting simply to affirm, in writing, that: "I was there". However, while the basic fact of co-presence in an age of global communications arguably carries a value in and of itself, with such developments comes a further responsibility. For while

I earlier took Koolhaas et. al to task for misrecognizing their theoretical perspectives for the object of their analyses (or, *pace* Cai Guo Qiang, the painting of the dragon for the dragon itself), I must also signal the likelihood that what I claim as cosmopolitan in the work I address is at least partially informed by my own cosmopolitanism *relative* to that work. In acknowledging that misrecognitions are inherent in any cosmopolitan project, however, I nevertheless re-assert that the outcome is not relativism ("it's just my opinion"), but relationality, which complicates but does not dissipate the different kinds of relations already set in play by, in this case, a given performance in a given context. Nor can such relations be fully articulated. Rather, over the course of the following chapters, it is my hope that they emerge as integral to, rather than independent of, other features of the writing such that, whatever else it amounts to, this thesis is demonstrably a document of its own processes of research and production.

PART TWO

1. Relational Selves: Asian Values and Solo Performance.

1.

On 9th April 1967, less than two years after irreconcilable political differences had led to Singapore's reluctant independence from Malaysia, the *Straits Times* reported how then Minister for Defence Goh Keng Swee had used the occasion of a speech at a PAP variety concert to offer a few "pointers" on how to write a play. With exhortations to emphasize patriotism and a love for science, avoid crudeness and backwardness, provide noble and healthy entertainment, and to take the resulting work to the streets and villages, Goh's advice to the players exemplified the broader concerns of the post-colonial moment, in which all the energies of the population were to be directed towards securing the future of this improbable, diminutive and abruptly-born nation state. In addition, and taking precedence over these pragmatic – if paternalistic – suggestions, were two points that would continue to resonate long after the immediate needs of the fledgling republic had been met:

> First, he said, the themes of the plays should be in keeping with the realistic life in Singapore and its multi-cultural, multi-racial and multi-religious spirit.
> Second, they must discard the crazy, sensual, ridiculous, boisterous and over-materialistic style of the West. In the same way, the feudalistic, superstitious, ignorant and pessimistic ideas of the East are equally repugnant (article reproduced in Oon 2001: 54).

These imperatives were in line with nation-building policies whose impact on the Singaporean sense of identity would be pervasive and long lasting. With the spectre of pre-Independence racial riots haunting the national imaginary,[1] and a Chinese-educated majority that maintained both a strong attachment to traditional culture and a historical association with communism, up to the end of the seventies the Singapore government sought to de-emphasize Chinese cultural identifications, most notably by closing down the Chinese-language Nanyang University in 1975. This even as it foregrounded a highly race-conscious vision of "multiculturalism" as an official creed. However, by the early eighties, with the economy growing rapidly and industrialization continuing apace, there was a softening of some aspects of this approach, and in 1982, an eight-strong delegation of scholars from China and the United States came to Singapore on the invitation of the PAP to discuss and debate Confucian ethics. With increased prosperity, the fabric of society was changing, but while Singapore was fast

[1] In July and September 1964, against the background of on-going tension in relations between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, and a perceived anti-Malay bias by the PAP, a series of inter-ethnic riots took place in Singapore. They are regularly invoked in historical accounts of Singapore as evidence of the fragility of "racially harmonious" relations, even in the present.

building a reputation as a stable foothold for multinational corporations in a volatile but potentially profitable region, its leaders were concerned at what they saw as potentially deleterious social side effects. Thus it was that, having earlier denounced feudalism (a historical slur upon Confucianism from the Chinese May Fourth 1919 movement onwards) as an impediment to nation building, and acted upon it accordingly, it now became clear to the PAP that the greater threat came from materialistic individualism. The blame for that would be laid squarely at the door of the *other* object of Goh's disapproval, the "Western" threat of "a libertine pre-occupation with self-gratification" (*Straits Times*, 3rd December 1982, cited in Tamney 1996: 26). Accordingly, the Singapore government decided to introduce Religious Knowledge into the moral education syllabus, and Confucian Ethics was to be among the courses on offer.[2] This was the reason for the scholars' visit.

Given that Confucianism – not, itself, a religion – sets great store by the cultivation of wisdom as a means to achieving the status of a morally unimpeachable sage or worthy, there was something particularly apt about a group of scholars being drafted in to advise on the creation of a syllabus on Confucian ethics. Indeed, the transcripts subsequently published by one of the eight, Tu Wei-ming (1984), with chapter titles such as 'Conversation with the Ministers', and repeated expressions of deference to more senior academics, suggest the extent to which the visit itself represented an exemplary exercise in the practice of Confucianism. However, the fact that the delegation was required in the first place highlights the novelty of the situation, and begs the question as to how deeply rooted the ethical precepts of Confucianism really were in Singapore's Chinese population. An answer is suggested in the eventual unpopularity of the much-vaunted Confucian Ethics course. At the end of the eighties, following a study suggesting that increased religious fervour among students was threatening to increase interracial tensions, the entire Religious Knowledge programme was phased out.[3]

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[2] It was expected that Malay and some Indian students would opt for Islamic Religious Knowledge, the remaining Indian students for Hindu Studies or Sikh Studies, and Eurasians for Bible Knowledge (Catholic). A number of options remained open to the majority Chinese, for whom religious observance, while common, is by no means as closely determined by or linked to ethnic identity. In addition to Confucian Ethics, these included Bible Knowledge (Catholic), Bible Knowledge (Protestant), and Buddhist Studies.

[3] In 1989, enrolments were: Bible Knowledge – 21.37%, Buddhist Studies – 44.37%, Confucian Ethics – 17.81%, Hindu Studies – 2.74%, Islamic Knowledge – 13.35%, Sikh Studies – 0.37% (in Tamney 1996: 38). A number of analysts have considered the reasons for the unexpectedly low take-up of Confucian Ethics, especially by comparison with Buddhist Studies. Tamney cites the difficulties of reconciling Confucianism and capitalism, the perceived difficulty of the course by comparison with Buddhist Studies and Bible Knowledge, the lack of a strong cultural identification with the subject, and the implicit anti-materialism of Confucian texts (1996: 37-50). Chua Beng-Huat, meanwhile, describes the failure as

Nevertheless, the social and economic transformations that had motivated the experiment continued apace, and if the high-profile introduction of an ethical prophylactic into the education system had failed, what was to be retained, and indeed developed, was its implicit culturalism. Confucianism offered Government ideologues a way of parsing the constituent elements of industrialization, and of excising those held to be politically undesirable by ascribing them culturally alien provenance. More specifically, as the sociologist Chua Beng Huat explains: "If its [industrialization's] potential untoward consequences were to be contained without jeopardising continuing economic growth, individualism, an essential attitude of capitalism, had to be wrenched from the latter and dealt with at the level of culture as ideology" (Chua 1995: 27).

Accordingly, in 1990, neo-Confucian ideas would form a central plank in the construction of a national ideology known as "Our Shared Values", and subsequently as a pseudo-intellectual prop in the ensuing international debates about "Asian Values" (so called because they were held by their proponents and some of their detractors to derive from essential cultural traits peculiar to "Asians"). The Shared Values distilled and affirmed a vision of social organisation that purportedly differed in important ways from that of Singapore's former colonial power, Britain, and its cultural peers in Euro-America:

- Nation before community and society above self
- Family as the basic unit of society
- Community support and respect for the individual
- Consensus, not conflict
- Racial and religious harmony ('White Paper on Shared Values' 1999 [1990] 121)

This list aligns Singapore with a vision of family-focused communitarianism, and derives from an interpretation of the Confucian self as obediently relational; realized through the development of its roles as son or daughter, parent or sibling, minister or subject and so on, respectful of authority, and filially dutiful. This, in turn, informed a crude distinction with the notion of the Western individual as self-possessed and therefore rights-bearing and -demanding to the point of social breakdown. In 1993, the

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"...either because the so-called 'moral crisis', which supposedly resulted from economic success and Westernisation, was more perceived than real or...established religions appeared to have greater ideological appeal than Confucianism, indicating again the absence of Confucian ideas as foundations for the organisation of the daily life of Chinese Singaporeans" (1995: 30).

Singaporean diplomat Tommy Koh, one of the staunchest defenders of "Asian Values", wrote in a letter to the *International Herald Tribune*:

> East Asians do not believe in the extreme form of individualism practised in the West. We agree that every individual is important. However, he or she is not an isolated being, but a member of a nuclear and extended family, clan, neighbourhood, community, nation and state. East Asians believe that whatever they do or say, they must keep in mind the interests of others. Unlike Western society, where an individual puts his interests above all others, in Asian society the individual tries to balance his interests with those of family and society (1998 [1993]: 349).

By means of such binaristic reasoning, Koh and others were able to deduce a range of virtues that, at least nominally, defined the "positive values" that East Asia stood for. Relationality, strong families, respect for education, thrift, hard work, teamwork, respect for the social contract, a stakeholder society, moral wholesomeness and social responsibility: "Taken together, these ten values form a framework that has enabled societies in East Asia to achieve economic prosperity, progress, harmonious relations between citizens, and law and order" (Koh 1998 [1993]: 351).

There are a number of different ways in which one can address such claims, not least by calling into question Koh's crude occidentalism (and indeed orientalism), the ease with which he moves from precepts to values, and the grounds upon which he arrogates those values to an apparently homogenous entity called "East Asia", to the exclusion of other regions, peoples or cultures. This is indicative of more general critiques of Asian Values discourse, which have also questioned the validity of its culturalism (Chua 1995, Lawson 1998, Wee 2002), its interpretation of Confucianism (Liu 1996, de Bary 1998), and the sidelining of Asian precedents for participatory democracy (Kim 2002). Meanwhile, supporters have championed its implications for communitarianism and what they approvingly term "illiberal democracy" (Bell 1995, 2000, Zakaria 2003).

What is of particular interest in the context of the present study is that the discourse developed in response to a rapid economic and infrastructural development that, even in the early eighties was, in Singapore's case, highly globalized. This meant that economic factors prevailed even though the analysis was culturalist in orientation, a situation that was to have intriguing implications for official perceptions of artistic practice in Singapore. During the consultations of 1982, Tu had been eager to affirm the importance of artistic endeavour to the Confucian worldview, for "...the ability to respond to the world in a poetic sense is considered essential for the development of the person" (1984: 6). In the *Analects* Confucius notes its centrality to the crucial

concept of *li* (propriety): "Let the character be formed by the poets; established by the laws of right behaviour; and perfected by music" (8.8). However, the PAP's hierarchical and governance-focused interpretation of Confucianism would not only ignore the aesthetic and environmental dimensions of the philosophy, but, precisely *because* their interests lay in hierarchy and governance, would take on a totalizing aspect that simply could not admit of other such features. This goes some way to explaining the absence of references to aesthetic practice in Tommy Koh's culturalist paean to East Asian progress and prosperity in the *IHT*. It would be tempting to describe this omission as evidence of benign neglect, were it not for the fact that at the same time as Koh was putting pen to paper, it is likely that he was also mulling over his less-than-harmonious relations with Singapore's arts community. Recently installed as the Chairman of the newly-formed National Arts Council (NAC),[4] he would soon be embroiled in the *de facto* banning of performance art and forum theatre under somewhat farcical circumstances that had more to do with historical sensitivities towards political theatre than it did the specific conditions of the performances in question.[5] The first instance, in particular, which followed in the wake of a sensationalist report in the tabloid *New Paper* on the performance art piece *Brother Cane* by Josef Ng, served to clarify the official perspective on such pursuits. According to a press release excerpted by the *New Paper* two days after the initial article:

> NAC finds the acts vulgar and completely distasteful which deserve public condemnation. By no stretch of the imagination can such acts be construed and condoned as art. Such acts, in fact, debase art and lower the public's esteem for art and artists in general.
>
> If an artist has any grievances there are many other proper ways to give vent to their feelings. Artists with talent do not have to resort to antics in order to draw attention to themselves or to communicate their feelings or ideas (*The New Paper* 1994).

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[4] A National Arts Council was first mooted in 1989 in the government-sponsored *Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts*. 1990 saw the creation of the Ministry for Information and the Arts (MITA), and the NAC came into being as a statutory board within MITA the following year. MITA has since changed its name to the Ministry for Information, Communications and the arts (MICA).

[5] On 3rd January 1994, the tabloid *New Paper* carried a front-page story detailing how a local performance artist, Josef Ng, had snipped off some of his pubic hair in a protest performance against newspaper coverage of a sting operation to arrest gay men. The performance and the art form of which it was assumed to be representative was publicly denounced by a number of government agencies and public figures, and Ng was charged with obscenity. Ng was subsequently sentenced to pay a fine of S$1000, and prohibited from performing in Singapore. The NAC announced that performance art would no longer be eligible for funding, a fact that in turn prejudiced the likelihood of a performance art event being granted a Public Entertainment License by the Police. On 5th February 1994, a *Straits Times* article reported that Alvin Tan and Haresh Sharma of The Necessary Stage had attended workshops run by Augusto Boal in New York, and drew attention to Boal's ideological debt to Marxism. Sensing another scandal, Koh moved quickly to express his support for the company in a letter to the newspaper. However, he also stated that the NAC would no longer support the staging of Forum Theatre. Both restrictions were lifted following a recommendation to do so by the Censorship Review Committee in 2003.

Here, a dual strategy is taking shape. On the one hand, the event in question is denied the status of art, and is therefore implicitly distanced from the purview of the National *Arts* Council. On the other hand, a cloud of suspicion is cast over all artists whom, it is conceded, may wish "to give vent to their feelings". The trope of the artist selfishly demanding the right to self-expression regardless of social norms is a common one in government discourse, and has remained so, even as it has officially embraced the arts as a subdivision of the creative industries. A 2000 forum organised by the National University of Singapore captured this thinking in its pre-emptive title *Artistic Integrity and Social Responsibility: You Can't Please Everyone!*, at which the then Minister of State for Defence and Information and the Arts outlined the government's perspective:

> [T]he majority of artists accept that they have a responsibility to preserve and enhance social peace. This does not mean that they cannot challenge the status quo...But it does mean that in mounting such challenges, artists must be attentive to the mood and readiness of the people for change, and use their skill and art to find a way to navigate a path forward to the community at large (Lim 2001: 15).

More recently still, the government's *Report of the Censorship Review Committee 2003* lent this anxiety an immutable quality when it stated: "The *perennial* tension between the desire to grant greater artistic freedom and the need to protect moral standards should be discussed through debates in a rational and non-emotional manner" (26, emphasis mine).

In entrenching the binary of "artistic freedom" and "moral values", artistic practice in Singapore – with theatre at its forefront – remains associated with the "crazy, sensuous, boisterous" attributes of "Western" styles that Goh Keng Swee railed against almost forty years ago. This does not, it should be noted, amount to an actively propagated policy on the part of the government, whose ministers continue to attend the gala openings of some of the more high-profile performances. Rather, the concept stands in reserve, allowing for the strategic exclusion and indeed condemnation of artworks and artists when they appear to challenge the official interpretation of Singapore's success story. "Asian Values" is, after all, primarily an interpretation of the way in which the PAP has been able to marry economic prosperity and infrastructural development with authoritarian control and, as Chua Beng Huat points out, one that will continue to forestall the development of liberal democracy: "[T]he discursive connections to past traditions made for the shared values is but an alibi for the institutionalization of a blueprint for the future" (1998: 44). In this context, the always-potential exclusion of the theatre from this blueprint draws attention to the partial

nature of its apparently totalizing impetus, and begs the question as to whether there is a more appropriate, less coercive, interpretation of contemporary Singapore – one that makes it possible to envision a different kind of future than the one already spoken for by the state. After all, despite Tu et al.'s high profile public lectures, press interviews and television appearances in the early eighties, the fact is that the invention of the neo-Confucian self was, quite literally, not the only show in town.

2.

"Having started out with basic Confucian core values, and having picked up Western beliefs along the way, we took off". This is how then Minister for Communications, Dr Yeo Ning Hong, explained Singapore's economic success during the Confucian consultations (cited in Tu 1984: 180). Even leaving aside the complex processes of subaltern and comprador colonial identification at work in such an analysis, it is highly partial, and its omissions reveal in swift order the extent to which the association of theatre with "Western decadence" was a diversionary tactic. Following the May Fourth Movement of 1919, the theatre was a key vehicle for the propagation of an anti-Confucian concept of the individual in China in the twenties and thirties,[6] a tradition that transformed into a practice of class analysis during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and prevailed in post-Independence Singapore. In the early seventies, hundreds of local left-wing theatre-makers participated in the "Go Into Life" campaign, where, as Kuo Pao Kun later reported: "young artists and intellectuals would spend some time experiencing the life of the masses in Singapore and Malaysia – the workers, the peasants, the fishermen" (in Lo 1993: 139). The subsequent Chinese-language performances would attract "as many as 20 000 people per production" (in Klein 2001: 114).

Kuo's detention without trial in 1976 – along with his wife, choreographer Goh Lay Kuan, and other leftist sympathisers – was indicative of the repressive action required for Yeo to propose his simplified teleology several years later. By 1980, leftwing alternatives to the PAP's radical programme of modernization had been sufficiently suppressed for Kuo to be released, and the turn to Confucianism, which represented a

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[6] As Tam Kwok-kan and Terry Yip Siu-han write in their discussion of Chinese plays of the time:
> In the early years of the May Fourth era, particularly those between 1917 to 1927, Western ideas of individualism were taken as a force countering Confucian collectivism. One effective and lively means to appeal to the intellectuals was drama, which suddenly became a widely adopted mode of mass media. Many Chinese intellectuals resorted to playwriting to reveal the moral disease of the Chinese majority and to advocate ideas of iconoclasm and individualism as necessities to progress (2002: 204).

shift to a less heavy-handed (but arguably more pervasive) mode of "soft authoritarianism" by the government, was mirrored by a shift to a less confrontational (but arguably more persuasive) aesthetic style on Kuo's part. In detention, he subsequently claimed in interview, he realized that "art first and foremost has to be art, even if you want it to be very political, you still have to be first and foremost artistic" (in Lo 1993: 142), and while the extent to which this epiphany was guided by the legal or paralegal conditions of his release cannot be known,[7] the initial outcomes were to prove instrumental in envisioning nuanced alternatives to state-sanctioned descriptions of the individual.

When Kuo was asked in 1993 if he felt his shift of focus in the eighties to what he calls "the inside story" of human beings was a result of western influences and the effects of capitalism, he replied: "I think it is the reflection of the individualisation of the person, in a modern political economy that produced the individual" (in Lo 1993: 142). This gnomic formulation seems to express as much in what it leaves out as in what it says. Kuo refuses to be drawn on the cultural provenance of the trend, nor to ascribe it directly to industrialization. Instead, there is a circularity in his answer that suggests a lingering dilemma rather than an easy resolution. Rapid social change seems to impact on the individual in ways that precede understanding, yet the individual is nevertheless as much an agent *of* as subject *to* that change. This ambivalence about the causes, extent and effects of individualism and its relation to broader debates about Confucian *and* humanist conceptions of selfhood is what distinguishes Kuo's theatrical output in the mid-eighties from the simplified concept of the neo-Confucian citizen that was then being formulated by the government. Specifically, two monologues, *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* (1985) (figure 12) and *No Parking on Odd Days* (1986), which both detail personal encounters with state bureaucracy, dramatise that constitutively vague area of identity formation that lies between action and self-realisation, structure and agency, and suggest an interpretation of relationality that refers to a range of cultural perspectives in its exploration of what it means to live in a rapidly industrializing postcolonial state.

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[7] It is difficult to know with any certainty what the terms of release from political detention are in Singapore. Detainees are bound over to refrain from engaging in any further activities deemed "political" in nature, and anecdotal evidence suggests they are required to meet with members of the Internal Security Department annually for a review of their case and behaviour (colloquially known as "going for coffee"). Kuo had his passport revoked on detention, and although some of the restrictions on his activities were withdrawn in 1983, his citizenship was only reinstated in 1992. An earlier request, made in 1990 two weeks after being awarded the Singapore government's highest cultural award, the Cultural Medallion, had been rejected.

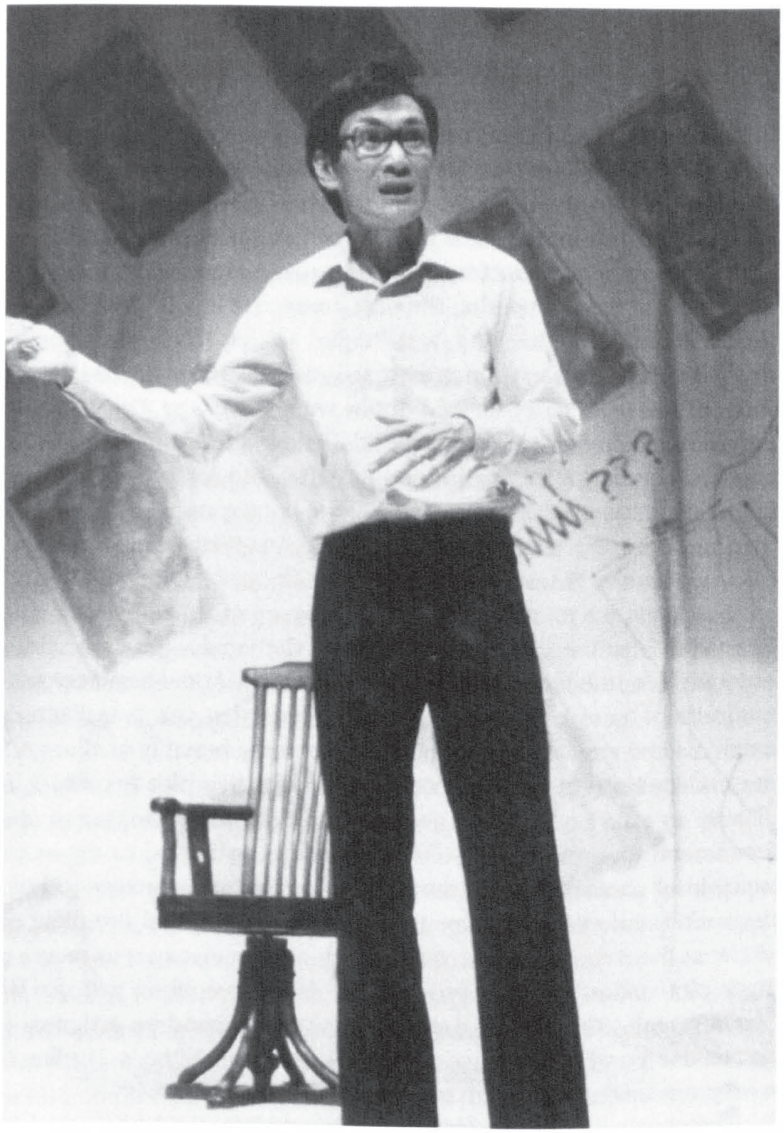

Figure 12. Lim Kay Tong in *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* (1985) by Kuo Pao Kun. Photo courtesy of The Theatre Practice.

This is achieved in a number of different ways. First, the plays highlight inconsistencies in the then recently-minted concept of the neo-Confucian Singaporean; second, they affirm an idea of selfhood that is more firmly grounded in the lived experience of their audiences; and third, they provide a meditation on the place of theatre in such a context as more substantially relational than had previously been proposed.

For the neo-Confucian ideologue, *Coffin* and *Parking* pose a dilemma because both their protagonists take issue with Singapore's technocracy without reproducing the caricatured western affectation of petulant individualism. There is no doubt that there is a hierarchical, authoritarian strand to classical Confucian thought, epitomized by oft-cited epigrams such as "[l]et the ruler be the ruler, the minister the minister, the father father, and the son son" (*Analects* 12.11), and it is these that inform the smooth declension of obedience and loyalty enshrined in the first "Shared Value": "Nation before community and society above self". However, both *Coffin* and *Parking* draw attention to a series of differentiations that are *internal* to the relational whole, and in so doing, their protagonists demonstrate a closer fidelity to practical Confucianism than that of their bureaucratic adversaries. Key to this is that the narratives of each play – which recount one-man stand-offs over permission to enlarge the hole for an unusually big coffin in one case, and contested parking infractions in the other – feature actions taken by somewhat timorous Everymen. Neither narrator is named, nor does he give any details about himself or his background that are not integral to the developing story. It is, rather, their normalness that is underlined: both are wary of getting into trouble with the authorities, and eager to stress the reasonableness of their requests and the respectful manner in which they pursue them. Avuncular "you see"s and "you know"s are lobbed into the auditorium throughout the unfolding narratives. "I'm sure you understand that," says the narrator of *Coffin* (Kuo 2000: 61); "I think you all understand that lah," echoes his counterpart in *Parking* (86), innocuously interpellating the audience on the assumption that the experiences described are nothing out of the ordinary.

The unremarkable tone established, it becomes apparent that both characters take action – by demanding a bigger hole for the coffin, and by arguing the parking ticket case in court rather than paying the fine – for reasons that are only notionally self-interested. In *Parking*, the narrator's actions are bound up with anxieties about his son's future, while in *Coffin*, the protagonist is galvanized by a sense of filial

responsibility to fight for the "special charisma and unique character" of his grandfather's coffin. It is distinctiveness, rather than individualism, that concerns him, a distinction that is itself shown to be overlooked when the functionary at the graveyard announces that "[t]he consideration for humanity and sympathy cannot overstep the constraints of the state policy!" (68). That this is more a matter of instrumentalist inflexibility than an imperative of Asian culturalism is evident from Wm. Theodore de Bary's discussion of the "continuing tension" over the power of the state within classical Confucianism:

> [F]rom the Confucian point of view the state's responsibility for the public interest was to encourage legitimate private initiative. How to define what was legitimate remained an issue, and the state, historically, was not slow to assert its own authority in this respect (any more than it is today), but Confucians were just as ready to challenge any such claim on the part of the state bureaucracy (*guan*), asserting instead that the public interest (*gong*) consists in serving the legitimate desires and material needs of the people. A balance of public and private (*gongsi yiti*), not the person or individual subordinated to the collectivity or state, remained the Confucian ideal. (1998: 29).

Where the bureaucrat at the graveyard assumes that the authority of the state is both continuous with and exceeds familial obligation, both of Kuo's plays suggest that the multiple identifications that make up the Singaporean self are differentiated and, at least sometimes, weighted against each other – or, as the grandson in *Coffin* puts it to the bureaucrat: "You know, this is my grandfather getting buried...it is not the canning of pineapple cubes" (69).

It is perhaps inevitable, therefore, that the narratives end on an ambivalent note, since both narrators sense that in the long term, their actions represent pyrrhic victories at most. In *Parking*, the father fears he has inculcated a docile fatalism in his son, while in *Coffin* the grandson worries that his own descendents will not find him out and recognize him amongst "those rows after rows of standard sized graves" (71). Yet the plays themselves are not quite so downbeat. Rather, they are cautionary tales, in whose narrators audience members are more likely to recognize something of themselves than see exemplars of heroic action from a respectful distance. Over the course of the lengthy and somewhat digressive narrations, both protagonists recount feeling out their responses to concrete situations, struggling to retain their dignity through a strengthening sense of self-identity defined not in terms of abstract principles, but *against* the abstracting impetus of a dehumanizing state system. To this end, both narratives home in on the relatively mundane world of objects – coffins, funeral garb, parking coupons, road signs – and use it as a focus to explore the flawed and cluttered world through which people stumblingly make their way, over and above

the exacting, austere environment that the Confucian precepts and Lee's government demand. Similarly, while there is certainly a privileging of the Chinese voice in the plays, one should not overlook the way in which they also reflected the cross-cultural currents that made up so many Singaporean audience members' daily realities. Krishen Jit identifies in *Coffin* "the presence of the Chinese oral story-telling and cross-talk performance traditions", which manifests itself in "the stance of the narrators, and the forms and sensations of the monologues and dialogues they conduct..." (2000: 93). However, these traditions were on the move, as it were. With *Coffin* premiering in Mandarin in 1985, and *Parking* in English in 1986, the plays marked a watershed for Kuo, and if they both had an easygoing, chatty aspect to them, the rapidly changing cultural contexts in which they performed also drew attention to the materiality of the language used.

In all these respects, *Coffin* and *Parking* establish the tangible ways in which relationality is mediated. In addition, there is another feature of the plays that enables us to move beyond enumerating the ways in which they operate in contradistinction to the pervasive discourses of the state, and to understand their broader significance for Singapore theatre. This concerns the theme of performance, and the relationship between the actions described, and the performance of their description.

Beyond the formalistic references to oral traditions noted by Jit above, there is a clear significance in the fact that both *Coffin* and *Parking* are monologues. In the grand narrative of the Euro-American theatrical tradition – one that Kuo was familiar with from his English language education and early career in the Australian theatre – there are powerful resonances between solo performance and more generalized interpretations of selfhood. Cultural materialists such as Catherine Belsey, for instance, have clearly, if critically, articulated the coincidence of the soliloquy on the Renaissance stage with the development of mercantile capitalism and liberal humanism, since it "makes audible the personal voice and offers access to the presence of an individual speaker" (1982: 42) in ways that were otherwise unprecedented. As has already been inferred, it is certainly useful to understand the emergence of Kuo's plays as both reflecting and participating in a socio-economic moment in which concepts of selfhood and the individual's place in society had become mutable and subject to re-negotiation. At the same time, there are instructive differences between the poststructuralist concern with the construction of the subject in Western Europe, and the kinds of experiences and identities staged by Kuo. For

Belsey, the shift from "morality personifications" in Medieval theatre to the "concrete individuals" of the Renaissance was flawed: "Since the subject of the enunciation always exceeds the subject of the utterance, the 'I' cannot be fully present in what it says of itself" (49). From such observations arise the central insights of poststructuralist analysis, including the unstable but normativizing performance of selfhood in its various roles as a way of securing – albeit never entirely successfully – a sense of identity. At first glance, a similar process is described in Kuo's plays. In *Parking*, the fact that the father draws inspiration from Perry Mason in his courtroom behaviour is no less valid for being comic, and *Coffin*'s narrator only realises the full significance and obligations of his position in the family when the stares of the graveyard bureaucrats cause him to notice his own funeral garb, as if for the first time: "It was only then that I realized I was still wearing my full set of funeral costumes that becomes a pious grandson!" (65).[8] Were one so inclined, one might read the *Parking* example with reference to postmodern ideas about the strategic citation of pop cultural tropes, or even a kind of postcolonial mimicry, while *Coffin* seems to lend itself to a Lacanian or feminist interpretation concerning accession to the Law of the Father, and entry into a patriarchal system of signification. That such a move would be inappropriate is not only because the narrators are empowered in their "performances" – however ostensibly normativizing – to take a stand against the state, but because a distinctive feature of Confucian selfhood is that it is constituted by its roles in ways that are emphatically *not* performative. As Henry Rosemont Jr. writes:

> I am the totality of roles I live in relation to specific others. Moreover, these roles are interconnected in that the relations in which I stand to some people affect directly the relations in which I stand to others, such that it would be misleading to say that I *play* or *perform* these roles; on the contrary, for Confucius I *am* my roles. Taken collectively, these roles weave, for each of us, a unique pattern of personal identity, such that if some of my roles change, others will of necessity change also, literally making me a different person (1997: 71).

In light of the poststructuralist performativity thesis, it is tempting to see in the theatre a metaphor or indeed exemplar of the way in which identity is "constructed" in society at large. However, in light of Rosemont's observation, one comes to the salutary realisation that the theatre has no privileged or explanatory place in the constitution of Confucian selfhood. This raises an intriguing question about the effect of watching Kuo's plays, since they are, nevertheless, inordinately concerned with performance and public action. The narrator of *Parking* repeatedly asserts his confidence in the face

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[8] These consist of sackcloth worn on the torso and the head, and, in accordance with the relational principles of Confucianism, are colour-coded according to one's relation to the deceased. Grandchildren wear blue.

of the authorities, and it is this that drives him to act despite having reservations "deep down". "I don't know where I got the passion and where I got the courage," states the narrator of *Coffin* (69), but he stands firm, surprised at his own unrehearsed eloquence, and wins out.

On stage, the actor's own performance undergirds these narrated acts of self-realisation in ways that do not wane with the characters' confidence, and key to this is the notion of the public telling of the stories, where the presence of the assembled audience members is integral. This raises the possibility that, rather than the inherent doubleness of theatre bringing to light the dynamics of identity formation in life, it is the sincere attention of the audience that legitimates the unfolding of the theatrical event, and grants it *its* integrity. In the case of *Coffin* and *Parking* this means that the actor is constituted in his role *as* an actor only cumulatively, as he draws his audience into a relational network of association and affiliation. Perhaps this, more than being the verbal tic of the avuncular Everyman, is the reason for those moments of shared recognition with spectators ("I think you all understand that lah" and so on), for these are also the moments that bore through the tale to speak for the teller, too.

It bears noting that this idea of theatrical performance as relationally produced is not one that derives directly from Confucian aesthetics, although some writers have described related phenomena. Of particular interest is Haiping Yan's discussion of audience responses to the fantastical "marvel plays" of classical Chinese music-drama:

> As a performer uses artistic means – including dancing, singing, pictorial gestures and bodily movements, narrating and poetry-recitation of varying tonalities, all with extraordinary stylization – to animate a sphere beyond the routinized, she moves the audience to *do* their imaginative 'knowing' and 'feeling' as they decide how to relate to the performer, the performed and their 'normal' state of mind. Spectatorship of Chinese '*yanxi*' or 'enacting of stories of suppositionality as plays,' it follows, is crucial to the operation of theatricality. Theatricality is not only about beholding the explicitly theatrical on stage but also about participating in it. Being 'moved' by or 'moved' into 'most profound feelings' as a witness to *yanxi* involves decisions that create sites of theatricality. So theatricality, one may argue, inherently involves the production of human agency (2003: 84-5).[9]

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[9] A more austere observation is made by Karyn Lai in her analysis of the relationship between Confucian moral cultivation and musical training:

> The pianist, if she is a virtuoso musician, engages the audience *in her performance*. In turn, a learned audience, in appreciating the performance of the piece, becomes engaged with, and engrossed in *the performance of* the music. In this scenario, the music provides a medium whereby the pianist and her audience communicate...A performance is an event through which the musician expresses and reveals herself...It is not through technical excellence alone, but through her expression of self *in her technical excellence*, that she engages with her audience. Indeed, it could not be further from the truth to suggest that there are two distinct parts to a

Taking place in a different context and in a different form, one nevertheless sees an overlap between the ways in which Kuo's plays could be said to be collectively produced, and the active role of the audience in underwriting the theatricality of Chinese music-drama. It also offers a more generous way of conceiving the potential of relationality than the rather rigid version that informs Singapore's Shared Values. As Tu Wei-ming writes: "The self is situated, but neither enclosed nor enslaved, in its sociality. The texture of the dyadic relationships that define its social roles is never fixed. It has to be constantly interwoven with the changing configuration of disappearing and emerging threads which the self encounters in its life situations" (1985: 134). While this may conventionally take the form of what Tan Sor-hoon calls "graduated love" (2002: 173), in which an intensification of relations near the centre ripples out to affect all others, in contemporary contexts, a range of different relationships may be mutually beneficial, including those nurtured at the outer reaches of the network.[10] As the network flexes and grows, so all the relations within in it are altered accordingly, and in this regard, one can see the theatre as a site in which relations between people that may otherwise be distanced are temporarily drawn close, influencing them and the other relational networks in which they conventionally participate in more long-lasting ways. In this small-scale but intimate way, the theatre takes advantage of a cosmopolitan aspect of Confucian relationality more generally, whose mutability suggests a responsiveness to the flux of interactions that increasingly define the experience of sociality in globalized contexts. As Confucius writes in *The Analects*: "The person who does not consider what is far away will find worries much closer at hand" (15.12).[11]

All this is underscored in the case of *Coffin* and *Parking* by the cumulative effect of their enduring popularity. No other Singaporean plays have been so consistently

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musical performance, the outward show and some other inscrutable, mystical "inner" feelings of the performer. The performance *is* the expression of the performing self, and conversely, the accomplished musician can only express herself through performance" (2003: 122).

[10] Of course, it is seldom the case that relational developments are universally beneficial. On this point, Tan Sor-hoon notes: "There are times when 'breaking away' from a family relation is necessary for the growth of one's relational network. In becoming involved in other relations, one does not simply replace the damaged family relation with others that one attempts to make more immediate. The new resources or gains in the resulting personal growth could also enable one to repair the damaged family relation in a way that would be impossible without that earlier break" (2002: 183). It should be noted that this more liberal – or perhaps simply realist – interpretation is somewhat at odds with Tu's assertion that "there are underlying permanent webs, such as the father-son relationship, that must endure all contingencies" (1985: 134).

revived and reinvented. Since the turn of the millennium alone, they have been performed in English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil in a Singapore Arts Festival showcase; they have been performed by women; deconstructed and reconstructed by artists from Hong Kong, Taiwan and China; and when, in March 2004, the Old Parliament House re-opened to the public as The Arts House, *Parking* was the inaugural play in the renovated Chamber.[12] In consequence, the plays have accreted a kind of associative and affective density, with many audience members already familiar with the stories. Each performance is no longer simply the recounting of a fictional event, but also the recounting of previous performances: the narratives have taken on the status of urban myths, whose every re-telling, while embellished and adumbrated by each performance as all such stories are, is also a collective process of re-invention.

In this regard, the relational interactions that produce each performance in the manner introduced above can be seen to extend beyond the parameters of a given theatre on a given night, to encompass a host of other features. Like the mundane objects by which the narrators mediate their relationships with other people – be they friend or foe – so the plays themselves have become the means by which audience members interpret their own, developing interactions: touchstones for an understanding of state-citizen relations, for instance. This enquiry adds, in its own small way, to the on-going conversation about Kuo's work, which has been the subject of increasing amounts of critical analysis, but perhaps nothing has intensified the relational network around Kuo's plays more than his death from cancer in 2002. Widely and deeply mourned at the time, his name continues to be invoked with respect and an enduring sense of irreplaceable loss. New connections are being forged in and by the theatre in Singapore all the time, but very few of them will not have passed by way of some association with the works or life of Kuo Pao Kun. In this regard, it is not an exaggeration to say that, beyond their own characterization, the narrators of *Coffin* and *Parking* spoke an entire generation of *dramatis personae* into being on the Singapore stage...

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[11] See Tan Sor-hoon 2002: 188, n. 86 for an explanation of her re-translation in spatial terms of what D. C. Lau, in the Penguin edition, renders temporally.
[12] I discuss this performance in the Conclusion.

...but neither would it be entirely accurate. In 1985, the same year as the premiere of *The Coffin is too Big for the Hole*, another monodrama was staged whose popularity was to prove equally enduring. *Emily of Emerald Hill*, by Stella Kon, is ostensibly a very different play from Kuo's. With a running time of approximately two hours, the title character conjures a domestic epic of Peranakan life[13] that stretches from her humble childhood as an unwanted burden on callous relatives, through her marriage to a rich but apparently feckless business man and her rise to prominence in an extensive household and in "society", to her final years as a wealthy but broken and abandoned widow whom time has passed by. However, taking the form of a monodrama, recounting interactions between multiple characters, and engaging with the themes of tradition and modernity, as a theatrical investigation of selfhood that emerged at a time of rapid industrialization and socio-cultural flux, it chimes with the spirit of Kuo's plays, and the historical moment in which they both participated.

Indeed, *Emily* nuances an assessment of those plays in important ways. Just as it is historically significant to note that a play written by a woman and depicting a powerful, self-possessed female protagonist emerged concurrently with those featuring Singaporean Everymen and written by the "father" of modern Singapore theatre, certain implicit features of the events recounted by Kuo's male narrators become the explicit focus of Kon's thematic rendering of female experience. In *Coffin*, for example, it falls upon the narrator to act, since even though he is the grandson, "my father and his brother had all gone before my grandfather" (62), leaving him as the titular head of the family. In *Emily*, the patriarchal logic that forecloses the need even to mention the surviving female relatives is thrown into relief, with a very different light being shed on the mechanics of the situation:

> Do you understand what made me what I am? Before my breasts were grown, I learned that a woman is nothing in this world that men have made, except in the role that men demand of her. Your life is so meaningless, you have no value, except as you are a wife and mother: then be the very devil of a wife and mother. Look after your husband and family, yes: do everything for them, wrap them, bind them in the web of your providing, till they can't lift a finger to help themselves: so that husband and son and sister-in-law must all depend on you, so that you control them and keep them in the palm of your hand (Kon 2000: 51).

In this regard, where Kuo's plays highlight the internal differentiations within Confucian relationality, *Emily* underscores the dynamics of power that obtain between those

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[13] The Peranakans, or Straits-born Chinese, are a culturally distinct group whose roots lie in the inter-marriage of Chinese men with Malay women in and around Malacca during the sixteenth century. Peranakan culture is a hybrid of Chinese and Malay influences, and manifests itself in rituals, clothing,

differentiations, and, given the neo-Confucian moment into which it intervened, would have served as a timely reminder of that philosophy's historical role in legitimating patriarchal power and the subordination of women. This is not to say, however, that Emily is unambiguously a figure of feminist empowerment, and her ambivalent relation to the patriarchal system, along with the cultural context of the play's writing and setting, informs a perceptive study by Jacqueline Lo. Bringing Homi Bhabha's concept of postcolonial mimicry to bear on the play and the character, Lo concludes that "...it/she functions in-between the colonial dialectic as both dominant and subaltern" and that "...*Emily* traces the negotiation of power relations – as a literary exercise, as a theatrical event and as a signifier of the larger systems of recuperating cultural and political identity in many post-colonial societies" (1992: 130). In terms of gender, class and cultural identifications and its ramifications for those Emily comes into contact with, "the victim is also the victimiser" (129).

At the same time, the question arises as to whether the performance of this ambivalence is all there is to the play, and if not, where else its force and effects might be identified. The pertinence of Lo's observations notwithstanding, framing Emily's "subject-positioning" so resolutely within the context of "power relations" and their critique arguably circumscribes the most intriguing aspects of both Emily's and *Emily's* performance. For Lo, the play has deconstructive force because it suggests that "the Centre is itself made up of multiple levels of marginality" (129), yet as the terminology of this and other observations imply ("mimicry is at once resemblance and menace to the Centre" (127)), Lo's own analysis is discursively organized by what she disparages as "the authority of the Centre" (127). What is distinctive about *Emily* and Emily, however, is not that they are "decentred" or even "multiple", but simply centre*less*. There is no identifiable core to the character or the play, but nor are they permeated by its absence, or exercised by a resistance to it. One cannot deny the socio-historical conditions and epistemologies that inform Lo's postcolonialist analysis. However, the negatively defined qualities she applauds in the monologic style, which "...radicalises the discourses of abrogation and appropriation within the text by foregrounding the semiotic gaps between what is said and what is seen" (126), demonstrate a fundamental antipathy to what is *affirmed* by the performance, as well as a glossing-over of some of the play's ultimate weaknesses. These affirmative elements, I

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food, architecture, language (a mixture of English, Malay and the Hokkien dialect) and a popular form of theatre, whose stock characters include an overbearing matriarch played by a man.

propose, offer a way of refining the concept of relationality introduced above, while the play's weaknesses underline some of its limitations.

To elaborate on both these points, I shall make specific reference to the most recent professional production of *Emily*, presented by Wild Rice Theatre Company, and performed by Ivan Heng, which premiered in 2000, and was periodically revived until 2002 (figures 13-15). That a play already intrinsically concerned with the performative qualities of gender formation should enjoy a highly successful local run and international tour with a man in the title role would appear to make it ripe for a Butlerian analysis, not least since Butler finds a paradigmatic corrective to the normative force of performative repetition in the drag act.[14] However, what Heng's ebullient performance rather serves to underscore is an imaginative partnership between audience and actor in which the normativizing imperatives of gender formulation are just one of the themes that are explored. This is because Heng blends a method-style approach to characterization[15] with references to cross-dressing traditions in Peranakan theatre. The result is a composite of gendered gestures whose dizzying conflagration invests them with a momentum in which they constantly blend. This process happens repeatedly and rapidly. For example, in the script, the point at which Emily seals the trust of her mother-in-law is described thus:

> One day she went to the bank to take out her diamonds for a party. And that day she happened to be in a good mood so she took her big ring and asked me, 'Mau-kah Emily?'
>
> *Shows big diamond ring.*
>
> So she gave me her ring, Susie naik jah-kee saja (Kon 2000: 18).[16]

In Heng's performance, after a slow build-up in which Emily shrewdly helps her mother-in-law win at cards, this vignette is enacted in a flurry of movement. Going to the bank is described as he moves across the stage as Emily, after which he jumps momentarily through 180 degrees to play a hunched and toothy mother-in-law offering

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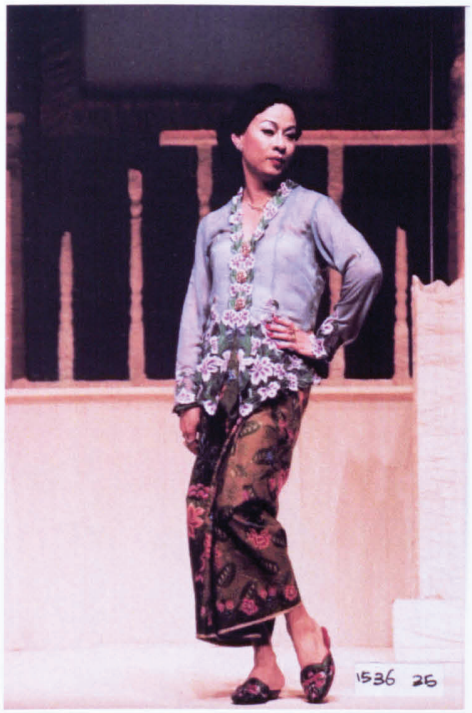
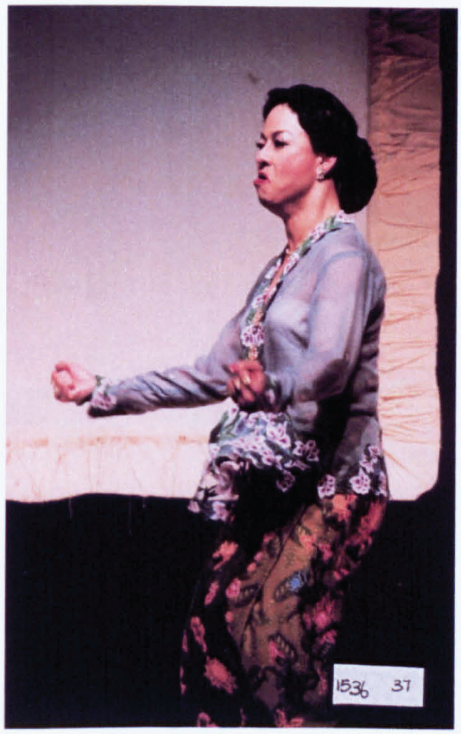
[14] "*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*" (Butler 1999 [1990]: 175, in italics in the original).

[15] In a television documentary about the production, Heng states: "It's like any other role. I have to put on a costume. I have to work on my posture. I have to work on my voice. I have to work on my movements, and the whole vocabulary is built up based on two things: imagination and observation. I like watching people, and I like really getting inside people. It's got to do with an emotional core as well as a physical thing. So I try and get in touch with those things and I just apply myself rigorously to taking on the role like I would any other role (*Ivan Takes on Emily*: 2001)."

[16] Mau-kah Emily? – Do you want it Emily? Susie naik jah-kee saja – Susie was so jealous. These are Peranakan expressions.





Figures 13-15. Ivan Heng in *Emily of Emerald Hill* (2001). Photos courtesy of Wild Rice.

the ring. Within seconds he is Emily again, strenuously protesting her unworthiness of the offer, a gesture played out just slightly too long to be spontaneous and heartfelt, whereupon he swoops his arm up and turns it through ninety degrees to show the audience a glittering diamond ring on his middle finger. A triumphant grin and knowing nod of the head sustains the audience's laughter, as they realise both the full extent of Emily's deviousness, and revel in their own complicity.

This brief sequence exemplifies the complexities, not only of Heng's portrayal, but also of the play as a whole. Describing an event that happened "one day" at a specified location marks a temporal and spatial shift from the narrative that precedes it, and which the actor is free to acknowledge depending on their chosen performative conventions. The next line introduces a new character, succinctly described as in a good mood, executing an action, and speaking to Emily. The stage direction does not specify *who* shows the ring, and, in a sense, it could be all three: Emily, her mother-in-law, and the performer. Heng's action here is of particular interest. The switch from mother-in-law to a protesting Emily is a comic one, based on contrasting generational and social behaviours, each with their own subtexts. His turn to the audience marks a shift both from the narrated past into the narrating present and into a more presentational mode. As he does so, the raising of the finger represents a loaded climax to the story. That the ring is well displayed is the least important aspect of the gesture: that it is on the *middle* finger, with the others folded down, is an unambiguous sign of triumph at the expense of another – in narrative terms, Susie – and also takes on a gendered signification, not only because of its sexual connotations, but because Heng deliberately invests the move with a muscularity and forcefulness that leaves the audience in no doubt about its masculine aspect. This, itself, is double-edged, referencing both Heng's own gendered identity, *and* suggesting that Emily, too, must retain something of this trait if she is to capitalise on her success at the bank.

That all this takes place within a matter of twenty seconds hints at the extent of the fluidity that characterizes the full two hours of the play, lending it an epic quality. Indeed, it is in terms of temporal flux and its cumulative effect on the audience's experience of the performance *as* a performance that the play's perfect unconcern with a centre *or* its absence becomes most apparent.[17] "Now, 1950" states Emily near the beginning of the play, but no such temporal marker ever accrues sufficient

[17] I presume to generalize about the audience's experience of the performance here because of the extent to which the production elicited an audible sense of collective response.

narrative or emotional significance to distinguish it as foundational: as the standpoint from which all the other events are described. Instead, Emily and the actor flit incessantly between decades, at times detailing a specific occurrence (such as her wedding), at times drawing a more general picture of an era (such as the long sequence – played at bewildering high speed by Heng – where she is shown managing the day to day activities and aspirations of her family). Nor can the "real time" shared by performer and audience be said to play this role, since it, too, takes on multiple complexions. "You have to decide whether you are at this party or not" extemporizes Heng in response to an unenthusiastic rendition of "Happy Birthday" from the audience at Emily's eldest son's party. However, the audience response derives not so much from frostiness as their still adapting to these new demands. Elsewhere in the performance, Heng turns a cookery demonstration into a stand-up comedy routine, and routinely harangues the audience. At still other times, the singular loneliness of both character and monologist bear unambiguously on Emily and Heng. For example, while the audience is applauding the virtuosity of the aforementioned "fast-forward" routine, Heng is already crumbling into Emily's subsequent despondency, such that by the end of the applause, the audience finds itself at odds with the new tone, and scrambling to catch up with a now much more private scene being shared by actor and character. Excepting a year or two at either end, the narrative encompasses Emily's entire life span, yet what the performance produces is not so much a character study as a certain density of experience that manifests itself in Emily's case as a sustaining energy.

This, more than any postcolonial critique of race and class, is the crux of *Emily's* staging of selfhood, and of the relationship it builds with its audience. Rather than being engaged in the identification of "resistant" qualities, the centrelessness that I have noted above requires that the audience conspire in the play's continuous co-creation. This is most immediately apparent in the banter and audience involvement as the performance unfolds, but it also operates in a more complex manner, which arises in response to the vulnerability of centrelessness: that with no single ordering principle to revert to or fall back on, the production is in constant danger of stalling, of stopping dead in its tracks. The audience-performer complicity that forestalls this outcome is a version of the relationality I identified earlier, where it was the audience's commitment to the performance that constituted it as such. If, in Kuo's plays, that mode of relationality has come to derive, in part at least, from the cumulative effect of their performances, in *Emily*, it is more centrally concerned with the way in which the

character is identified and sustained within the imaginative realm of the play and, in Heng's case, the singular realm of the performance.

A clue to how this happens is given in Heng's observation in interview that:

> In Emily it's very profound because you see *a life*. We only know our mothers as our mothers. We didn't know our mothers when they were sexy, when they were hot, when they were young, when they had dreams. We don't know our mothers when they are grandmothers, and you don't know your mother when she was ten. So in many ways you see a life and in that aging, you see her change. (Heng: 2003).

The sense here is that the play enables audience members to recognize the character in their own mothers or grandmothers, while at the same time disassociating themselves from the highly personalized perspective in which such relationships are conceived. The result is a kind of affective deindividuation, enabling the audience member to encounter what Gilles Deleuze – using terminology that resonates closely with Heng's – calls "a life":

> "*A* life is everywhere, in all the moments that a given living subject goes through and that are measured by given lived objects: an immanent life carrying with it the events or singularities that are merely actualized in subjects or objects....The singularities and the events that constitute *a* life coexist with the accidents of *the* life that corresponds to it, but they are neither grouped nor divided in the same way. They connect with one another in a manner entirely different from how individuals connect" (2001 [1995]: 29-30).

Deleuze goes on to cite the smiles and gestures of small children as examples of singularities, rather than subjective qualities, suggesting that "a singular life might do without any individuality, without any other concomitant that individualizes it" (30). Similarly, the overriding impression given by Heng's Emily lies not in the rounded portrayal of an indomitable matriarch (although that is also present), but in the persistence across time of a certain arch of the eyebrow, or a curl of the lip. By turns ostensive and decorative, Heng uses his hands as if carving Emily's environment out as he progresses. With more than a hint of Chinese opera-style flourish lending the movements an expanded – but entirely consistent – arc, trajectory, curvature and flow, the result is a gestural density that is neither extraneously theatrical nor mousily naturalistic. It is to this density, as affective experience, that one first and foremost responds as an audience member.

Hence, while in *Emily* a psychologically motivated character is convincingly drawn, a postcolonial critique is launched, and the dynamics of traditional Asian gender roles are explored, the conception of selfhood the play produces is reducible neither to

humanist individualism, reactive postmodern decentredness, nor neo-Confucian hierarchical obligation. Instead, Heng's portrayal would appear to have the effect of lifting the spectator out of these conventional frameworks to participate in a situation portrayed not only from another point of view, but in a qualitatively different way. As the performance unfolds from one moment to the next, with the actor constantly morphing into and out of other characters and part-characters, the character traversing her biography, and the narrative shifting not only from location to location, but between the specific and the general, the audience member is drawn into a process of on-going invention.

This process, which sustains the momentum of the performance in the absence of more secure structuring or narrative principles, draws attention to a form of relationality that is closely related to the experience of aesthetic affect. Taking his cue from William James' insight that participation in any given life-event precedes perception (James' famous example is that we are afraid because we run, rather than *vice versa*), Brian Massumi proposes an interpretation of relationality that exists prior to subject-object determinations. Since "[r]elation is immediately perceived *as such*" (2002: 231), then relationality is irreducible to the objective interactions that can be mapped between the separate components in any given situation. This is because the identification of discrete ingredients and the act of separation is applied to the "indeterminate givenness" (212) of a constantly snowballing stream of experience. While, retroactively, this can only be interpreted as a kind of vivacious excess over and above what can be named, Massumi is concerned with how testifying to the emergence of "newness" into the world carries the potential for qualitative transformation: "Relationality is the potential for singular effects of qualitative change to occur in excess over or as a supplement to objective interactions. Relationality pertains to the *openness* of the interaction rather than to the interaction per se..." (225).

Acknowledging the impossibility of perceiving such phenomena in their entirety, Massumi identifies their temporary or partial apprehension in the idea of the quality, and again, the practice of openness is key: "A quality, by nature, is a perceptible expression of uncontained affect. It always retains a sense of openness – if your sensing and speaking retains an openness to it" (220). It is here that we can begin to draw the focus back round to Ivan Heng's performance of *Emily of Emerald Hill*. While events are in a constant state of emergence and almost instantaneous capture by language, the aesthetic encounter in art may be said to withhold such reductions in

favour of provoking or sustaining the experience of a quality. In Heng's case, I propose that it is the occasion of a life, which resolves itself into multiple instances of *the* life of Emily, but never definitively.

This experience, I would argue, is what fosters and feeds off the "openness" of which Massumi writes, and in "sensing and speaking" accordingly inheres the promise of a cosmopolitan practice. However, although *Emily* and Heng's performance of it have been extremely useful in suggesting how Massumi's description of an immanent experiential relationality might be said to be operative in the theatrical event, there is a countervailing tendency within the play that limits what can be revealed about how this openness is manifested.

The problem is one of nostaligia. Kon wrote the play while living abroad (in Edinburgh), basing the character on her own grandmother, and the Peranakan cultural milieu is rosily remembered. The play is peppered with references to places, practices and recipes of the past that, to judge by the audience's response to Heng's performance, operate as points of nostalgic recognition. There are several moments, for example, when Heng simply has to throw in a Malay or Hokkien phrase to produce appreciative laughter in monologues that are far from comic. This nostalgic element also serves to invest Emily's lonely plight at the end of the play with pathos, rather than the more complex dynamics of bittersweet desperation that characterize earlier scenes. In Heng's case, this meant that the aforementioned gestural density was gradually smothered by a plaintive whine that simply could not sustain the degree of sympathy the sentiments expressed demanded of the audience as a whole.

In this regard, what might be called the various "triggers" in *Emily* that ultimately foregrounded nostalgic recognition over imaginative co-creation and emotional tugs over affective engagement can be conceived of as blockages in the circulation of inventiveness mentioned above. At these points, playwright and actor pull into focus as individuals with responsibility for ordering the play and the trajectory of its reception, and the audience's responses become pre-figured and therefore conform to already-existing points of reference. While this can result in an appreciative audience response, it also compromises the idea of the relational that I have been pursuing in this chapter.

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Amongst the first Singaporean monodramas, and still some of the most popular, *The Coffin is too Big for the Hole*, *No Parking on Odd Days* and *Emily of Emerald Hill* all represent intriguing interventions into the conceptions of selfhood that underscored the PAP's response to rapid economic development in the eighties and beyond. Against the latter's totalizing and essentialist validation of a rigid, hierarchical set of pre-determined relations, the plays manifested a broader range of cultural influences that characterized the milieu of their writers and audiences. In Kuo's case, this included, but was not confined to, an approach to relationality that was sufficiently informed by Confucianism to mount a subtle critique of inflexible technocratic rationality, and to acknowledge the centrality of audience-performer interactions in forging alternative avenues for human relations. In so doing, his work can be said to have fostered both the singular and social relations that are the broad concerns of this study. Kon drew attention to the unbalanced and distorting ways in which the official interpretation of relationality had historically been practiced and, in production, her play demonstrated the potential to counter this by requiring performances that engaged in a wholly different relational register, conflating the gregarious promise of *Coffin* and *Parking's* production and reception and locating it within the purview of the aesthetic. Mixing nostalgic social conservatism and radical singular possibility, the play hints suggestively at the general tenor of the time in which it was written, and just as it continues to be produced, so the state initiatives that were set in train at its time of writing continue to shape Singapore society. In the next chapter, I explore the work of a company whose engagements with that society owe a clear debt to Kuo's pioneering work and Kon's thematic concerns, and which is distinctive for the explicit way in which it has sought to combine a keen sense of social mission with aesthetic exploration: The Necessary Stage.

2. Public Relations: The Social Work of The Necessary Stage.

1.

The discussion of relationality in the previous chapter was informed by a Confucian insight concerning human-relatedness, which extend outwards as if in a series of concentric circles, from the self at the centre, to immediate, biological connections with family members, through friends, to the community, country, world and, ultimately, a "beyond", where Confucianism takes on an ethico-religious dimension. This system simultaneously provides the scope for both a mode of self-development that stresses inter-dependency and the extension and enhancement of the entire relational network, and the pervasive exercise of social control. Moreover, these two factors are not mutually exclusive, and it is intriguing to note how they have been negotiated in Chinese theatrical aesthetics. In her analysis of several iconic female roles in classical Chinese music-drama, Haiping Yan describes how the action taken by certain characters broadens the scope and boundaries of Confucian ethics. However, she also notes that the register of "feelings" produced specifically by female characters is incommensurable with the system of codified laws within which they act. The result is an ethics that is both redefined and paradoxically exceeded by theatricalization. For instance, Yan writes of the thirteenth-century play *The Injustice Done to Tou Ngo*: "Driven by ethical impetuses and phrased in Confucian vocabulary, the staging begets imaginative forces exceeding the realistic terms of the plot to operate aesthetically upon the cultural matrix of the specific historical moment" (2003: 73). It is such "felt truths" in Chinese music-drama that "potently challenge the hegemony of intelligible reality while radically redefining "true" humanity" (81).

Yan's analysis is subtle, and to elaborate such an ethics with reference to contemporary Singaporean theatre would not only require a nuanced re-formulation of her form- and context-specific observations, but would risk over-stating the significance of Confucian aesthetics to a modernized and heterogeneous cultural milieu. Nevertheless, what Yan usefully highlights is the question of what falls outside or exceeds those aspects of Confucian codification that – in its "Asian Values" incarnation as much as in other historical periods – establish and legitimate social control. These are based on the so-called "five relationships" – father-son, ruler-minister, husband-wife, old-young, and friend-friend – which are philosophically defined as reciprocal, but have traditionally taken on a hierarchical cast. In prioritizing

these relationships, Confucianism embeds social being experientially in the here and now, and politically in the status quo. While the ensuing process of creative self-transformation is one of working *from* the status quo *towards* what ought to be, questions remain about the possibility of new kinds of relationship, and the ruptures they provoke or to which they respond.

It is with the aim of exploring the ways in which the theatre can reflect on or produce novel forms of social experience that I wish to draw together two complimentary observations. The first is that, in Singapore, where, as the sociologist Chua Beng Huat observes, the expression of alternative political and social views has long been suppressed by restrictions on public assembly and freedom of speech, "the responsibility for critical commentary on society, culture and politics have [*sic*] ended up disproportionately on the shoulders of the arts, particularly theatre" (2004: 320). The second is that the material aspect of many of these restrictions combines with Singapore's small size and population density to make the use and control of space integral to any discussion of relationality, however abstract its terms of reference may ostensibly be. In this chapter, I will discuss the conjunction of these two observations, particularly as they relate to the work of The Necessary Stage (TNS), the Singaporean company that has most explicitly explored the intersection of social and theatrical space, and the kinds of relations that might ensue. I will then focus on one performance by TNS which, although in some regards atypical of the company's output, enables us to revisit the ideas introduced towards the end of the previous chapter, and to further develop them in light of these theatrically-informed "public relations".

2.

The story of Singapore's development is one of the radical transformation and intensive exploitation of space. This was initiated by the planning and plantations of the colonial era, and reached unprecedented levels after independence. The 1966 Land Acquisitions Act enabled the PAP government to purchase large swathes of land at low cost, for the purposes of public housing, transport infrastructure, and to effect a shift from agriculture to manufacturing and, most recently, to service industries and hi-tech research and development.

As a result, one of the main challenges of daily life in Singapore is to exist in close proximity to many other people without ceding intimacy. Elite status is determined by access to and ownership of sufficient space to diminish this challenge, for example through "country club" membership, and landed property. For the rest of the population, it is met through constant negotiation, the terms of which are determined not only by personal and cultural standards, but also by the dynamics of the public space in which they take place. Singapore's reputation for orderliness, and the oft-repeated joke about it being a "fine" city, derive from the degree to which such stipulations penetrate "personal space", and are enforced. A high degree of surveillance is taken for granted, and the ubiquity of security guards testifies to the comprehensive privatization of apparently public space. A plethora of individually inconsequential restrictions and urban design features combine to determine the individual's passage through space, and the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (Sars) outbreak only intensified an already invasive level of corporeal discipline through all-pervasive hygiene campaigns, movement restrictions, temperature checks and Identity Card-based tracing mechanisms. Moreover, the ideological premium that is exacted by the transformation of *spatial* control into *social* control is invariably to be found in a "value added" relationship with a commercial one. In the miles of malls that characterise most of Singapore's "leisure" areas, space is farmed every bit as intensively as the rubber plantations of a hundred years ago, whether by maximising advertising coverage, or displaying consumer goods and special promotions, to greatly homogenising effect.

This situation is integral to the "social compact" that Singaporeans are said (usually by state agencies) to have with the government. Public space is policed, surveyed, homogenized and corporatised as the pay-off for living in a safe, clean and reasonably affluent environment: yet people subvert it in their own way. Any new pavement not respecting the most direct route from A to B will go unused, while a more practical path is worn in the grass within days. The lack of public seating is compensated for by the inveterate co-option of stairs, and sub-cultural groups, from break-dancers and skateboarders to picnicking Phillipina maids, effortlessly seek out and appropriate architectural features that meet their needs. In addition, one only need scratch the surface to realise that people are unwilling to take Singapore's social spaces at face value. More arresting even than the corporate *feng shui* that determines the design of some of its most significant developments (such as the Suntec City shopping and

exhibition centre), the island is teeming with altars, positioned everywhere from the foot of great trees and the space beneath flyovers, to ledges in otherwise pristine shopping malls. During the Hungry Ghost Festival in August, when offerings are left by the roadside, Chinese Opera performances (*wayang*) and mandarin pop concerts (*ge tai*) are held on temporary stages to entertain the ghosts. It is at times like these that one is reminded most powerfully that, however policed and privatised public space may appear to be in Singapore, it is never entirely dominated or possessed: from inter-personal negotiations and ad-hoc improvisations, to the overlaying of the physical space with other worlds – and other inhabitants – space in Singapore is multiple, contested, and highly charged.

3.

It is significant that it should be the theatre that stands at the crossroads between the human and spirit worlds, for this is a role that it has played in all the great and heterogeneous cultures from which its people are drawn – Chinese, Indian and Malay – and continues to play, although to a decreasing degree, in the traditional theatrical expressions of those cultures. The extent to which the contemporary theatre has inherited such spiritual functions is debatable, but, the secular context notwithstanding, the theatre nonetheless remains a space of ambiguity and multiplicity. Whatever is presented or represented on stage always both gestures elsewhere and remains resolutely itself. The stage is both "here" and "there", which, as Gay McAuley notes, has ideological implications: "...the connection between the onstage and the off is the means of bringing into focus the reality status of the one in relation to the other and, indeed, the relationship of the dramatic fiction to the society in which it is being performed" (1999: 88). In a country whose every square metre is comprehensively quantified in a Master Plan, and whose most vibrant site of participatory democracy is the Forum Page of *The Straits Times*,[1] the referential fluidity of theatrical space in Singapore means that it maintains an importance far in excess of the few hundred square metres of actual stage-space available on the island.[2]

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[1] The Master Plan is an island-wide map, updated periodically by the Urban Redevelopment Authority, which designates the approved usage of every building and tract of land in Singapore. There are 54 map sheets (in 1:2000 scale) for the Central area and 257 map sheets (in 1:5000 scale) for the rest of the island. The Master Plan is accompanied by a Concept Plan, which envisions future land use. For more details, visit http://www.ura.gov.sg.

[2] This is not to suggest that what occurs in the theatre is by any means inherently "resistant" to dominant discourses and practices – increasingly in Singapore's burgeoning mainstream, far from it. However, at the very least, one might observe that the "reality status" of what occurs on stage is subject to significantly more rigorous critique by audience members and reviewers than ever publicly attends the pronouncements of state representatives.

Evidence of the extent and effects of this fluidity is to be found in the variety of strategies local theatre-makers have employed to investigate space on stage. The first is *thematic*. Kuo's *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* (1985) and *No Parking on Odd Days* (1986) are both parables of resistance to social control played out over apparently insignificant amounts of space. Such concerns would crop up again in plays like TNS's *Still Building* (1992) and Kuo's *Geylang People in the Net* (1997). The second strategy is *aesthetic*. In the late eighties and early nineties, the advent of black box spaces at Fort Canning and the Substation, and the popularity of "poor theatre" techniques (introduced by Kuo's workshops on Grotowski) led to a range of experiments with theatricality (for example, Leow Puay Tin's *Three Children* (1988, 1992), by TheatreWorks) and stage configurations (such as TNS' *Those Who Can't, Teach* (1990)). In 1993, TNS brought a *social* impetus to this aesthetic tendency when they experimented with Forum Theatre, which was based on the live interaction and intervention of audience members into the plays. *Conceptual* innovations were introduced in the late eighties, when William Teo's Asia-in-Theatre Research Circus began to present work outdoors as part of a broader project of revisiting traditional Asian theatre forms. Subsequently, the nineties saw an explosion of site-specific work by groups such as TheatreWorks, TNS, Toy Factory, EcNad, Theatre OX and spell#7. Parallel developments in the visual art-influenced performance of Lee Wen, Tang Da Wu and Zai Kuning led to a focus on corporeality, with investigations into the codes and effects of staging the body in differently charged theatrical and non-theatrical spaces.

Whether investigating space at the thematic, aesthetic, social, conceptual or corporeal levels, what links these examples is that all the artists have made the inherently spatial aspect of theatrical performance a focus, rather than a by-product of their work. Of all of these artists, in terms of isolating that point at which the theatrical and the social most productively intersect and overlap, there is no more comprehensive – if problematic – example than the body of work produced by TNS. The company's first production – a staging of Woody Allen's *God* – took place in the same year as *No Parking on Odd Days*, 1986, to be followed the next year by the first of the locally-written plays (Ovidia Yu's *Dead on Cue*) they would come to be known for championing. From this point onwards, it is primarily on the work of TNS that I would like to focus. First, however, it should be acknowledged that although the association

of TNS's name with many of the developments listed above is significant, one should not jump to the wrong conclusion. The group has never explicitly pursued a "spatial agenda", as Haresh Sharma – the company's Resident Playwright since 1989 – is the first to admit.[3] Although *Still Building*, which juxtaposes three middle-class Singaporeans struggling with social claustrophobia against three clerks trapped in a collapsed bank, remains one of the defining Singaporean plays of the early nineties, such themes of physical and figurative entrapment have not been consistently pursued by the playwright. *Off Centre* (1993) is a more typical example from this period, where the displacement alluded to in the title is one aspect of a broader range of themes and scenarios drawn upon to depict the difficulties faced by a defined social group – in this case the mentally ill. Similarly, Alvin Tan – Artistic Director since the company's inception – has not pursued any sustained investigation into the spatial implications of staging the body in social space, and arguably the constantly changing make-up of his ensembles militates against such a project.[4] At the same time, the group's long-standing commitment to making local theatre in the context outlined above means that the lack of a spatial *agenda* should not preclude the identification of a spatial *practice*.

The implications of this become apparent it we start by considering the relative paucity of site-specific work done by the company. In light of the group's oft-acknowledged social project, which stems from "issue-based" thematic concerns, collaborations with government and non-government-affiliated community groups, to their own youth and community outreach programmes, it is perhaps surprising that TNS has made only three relatively minor works for "found spaces".[5] This is in contrast both to the output of Singapore's other high profile non-mainstream English language theatre company, TheatreWorks, whose artistic director, Ong Keng Sen, has produced six major site-specific productions since 1991,[6] and to TNS's apparent peers in the area of socially-

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[3] "I don't usually like to make space the issue. I prefer the issue to be the relationship between the audience and what we are giving them." (Tan and Sharma 2002).

[4] Apart from brief periods in 1993 and 1997-8 when an ensemble of four full-time "actor-facilitators" were employed, TNS has followed the trend of almost all theatre companies in Singapore of retaining full-time artistic directors and administrative staff, but engaging actors on a project-by-project basis.

[5] These were: *BrainStorm (what's that in your head?)* (1998) – a mini-festival of installations and plays by Sharma, Chong Tze Chien and others, mounted in the Singapore Arts Museum; *The Exodus* (1999), written by Sharma, directed by Jean Ng and performed at the decrepit and condemned Gay World Stadium in the Geylang area; and *Is This Our Stop?* (2000), written and directed by Chong for the M1 Youth Connection (an annual festival of plays for young people), and performed on a specially adapted moving bus.

[6] These are: *Trojan Women* (Bukit Timah quarry, 1991), *Broken Birds: An Epic Longing* (Fort Canning Park, 1995), *The Yang Family* (Amoy Street shophouse, 1996), *Destinies of Flowers in the Mirror* (Suntec City Fountain of Wealth, 1997), *The Spirits Play* (Battle Box, 2000) and *Search: Hamlet* (Elsinore Castle, Denmark, 2002).

engaged theatre practice, such as Augusto Boal and the Philippines Educational Theater Association.[7] Actually, by comparison with the former's process-based experimentation and the latter's more explicit commitment to left wing or revolutionary politics, TNS are aesthetic and political moderates. While one can speculate on both the external pressures (such as the PAP's post-"Marxist Conspiracy" and "Forum Theatre" tetchiness regarding political theatre[8]) and internal preferences (for professional rather than community practice, for instance) that may lie behind this, perhaps it is sufficient to note that Tan and Sharma seem to feel that their social project is best served when their objects of reference are hoisted out of the messy free-for-all of daily life, and set to work within the confines – both abstract and ambiguous – of the stage. The implications of this for TNS's artistic practice and social project are usefully teased out with reference to an example from a defining moment in the company's history.

In April 2000, TNS moved from their city-centre headquarters to purpose-built premises at Marine Parade Community Centre (CC), in then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's constituency on the East Coast. To outside observers, the move was both appropriate and perplexing, embedding the group as it did both more deeply in the community, and in the government's programme of social engineering.[9] Clearly aware of these issues, the company made a strategic statement by inaugurating their new black box space with *3some*: a short film and two one-act plays, one of which (*untitled women number one*) featured Resident Director Jeff Chen lying naked and immobile throughout (figure 16). The company self-imposed a Restricted (Artistic) (R(A)) rating on the show, which meant that it could only be seen by people over the age of 18. R(A) is a ratings category more commonly associated with film, determining that it can only be shown to over-21s, and only within the city centre. This form of zoning is one of the ways in which the government maps spatial divisions onto the city in line with

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[7] For an instructive survey of the aesthetic and political development of the Philippines Educational Theater Association, see the relevant chapters in Eugène van Erven (1992) and (2001).

[8] "On 27th May 1987, *The Straits Times* reported that 16 people, among them Wong [Souk Yee] of [local theatre company] Third Stage, were arrested under the Internal Security Act for participating in a conspiracy to overthrow the government. Chng [Suan Tze] was arrested a month later and went on TV to confess her involvement in the Marxist plot, while Wong spoke of writing *Esperanza* [a 1986 play about the plight of a foreign maid in Singapore], to highlight "class difference". Both were detained for over a year, and, upon their release, had to promise that they would not do theatre for two years" (Oon 2001: 112). For more on the Forum Theatre issue, see Chapter One, note 5.

[9] Mauzy and Milne describe the management committees of CCs as "para-political organizations", which serve "to blur the line between government and party...to mobilise grassroots leaders who have been reluctant to identify openly with a political party...[and] to mediate between the PAP MP, the government, and the people, instead of the party branch" (2002: 43).

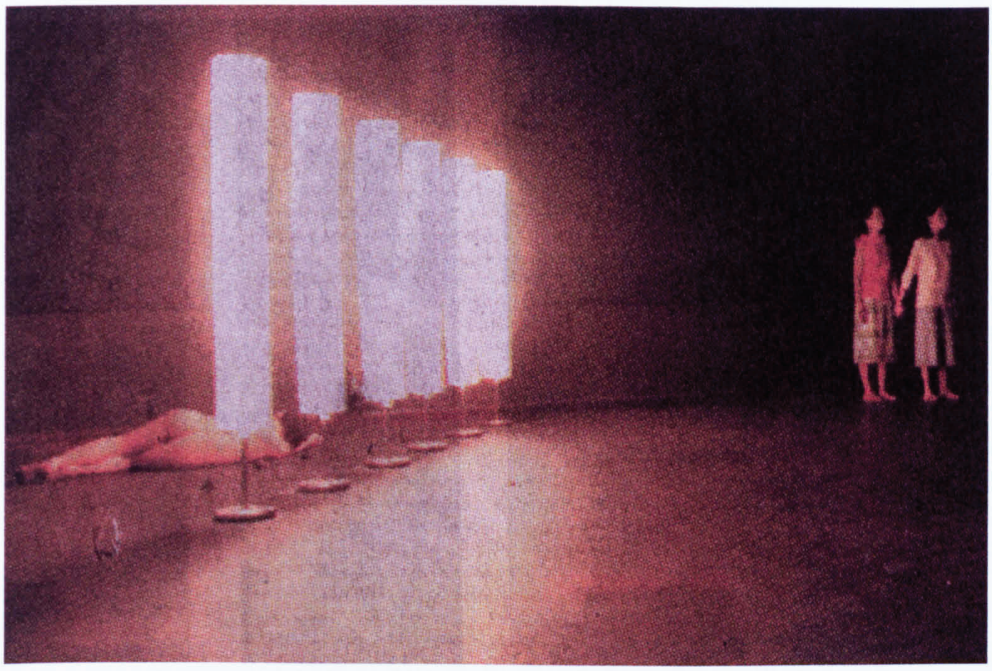

Figure 16. *untitled women number one* (2000) by Haresh Sharma. Photo courtesy of The Necessary Stage.

their rhetoric of the liberal Cosmopolitan and the conservative Heartlander. The staging of an R(A) performance in the "Heartlands" was both a statement of the group's calculated indifference to their changed circumstances, and an implicit challenge to the government's simplistic reasoning. Equally important in this was the ambiguous nature of the production itself. Over its entire duration, the two main characters, both women, stood still, one slightly in front of the other, hand in hand. A series of fragmentary dialogues hinted at a relationship between the two women and with other characters, including the naked man. The women related happy and traumatic memories, sang songs, and expressed feelings of pain, pleasure and fear. A single spotlight and some standing lamps illuminated them and then faded in a Beckettian invocation of time and environment, but the ambiguity of their situation was never clearly resolved. That *3some* was followed up by a community festival further demonstrated a commitment to the full range of the group's diverse interests and audience constituencies.

The staging of *untitled women number one* at Marine Parade activated two spatial features that have characterised much of TNS's work since: an explicit awareness of the institutional meanings that attend a given theatrical space, and an opening-up of the interpretative space available to audience members in relation to the performance. In combination, they lie at the heart of TNS's use of space, although they conform neither to any of the various theatrical uses of space listed earlier, nor any discernible development of theme or performance technique on the part of Sharma and Tan. For this reason, further discussion needs to be informed by another kind of spatiality that is of acute import in Singapore: *civil space*.

In 1998-9, Alvin Tan participated in The Working Committee (TWC), a year-long networking and support project for a diverse range of established and emerging civil society activists. Recently, many countries have seen an increase in ground-level political participation through the formation of politically non-aligned interest groups. In developed countries in particular, many such groups have been galvanised by a perception that multinational corporate interests threaten both minority rights and government powers of regulation alike. The Singapore context is slightly different. The *laissez-faire* attitude of the government towards big business on the one hand, and its aggressive involvement in commercial activities, through Government Linked Companies, on the other, along with pervasive tendencies towards social control, have

resulted in a novel configuration where civil society activity is principally defined in relation to domestic government policy, rather than against "big business" or transnational bodies such as the World Trade Organisation, International Monetary Fund or the G8. Furthermore, the last decade has seen the government wake up to the potential of *some* such activities for fostering a deeper sense of belonging in the nation. This, along with an anxious desire to compensate, without ceding political control, for the overwhelming dominance of the PAP in parliament, has led the government to develop limited initiatives for the cultivation of what it is careful to describe as "civic" society. This might involve participation in the good works of state bodies such as Community Development Councils (CDCs), or helping out at one of the ethnically-based support groups for disadvantaged children. However, where such civic involvement is defined by a call from the government for "Active Participation" or "Community Champions" within sanctioned and politically quiescent social structures, what galvanized the disparate civil society groups that made up TWC was their collective cry for "more space".

The precise nature of the space they were calling for (and continue to do so) is complex, in that it is interpreted in numerous ways. For some, the goal is literal. The Nature Society (Singapore), for example, campaigns for the setting aside of areas of natural beauty and scientific interest in the face of housing and golf-course developments. For others, it is also discursive. This is the case for the women's rights group AWARE, which fights for greater equality within certain heavily gender-coded spaces such as the home and the workplace. For yet others, the concept is largely metaphorical. Those defending the now defunct Internet discussion and information site *Sintercom* may have been calling for "greater political space", but, since cyberspace is, in material terms, a non-space, such a call needs to be seen as strategic, rather than literal. This multiplicity is such that any single usage also carries resonances of the others. This is because, as civil society activist Tan Chong Kee has observed in conversation (September 2003), they all stand as a euphemism for one thing: freedom. This is given extra weight by the fact that, in the highly charged and densely packed nation-state described earlier, no-one living in Singapore can speak in purely figurative terms about space. The call for greater space in Singapore is informed as deeply by proprioceptive experience as it is by abstract democratic ideals.

Alvin Tan's association with the other members of TWC suggests a shared perception regarding social roles and relations to the state which, in many countries, may not arise, given that theatre is not always conceived of as a civil society agency on the same footing as more conventional non-governmental organisations. Within the Singapore context, I would suggest that underlying that shared perception is Tan's *spatial practice* as a theatre-maker, which other local activists recognise and appreciate, regardless of their precise field of interest. By consequence, it can be inferred that there are significant and productive areas of overlap between TNS's theatrical space and Singapore's civil space. Yet the instability of the former and the multiplicity of the latter prohibit any simplistic mapping of the one onto the other. A brief theoretical detour informs a more nuanced interpretation.

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre draws a distinction between "representations of space" and "representational space". The former, he argues is the conceptualized space of "technocratic subdividers and social engineers", and is determined, at any given time, by the dominant mode of production. "Representational space" derives from lived experience, and overlays physical space with symbolism and the realm of the imagination. In this regard, it is the space of inhabitants and artists (1991 [1974]: 33, 37). Within the Singapore context, I would suggest that the difference between representations of space and representational space is the difference between civic and civil space. Civic space is normally inaugurated or supported by the government with the ultimate aim of increasing productivity. Civil space is more multiplex and decentralised, taking many different forms depending on the experiences, desires and aspirations of those who seek to produce it. Furthermore, this difference is qualitative.

Consider, for example, the concept of "Out-of-Bounds [or OB] markers", which the government uses to signify the limits of what is politically, socially or aesthetically acceptable within Singaporean society. Derived from golf, the spatial metaphor is an attempt to manage calls for civil space. In its ambiguity, it almost succeeds. Since the OB markers are never clearly formulated, and only come to light when crossed, their elasticity is used by the state as the carrot that promises a controlled process of "loosening up", and, in theory, goads Singaporeans into being more creative and less

risk-averse.[10] However, it is precisely *because* of this risk-aversion that the ambiguity surrounding the location of the OB markers is more usually seen as the stick that leads Singaporeans to self-censor, and behave cautiously.[11] The spatial assumptions latent in the metaphor militate against any radical reformulation of the terrain. With its elitist provenance, and quantifying implications, the concept of OB markers is a representation of space qualitatively at odds with the practices, discourses, ideals and lived experiences that constitute the creatively produced representational spaces advocated by many individuals and civil society groups.

In this light, it is tempting to equate theatrical space with representational space. Lefebvre cautions against this, noting the unique properties of space in the theatre:

> Theatrical space certainly implies a *representation of space* – scenic space – corresponding to a particular *conception* of space. The *representational space*, mediated yet directly experienced, which infuses the work and the moment, is established as such through the dramatic action itself. (188, italics in original)

It is at this point that we can productively return to TNS's combined concerns, noted earlier, with the meanings encoded in a given theatre building and with an opening-up of the interpretative options available to the audience in a performance. In mobilising the former, they engage with "representations of space"; the latter, "representational space". It is this *dual* approach, informed equally by the company's longstanding engagement with state technocracy and by the diffuse aspirations of civil space that is unique amongst Singaporean theatre companies. Furthermore, it is of particular

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[10] The logic of this is fully acknowledged by the government, as is evident in the following extract from a March 1994 *Straits Times* report in which then Minister for Information and the Arts, George Yeo, reflected on the aftermath of "the recent controversial performance [*Brother Cane*, by Josef Ng] by the arts group Fifth Passage":

> When we promoted the arts, we said, look, the old OB markers have to be widened and we will determine the new OB markers when it is clear where they should be. And when this incident took place, I said, ah, this is a very good spot to plant a new OB marker.
>
> ...
>
> Noting that it was good to define the boundaries in the long term, BG Yeo added: When the boundaries are clear, then those who act within the boundaries are free. But when the boundaries are not clear, those who act within the boundaries become unfree (cited in Langenbach 2003: 267).

[11] This even within government-sanctioned set-ups. Quoted in a newspaper report on improving feedback mechanisms on policy issued, Viswa Sadasivan, chairman of the Political Development Feedback Group, noted: "A lot of them [members of the public] are holding back because they're not sure where the OB markers are...I won't be surprised if some MPs and Cabinet ministers don't know either because the markers are not decided scientifically but, I believe, quite arbitrarily by a handful in top leadership. While we can see the need for OB markers when it comes to security and ethnic matters, in the long run, such an arbitrary method doesn't augur well for building an active citizenry" (cited in Tan, Kim-Kyna 2002).

importance to TNS, because it traverses an otherwise heteroglot company set-up and audience constituency.

This dual approach is well illustrated by the first three performances of the 2002 season: *The Beginning of the End (BOTE)* (Drama Centre), *God Eat God* (TNS Black Box), and *Close – In Your Face* (Marine Parade CC Theatrette).

With its plush seats and imposing proscenium, the Drama Centre was a typical western-style theatre space, well-known for the presentation of conventional, proscenium-based plays.[12] *BOTE's* set ostensibly conformed to this expectation, delineating as it did a domestic space (the archetypal setting of naturalistic drama) represented by the traditional scenographic technique of three flats, each with a door: a familiar scenario that enables the progression of linear narrative driven by the entrance of characters with new information. The opening scene, a lugubrious parody of family life (figures 17 and 18), immediately began the process of undermining any expectations of naturalistic convention that the audience may have entertained. And although the set remained intact throughout the performance, as a conventional playing space it was effectively ravaged by chaotic action, video projections and a spiralling anti-narrative of incest and insanity. The auditorium, meanwhile, was invaded by huge speakers playing music at deafening volumes, and an explosion of paper fragments that rained down on the audience's heads.

In *God Eat God*, the strategy was inverted. A black box space with an abstract white box set clearly gives rise to audience expectations of something challenging and "difficult". What they did not expect, however, was that the performance would open with Sharma standing up and delivering an apparently sincere homily about the need to believe in God and do good deeds. It was a direct challenge to the liberal constituency amongst the groups' audience to quit chattering and act within the community. The preachy tone and simplistic solution proposed by Sharma were redolent of *Singapore 21*-style exhortations to pull together, and the show closed with the same *faux-naïf* formula.[13] The effect on the audience was divisive, with some

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[12] The Drama Centre has since been demolished to make way for the new Singapore Management University.

[13] *Singapore 21* was a public consultation process initiated by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in 1997. In 1999, after gathering feedback from over 6000 citizens, the Singapore 21 Committee presented a report to Parliament that introduced a new set of more softly-focused precepts than those of the Shared Values. They aimed to highlight the importance of the nation's "heartware", as opposed to its "hardware",

audience members adding an "amen" to Sharma's sermon, while others seemed to bristle at the patronizing tone.

Close – In My Face opened with a replay, in a community theatre context – of the bare bottom that raised eyebrows in *3some* in 2000. A toweled middle-aged man walked to the front of the stage, said a few words, and then turned to go back to "the shower", revealing that the towel only reached part way around his body (figure 19): cue an audible gasp from the audience. The venue, publicity campaign and institutional backing (from the local CDC) for the performance clearly marked it out as a community event, and the bare bottom forced the audience to confront two simultaneous, but often conflicting realties. First, that such sights are normally deemed unacceptable on the Singapore stage, but secondly, that the setting is a domestic one that the majority of its target audience could identify with, and that it is therefore perfectly natural. The gasp was good-natured and amused, and the scene served as an efficient way of making clear to the audience that the play would be dealing with experiences close to those of their own daily lives, but that they should also prepare to be challenged along the way.

So much for *representations of space*. Addressing audience space at the level of *representational space* is a little more diffuse. In interview, Alvin Tan has stated:

> My site is when you're working with fragments or montage, and you put two things together that have no apparent connection and it's up to the audience to read it – I love that space. It's an abstract kind of space. It's not a physical space. People get anxious...That reflects a lot about life. It's very difficult to be objective (Tan and Sharma 2002).

On the face of it, this is textbook postmodernism. However, what distinguishes Tan's statement from any number of commentaries and analyses on and by practitioners who embrace this approach to theatre-making,[14] is his terminology. Although the re-configuration of spatiality (along with temporality) is a repeated motif in the discourse of postmodernism, there is nothing that demands the explanatory privilege Tan accords it: other practitioners might describe similar meaning-making processes in the theatre without conceiving of it in such explicitly spatial terms. As should be clear by now, Tan's spatial conception of his work is strongly influenced by the context in which

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and included: "The Singapore Heartbeat", "Active Citizens", "Strong Families" and "Every Singaporean Matters". *Singapore 21* has since been superceded by "Remaking Singapore" (see Chapter 0, note 14).

[14] See, for example, the influential commentaries that have arisen around the work of the Wooster Group, whose influence Tan and Sharma have acknowledged. For instance Savran (1988) and Auslander (1997).

Figure 17. *Beginning of the End (BOTE)* (2002). Photo courtesy of The Necessary Stage.

Figure 18. *Beginning of the End (BOTE)* (2002). Photo courtesy of The Necessary Stage.

Figure 19. *Close – In My Face* (2002). Photo courtesy of The Necessary Stage.

he operates. He continues: "The government can go on and say whatever they want, but it's like the space you create for yourself when you're in prison. It's not physical space, but it's more to do with how you make a space for yourself under restrictions" (Tan and Sharma 2002). The prison image is not inappropriate, since there is scant room for ambiguity in Singaporean public discourse, and the political history of the nation is littered with those who have fallen foul of the PAP's robust defence of its interests. A number of ruinous libel cases brought in recent years against opposition politicians have turned on the perceived hurt caused to prominent MPs by individual words or phrases.[15] It is within such a milieu that the full implications of Tan's comments become clear. He seeks not only to offer counter-narratives to those that dominate the Singaporean mediascape, but to generate an environment that enables audiences to engage with them in a qualitatively different way. It is through such spatially conceived processes of meaning-making that the possibility emerges of charging the "everyday" space sketched at the opening of this chapter with the "civil space" envisioned by TWC.

Again, *BOTE*, *God Eat God* and *Close* provide examples, even though Tan was not directly involved in all of them. In *BOTE*, uncertainty remained as to the identity of the characters, for the performers played multiple roles without any kind of consistent logic or switching-convention being apparent. The result was not, however, complete confusion, but a strange kind of rigour that serves to intensify the theme of "familyness". The superficial foibles of character development were stripped away, leaving the performers locked into a series of shifting inter-relationships that revealed the bedrock of this particular domestic environment: sibling rivalry, thwarted ambition, incestuous desire and unrequited love. In *God Eat God*, each of the semiotic and narrative strands – video, music, acting, the comic parts, the tragic parts – were held at a slightly forced, artificial distance from each other, obliging the audience to join the dots. In *Close*, an unidentified, ghost-like figure haunted many of the scenes, and engaged in her own abstract activities, at odds with the more clearly motivated concerns and linear narrative trajectories of the other characters. All three performances deliberately held open what I have identified as an "interpretive space" for audience members to fill through their engagement with the work. Crucially, this space can be conceived and configured differently by different people.

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[15] For more details, see the chapter "Authoritarian aspects of PAP rule" in Mauzy and Milne (2002).

Earlier, I wrote of the challenge in Singapore to live in close proximity to other people without ceding intimacy. Perhaps one of the most risky elements of TNS's spatial practice is not only to question the policing of that proximity by the state, but also the terms on which individuals maintain their sense of intimacy. In each of the plays discussed above, audience members are invited to participate in the production of representational space as it is, in Lefebvre's terms, "established...through the dramatic action itself". The degree of personal investment required often operates where intimacy is most closely guarded. This is challenging for both audience and performers, and there is no guarantee that it will succeed. However, while one may demur in the case of specific examples, it is important to note that TNS have shown evidence, through a range of methods and means, of a sustained engagement with that unique and productive point of crossover between theatrical and civil space. Within the Singapore context, where space is defined by a high degree of control and minimal options for contestation, this has proved to be a significant site at which to locate a body of work, and to forge a number of otherwise circumscribed modes of relation. Audience members with a variety of experiences and expectations have been challenged to account for the multiplicity of meanings they have encountered, and to question their own assumptions regarding how they experience space and on what grounds they share it with the rest of the population. In keeping both aesthetic experience and social context simultaneously in play, TNS's body of work raises the possibility that relationality, however experiential at its point of emergence, can inflect pre-existing frameworks in novel and sometimes surprising ways.

4.

Although TNS continues to be centrally identified with core members Alvin Tan and Haresh Sharma, its collaborative ethos reached its apogee between 2000 and 2004, when they presented work in conjunction with a number of resident and associate artists. This, along with the range of community, youth and main season projects that the company engage in, makes it impossible to identify any one performance that is exemplary of the company's work, and which might be used to develop in more detail the broad argument made above. Rather than giving a survey of several works I have nevertheless chosen to focus on a single performance, *untitled man number one* (1999), written by Haresh Sharma, directed by resident artist Jeff Chen and performed by Darren Chiam. This is because, in Tan and Sharma's decision to employ Chen can be discerned a self-conscious attempt to submit their own practice to the relational and

representational strategies outlined above. Chen's anarchic aesthetic and devil-may-care attitude in public pronouncements was unquestionably at odds with the stated social aims of the company.[16] Identifying such work under the TNS banner arguably served to undermine audience expectations more profoundly than might otherwise have been possible, given that TNS's reputation for social engagement tends to precede them. In this regard, Chen's work is representatively unrepresentative of the company's output, and while it does not *illustrate* it, it throws it into relief by putting the more conventionally benign profile of the company under pressure.[17]

In *untitled man*, all the fears of Kuo's accidental protagonists in *The Coffin is too Big for the Hole* and *No Parking on Odd Days* appear to have been realised. Indeed, by comparison with the behaviour of *this* character, the concern of *Coffin's* narrator that his own progeny will not recognize his "standard sized" grave, and of the anti-hero in *Parking* that his son has lost his questioning spirit, seem naive and parochial. This is because the anonymously eponymous Man of Sharma's play has grown up to manifest the operations of state power in a manner quite simply beyond the imaginings of his avuncular predecessors. Hence, where Kuo's Everymen, though prone to self-doubt, are ultimately able to identify the forces against which they are fighting in the functionaries – and functionings – of state bureaucracy, in *untitled man*, there is no such displacement. Instead, the play stages the dynamics of power at a level where it has become, to use a foucauldian term, capillary. While Kuo's narrators are upwardly mobile, sensitive to their roots and rights, even, in terms of the development of the plays, effecting a symbolic switch from Chinese to English, the Untitled Man is a product of consumerist culture and national ideology, and a victim of language policy.[18] Fated, as he mutters, mantra-like, to "eat shop buy", he speaks in a high-speed combination of English, Singlish, text message abbreviations and Chinese dialects,

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[16] According to Tan, these include: "We are interested in an art that is rooted to social reality", "We hope to be a facilitator/mediator in conflict situations" and increasing "the pool of new audiences" by "converting target communities into first-time theatre-goers" (Tan, Alvin and Davis, Lucy 2001: 137-8). Chen left TNS in 2004.

[17] An early instance of this is the procedural observation that the text of *untitled man* cannot be wholly attributed to Sharma, since it was partially improvised by Chiam for each performance, and, in light of Chen's deconstructive approach to directing, one can assume it to have been radically restructured in rehearsal.

[18] Language policy has shifted in emphasis since the 1960s, but the basic aim has been to produce bilingualism in English and the speaker's "mother tongue" in as many students as possible. However, given the complexity of Singapore's linguistic environment – which, in addition to the four official languages, includes other mother tongues, dialects, contact languages (such as *pasar* [market] Malay) and Singlish, many students have struggled, especially those whose home linguistic environment is at odds with the one they experience in school. As a result, it is common to encounter people who speak neither English nor their mother tongue fluently, and code-switch more out of necessity than choice.

and while they present coherent narratives, whose digressions only serve to enhance the overall progression of the story, his anecdotes are fragmented and inconsequential, splicing abruptly into each other with neither clear beginning nor end. Where *Coffin* and *Parking* tell of small-scale resistance to the powers that be, the Untitled Man rants illogically about meeting girls on Internet Relay Chat and being chased by transvestites, through surreal tales of keeping stones as pets, of seeing only the outlines of things, and of the red and green men at a pedestrian crossing having an argument, to more lyrical passages detailing a sado-masochistic love affair. An abusive coprophiliac, he mimes violent sexual encounters, fires off familiar prejudices against homosexuals while reading the newspaper on the toilet, and recounts rambling, self-pitying anecdotes.

Recalling the subversion of representations of space discussed above, the contrast between the characters of Kuo's plays and of *untitled man* hints at the way in which the latter play mounts a challenge to a range of conventions and institutional commonplaces. The first is the monologic form that Kuo and Kon introduced in the early eighties, and that developed into a distinctive tradition of Singaporean and Malaysian monodramas. These performances have tended to be built either on storytelling (for instance *The Eagle and the Cat* (1990) by Kuo), the exploration of a single character in biographical and emotional depth (*Lest the Demonds Get to Me* (1992) by Russell Heng; *Ang Tau Mui: A Modern Woman* (1994) by Leow Puay Tin; *Purple* (1995) by Goh Boon Teck) or the virtuosic conjuring of multiple characters by a single performer (*Atomic Jaya* (1998) and *Occupation* (2002) by Huzir Sulaiman). By contrast, *untitled man* is not only discontinuous and fragmented in form, but to the extent that central character can be identified, he is thoroughly dislikeable, thereby rendering superfluous the conventional expectation that a local monodrama will provide either entertainment or an emotional odyssey.

The second expectation subverted by the Man's crass behaviour is TNS's usually sympathetic portrayal of minority and marginal characters. The consistent exploration of the social, political and economic factors that influence human behaviour means that Sharma's characters are generally likeable, whereas in this case, the Man is simultaneously thoroughly unsavoury, and, in dress and speech, unmistakably working class. Indeed, the issue of class is seldom explicitly raised in the work of TNS, in keeping with a general trend in Singapore theatre since the so-called "Marxist

Conspiracy" of 1987 (see note 9). As a result, the clichéd representations of class that attend the PAP's cosmopolitan/heartlander distinction have gone largely unchallenged on the Singapore stage.[19] While the Man, almost comically decked out in a charity shop t-shirt, mangy permed wig, loose socks and football shorts,[20] is equally far from being an *authentic* representation of working class Singaporeanness, the very fact that an audience would encounter such signifiers in the ambiguous and highly charged situation of the solo performance is a rarity. This would only be exacerbated by the meanings normally associated with the space where the performance took place. In a reversal of the situation described above, where *untitled women number one* inaugurated TNS's black box space in Marine Parade, *untitled man* was performed as part of *BrainStorm (what's that in your head?)*, a mini-festival of theatre and installations that took place in the galleries of the Singapore Art Museum (SAM). In cosmopolitan/heartlander terms, the Man was in the wrong zone, an incongruity further underscored by an apparent unwillingness to take the space of the gallery into account for the bulk of the performance. Towards the end, an illuminated backdrop appeared, in the form of an overhead projection. As the Man continued to speak, a hand began to draw pictures of genitalia in a fashion more usually seen on toilet doors than on the walls of SAM. The drawing ended when the Man stopped speaking, and the projector was switched off, leaving the audience sitting in the darkness to contemplate a pornographic retinal afterimage.

If that lingering, obscene imprint was all that audiences could go home with, if all that these various transgressions and subversions amounted to was shock tactics and adolescent anti-authoritarianism, the most one might say of the play is that it was a breath of fresh air in a sometimes over-cautious local theatre scene. However, I propose that what is most interesting about the play is that ultimately it fails to shock, not because of a "seen it before" sense of affected ennui amongst audience members, but because something else is at work in the performance that channels the potentially-offensive into the much more powerfully charged realm of the affective. Again, this corresponds in part to the notion of "representational space" discussed above with reference to an interpretive ambiguity at the heart of TNS's recent work.

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[19] The exploration of working class concerns is one that is more comprehensively – though not unproblematically – explored in Singapore film than theatre. In particular, the actor-director Jack Neo has had a series of hits with Hokkien-language social comedies such as *Money No Enough* (1998) and *I Not Stupid* (2002). Although both films feature some sharp social commentary and political satire, they are compromised by their improbable "feelgood" endings.

[20] The tight perm is a hairstyle favoured by some middle-aged working class Chinese men.

However, in the case of *untitled man*, the result is not so much ambiguity as a qualitative shift in signifying processes.

Writing about *No Parking on Odd Days*, Krishen Jit observes that Kuo "...creates a fictive Singapore English that feels like the local version but he has reconstructed it in such a way that it is eminently usable for drama" (2000: 96). This can arguably be extended to describe the social context and the characterisation of the play as a whole. By contrast, one of the strengths of *untitled man* lies in the way it strains to grasp both the poles between which Kuo's plays so comfortably – perhaps too comfortably – fall. On the one hand, there is nothing heightened about the language, which bears a closer relationship to the everyday code-switching of many Singaporeans than most local English or Chinese language plays,[21] and is less self-conscious than Kuo's celebrated multi-lingual *Mama Looking for Her Cat* (1988). On the other hand, the play is highly inventive in form, and it is the tension between these two factors that lends it its peculiar appeal. It would be too simplistic to state that the representational strategies of the performance undercut the character it draws, not least since the play's refusal to pass judgement on the Man grants it an enduringly nihilistic quality. However, it is undeniably the case that its affective aspect is what imbues it with a complexity entirely lacking from, say, the clichéd "heartlanders" of television dramas, who are consistently over-played and over-inflected by middle-class, English educated actors.

Key to this is that Chiam performs blindfolded (figures 20-22). A dirty bandage with crudely drawn felt-tip eyes provides a kind of productive subtraction which animates the affective operations of the entire performance. Most directly, there is a redistribution of the expressive energies normally assigned to and enacted by the face. At one point, Chiam simply falls backwards onto the floor and conducts a dialogue between his feet, while elsewhere, his elbows take on the same duties, the one

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[21] See, for instance, this moment of maudlin near self-realisation when he recounts a conversation with his equally put-upon friend Kam Kam:

> Then after that I asked Kam Kam: 'Hey Kam how come you so sway [unlucky]? Last time you see ghost then now you let ah quah [transvestites] chase ah. Why you so sway?' Then he said: 'Um zhai leh [dunno] also dun [don't] understand why I so sway. I think my luck liddat [is like that]. My luck born out come out si beh sway [bloody unlucky], nothing good happen to me. I don't understand why, you know, don't understand why I'm given this kinda fucking life ah'. Then I also think, ah, why I so sway? I dun understand why I never do anything wrong but only rub [screw] one girl he rub so many girl. Why...he kena [had the bad luck to be] chased I also kena chased. Bo li yu leh [so unreasonable!].

Figures 20 - 22. Rehearsal shots of Darren Chiam in *untitled man number one* (1999) by Haresh Sharma. Photos courtesy of The Necessary Stage.

imploring the other to "...say something nice, something sweet and soft" (this and all subsequent quotes Sharma 1999: no page numbers). Moreover it is not simply a matter of Chiam puppeteering his extremities. During the opening monologue, as the list of things he can only see in outline proliferates ("TV – square: plate – round: *hor fun* [flat rice noodles] on plate: still round...") his hands move up above his head, first jerking in rhythm to his speech, but becoming more and more assertive until they appear to be *determining* the rhythm. When the speech finishes, it is the hands that keep going, moving robotically, with increasing sexual suggestiveness, and "conducting" Chiam in a leering "choop, choop" sound until he is down on all fours simulating a violent sex act.

Having ruptured the usual protocols that obtain between body and speech, in the following scene, the disjunctive and redistributive logic that the use of the blindfold generates is applied to the constituent parts of the signifying process. The story of how, as a child, the Man found out his brother and sister had been killed in a bus crash and couldn't make his mind up whose bedroom to take as his own is recounted in staccato monosyllables, so that although the meaning of the words can still be pieced together, it is deferred until subsequent syllables grant it retrospective sense. In the meantime, however, the *sound* of the syllables is foregrounded to such an extent that it is never entirely recuperated by the belatedly emerging meaning. Hence, while the story itself is shocking and amusing in equal measure, the overriding impression I had as an audience member is of a series of blocks of sound, whose patterns are primarily determined by rhythm and tone.

In the multi-lingual environment of Singapore, this strategy produces a distinct effect. Given the high degree of familiarity among local theatre-goers with the tonal, monosyllabic aspects of Mandarin, and the influence of Chinese pronunciation on the clipped but lilting Singapore English accent, Chiam's delivery falls intriguingly between the various competencies that the two languages require. However, neither language is fully able to equip one with the means to resolve the disconnect between meaning and affect. This, in turn, recalls Deleuze's description of what he calls "minor literature" as deriving from a line of continuous variation "...that will make you a foreigner in *your own* language or make a foreign language your own or make your language a bilingualism immanent to your foreignness" (1997 [1978]: 247). The implicitly monolingual assumptions in Deleuze's theory are shown up as something of a

limitation here, since it is not entirely clear how multilingualism and Singlish, for example, would sit in relation to a line of continuous variation. However, his assertion remains a productive and profoundly cosmopolitan formulation, and with regards to *untitled man*, one might say that Chiam expresses a kind of *dissonant* foreignness within some of the parameters that mark out the linguistic terrain of Singapore. This, in turn, contrasts starkly with the more harmonious "fictive Singapore English" that Jit identifies in Kuo's writing as making it "eminently usable for drama" (2000: 96). At its most effective, this dissonant aspect of the play extends across the performance as a whole, and renders it a compelling and perplexing intervention into Singapore's monodramatic tradition.

This is most sustained – and therefore most evident – in Chiam's performance, and the audience response it provokes. With the blindfold redistributing the expressive energies normally concentrated in the face, his whole body becomes charged and mutable. Proprioceptive vigilance compensates for blindness, and the effort required to effect the sudden changes and maintain the blistering pace of the piece shows as the bulky Chiam begins to sweat and breathe heavily. This only adds to the intense physicality of the play and lends its scatological and sexual aspects a powerful materiality that exaggerates the intimacy of the experience for the small audience. A further strain on the performer is to maintain the pretence that he can see. He does not shift much from his spot centre-stage, but nonetheless, his ease before the audience is a virtuosic sleight. Time and again as an audience member, one feels most directly in contact with Chiam when he is at his most casual, only to be brought up short by the realization of the effort it costs him to so appear. There is something troubling about the felt-tip eyes, and the inability to make eye contact with the performer: something that consistently repels or diverts one's attempts to gauge his sincerity, and to complete the feedback loop between performer and audience member that produces character. Instead, time and again, one's attention is shifted to Chiam's body, across which seem to play all the forces, desires and drives that animate this Everyman and, by extension, in ways they may otherwise be unwilling to acknowledge, every audience member.

Unencumbered by *Emily of Emerald Hill*'s nostalgic reterritoralizations, therefore, *untitled man* is more successful in expressing "a life". In a final vignette, Chiam/the Man morphs into a woman in labour, who accidentally calls a radio station instead of a

taxi service, and ends up singing the song s/he wants to dedicate because s/he's forgotten the title. Belted out through the birth pangs, the strains of a chart-topping hit by Irish band The Cranberries briefly, ludicrously, articulate a line of continuous variation: "All my life is changing every day, in every possible way." Chiam stops abruptly, and, in the performance I saw, a wag immediately called out from the audience: "It's a boy!" Rather less snappily, but perhaps more appropriately, we might speculate, with Deleuze, that what Chiam actually engenders is "an absolute immediate consciousness whose very activity no longer refers to a being but is ceaselessly posed in a life" (2001 [1995]: 27). Chiam's concentrated commitment to each of the sections he plays, the dispersal of audience attention across his body, and the rupturing of signification by affect, mean that almost the entire play is experienced as a series of intense blocs that simply do not admit of self-reflexive posturing. Hence, when Chiam turns abruptly on the audience, asking them "Eh you all understand what am I doing or not ah?", and then answers his own question: "Actually I also dun understand what I'm doing lah", one has the very strong feeling that, rather than postmodern glibness, he is telling the truth. Glossing Deleuze, John Rajchman describes "an element in experience that comes before the determination of subject and sense...[I]t involves a temporality that is always starting up again in the midst, and relations with others based not in identification or recognition, but encounter and new compositions" (2001: 15). On the video recording of the play, the audience is moved to talk, and their comments slide effortlessly in and out of the script. In response to Chiam's admittance of ignorance, an audience member nonchalantly claims "that's the fun part", and later on, part-way through the Internet Relay Chat story, a voice interjects: "Can I ask you a question? Are you speaking as your character or speaking as yourself? Are you telling me a story...", at which point Chiam cuts in with: "Aiyah you imagine lah" ["aiyah" is an expression of impatience]. The question that is begged is: imagine what? That he is himself? A character? Better, surely, not to let the imagination take hold of any one object or, indeed, subject, but rather to experience the performance in a generalized state of imagin*ing*. The very inconsequentiality of the anecdotes and triteness of the song lyrics ("I'm a sensitive person by nature/ Easily hurt and generally emotional/ I like songs with lyrics/ But generally I, occasionally I, most definitely I...") means they make no strong claim on one's attention, leaving it free to wander, gradually losing focus. What is revealed is an Everyman not because of his Kuo-style anonymity, but because he expresses the pre-individualised events that constitute a life in general.

The fact that these events are actualized in unpleasant ways should not be overlooked, because it is integral to the way in which *untitled man* connects the immediate relational experience of its audience members with the social contexts for which TNS are well known, without simply falling back on identitarian issues or political sloganeering.

It is tempting to extrapolate some kind of "politics" from the Man's jocular references to the government. At one point, for instance, he parodies its omniscience by mimicking the echo-effect voice of a Chinese television drama god, saying: "I know what you ate-ate-ate, to when you took a shit-it-it-it. I know everything-ng-ng-ng". Yet to separate out these references from the rest of the material is already to overstate the case with regards to its explicitly political content. Instead, they are simply mixed in along with the rest of the Man's concerns and opinions, demonstrating the extent to which the terms of the dominant discourse have become embedded in the mundane progression of daily life: of a piece with the general run of received wisdom, inconsequential anecdotes and fleeting references to pop-cultural forms that make up the performance as a whole.

In this, *untitled man* could be seen as evidence that, as Clarissa Oon writes of a more general trend, the company "may have done no more than retreat from cultural activism into artistic experimentation" (2004: 175). Indeed, this is a posture that Jeff Chen is happy to propagate: "I don't have any social or political agendas any more. I think doing socio-political art makes one's heart and mind very small, very narrow" (Chen and Low 2004: 192). While, in terms of Oon's trite binary, this would render his work self-indulgent at best, there is in fact a certain immutable logic to both his performances and his comments about them that suggests otherwise. Perversely, perhaps, this becomes apparent in his reflections on the last-minute censorship of another of his performances, *sex.violence.blood.gore* (1999):

> Being the capitalistic artist that I am, I am only interested in giving my clients, the audience, what they paid for: which in this case or any is a complete piece of work...It's all about customer service and accountability and of course money. As a product of a hyper-capitalist upbringing, these are issues closest to my heart (communication with Ray Langenbach in Langenbach 2004: 216).

What is most important here is not Chen's liberal-baiting self-description as a "capitalistic artist", but rather the continuity that exists between his and the Untitled

Man's sanguine appreciation of their place in the system. Chen suggests that there is no position outside that determined by his upbringing, and he must therefore submit his work to the strictures of consumerism as best he can. However, the sheer bloody-mindedness of desiring a "complete piece of work" simply as a matter of accountability manifests a fatalism that is itself provocative, and it is this that reflects back onto *untitled man*. There, where the affective energies that make up "a life" are territorialized on the forms, opinions and practices that are familiar to audience members from their ideological and consumerist environment, there is no question that the man will achieve any sort of liberation from his situation, nor even explain how he came to inhabit his condition. Rather, it is a matter of audience members recognizing his traits in themselves, and establishing their own terms upon which to accept or reject what they see. A similar strategy can be identified in *BOTE* (also directed by Chen), in which the audience was subject to a savage economy of affective exchange: no enjoyment without violence, no pain without mockery, and so on.[22] Severity underscored the on-stage ebullience, and there was a sense in which the material had been so comprehensively explored from every possibly angle, that by the time we – the audience – got there, there seemed to be no response not been pre-empted and accounted for. The result was a wearily familiar feeling: we are well prepared for watching *BOTE* if we have lived under the efficient, pre-emptive and circumscribed governance of the PAP.

Both performances manifest the ideological operations of the state without conforming to the more traditional TNS strategy of offering a position from which audience members, performers and characters can conspire in their critique. If anything, *untitled man* and *BOTE submitted* their audience members to such operations, arrogating to themselves the familiar singularizing force exercised by the PAP. However – and whether Chen intends this or not – the defamiliarisation that derives from the re-presentation of these operations in the context of theatrical performance throws the onus onto audience members to respond independently. While the most immediate reaction is to decry Chen's irresponsibility in failing to offer a proper critique, the much trickier, but ultimately more rewarding, response is to accept that what one reviles in

[22] Arguably, the performers only do to the audience what they are already doing to each other. Natalie Hennedige's overbearing counsellor, who morphs into a tyrannical theatre director, follows up a heart-rending monologue by Noorlinah Mohamed about unrequited love with a brusque "Whatever!" before attending to her own dramatic scenes. In the aftermath of a harrowing rape towards the end of the show, the audience are just beginning to think they might be left alone to come to terms with the burden of what they've witnessed when the whole cast throws itself into an awful dance-projection-melodrama sequence.

such productions may be what one too easily accepts in life outside the theatre. From there, the process of re-thinking one's relations to these social and ideological phenomena can begin, and if these relations now take on a critical inflection, it is all the more powerful for *not* having being articulated on stage.

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In this chapter, I have considered how relationality can develop out of the aesthetic encounter with theatre in a way that remains cognizant of the social factors and political contexts that influence human behaviour. Although it is tempting, in a discussion that pertains to cosmopolitanism, to address its most explicit manifestation, that of inter-racial relations, I have avoided doing so, so as not to pre-determine the terms of my enquiry. In the work of TNS, for instance, ethnicity has tended either to be explored with explicit reference to the official CMIO categories (as in *This Chord and Others* (1991)), or has been taken as a mundane fact of Singaporean life, and inconsequential to the main themes of the plays. Of those that have addressed ethnicity in a more complex or subversive manner, the majority have been directed by Chen (for instance *sex.violence.blood.gore* and *untitled cow number one* (2001)), and have therefore operated in the same confrontational way that other features of his productions have, as discussed above. This de-privileging of ethnicity as the primary focus of a cosmopolitan practice is echoed, for instance, in Clarissa Oon's coining of the (somewhat unwieldy) term "intra(sub)cultural", to describe TNS's concerns both with identity politics and with less explicitly-framed theatrical identities that are "inchoate and unstable, composed of ideas and forms that may be improvised, fragmented and then reconstituted" (2004: 167). As has already been indicated, Oon suggests that the latter concerns may come at the price of "cultural activism", whereas I have argued that it is the way in which TNS intersects a range of practices and expectations that enables them to produce new kinds of relations that continue to intervene into existing – often state-sanctioned – structures. The work of Jeff Chen has developed these possibilities a step further by producing a series of highly inventive performances whose affective force derives from and compensates for a withholding of the conventional terms of social critique. The outcome, I have suggested, is the production of a series of relations that differ in important ways from those generated by the more conventionally socially conscious productions of his colleagues and collaborators in TNS. However, in so far as the work has been made under TNS's

name, one can see the broad range of their output as being in a critical relation with itself, rather than internecine contradiction. As such, one can see how the apparently distinct categories of the singular and the social that I introduced in Chapter Zero, are in practice set in a dynamic and mutually informing relation. It is the developing interplay of these relations that enables one to conclude that the oeuvre of the company as a whole, with Chen's work an integral part of its history, continues to oblige audience members to reflect on their place in the social and political fabric of Singapore. At the same time, given the enduring and pervasive operations of "Singularpore", it is almost inevitable that certain parameters – and possibilities – will continue to be determined by the priorities of the Singapore state. In the next chapter, I explore the ways in which relationality operates and can be produced in a context that self-consciously reaches beyond the boundaries of the nation state, to address intercultural processes in the context of regionalism.

3. Inter-Relations: TheatreWorks' *Flying Circus Project.*

1.

In the chapter on "Default Cosmopolitanism", I considered the line "...children of parents of a good description of people", from Kuo Pao Kun's *Descendents of the Eunuch Admiral*, and noted that despite its ostensibly self-cancelling circularity, there is nevertheless something cumulative about it: each term appears to beget the next, just like that which it describes. Spoken on the Singapore stage, the phrase resonates forcefully with a vision of a multi-cultural future. Less vaultingly, it also inflects the myriad actualities of a multi-racial present, challenging those who inhabit it to keep pace with its logic of proliferation, and it is in this light that one can appreciate the artistic direction pursued by Ong Keng Sen after *Descendents of the Eunuch Admiral.*

Although the production blended several intercultural elements, including the intonation and gesture of Chinese Opera, Islamic design motifs and Dervish-like costumes, the resulting aesthetic was arguably too hermetic, too unified, to achieve the simultaneous play of difference and its own exceeding that Kuo's phrase enacts and demands. In 1996, shortly after *Descendents*, Ong's pursuit of a syncretic Singaporean performance aesthetic opened out into a long-term intercultural theatre project which has included a trilogy of Shakespeare adaptations (1997-2002), a range of international commissions, the curatorship of small-scale festivals and seasons of art and performance, and a series of intensive collaborative workshops.[1]

In this, as in previous developments, Ong's artistic concerns proved to be in harmony with the broader social, economic and political priorities of the Singapore state. Since his early work reinventing modernist European classics and fostering a stable of local playwrights at the beginning of the nineties, Ong has provided a cultural counterpoint to the economically and ideologically determined agendas of nation building and global prospecting that so shape public discourse, labour practices and business opportunities in Singapore. As the metaphor suggests, to provide a counterpoint means that one can continue to pursue contrasting interests, as long as one avoids

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[1] The details of these projects are as follows: Workshops: *The Flying Circus Project* (Singapore, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2004), *In Transit* (Berlin, 2002, 2003), *The Continuum Asia Project* (Laos, 2003). Collaborations: *Silver River* (USA, Singapore 2000), *The Spirits Play* (Singapore, Tokyo, 2001), *The Continuum* (USA, Singapore, Australia, Cambodia, Vienna, London 2001-5), *Mythen der Erinnerung* (Myths of Memory) (Vienna, 2003), *Global Soul* (Singapore, Netherlands, London 2003-5) *Sandokan Threnody* (Singapore, Australia 2004). Curatorial work: *Insomnia* (Singapore, London 2004-5). The

discord. Ong himself has cultivated a posture of personal and creative autonomy by avoiding overt references to the metanarrative of Singapore's development, and by producing works that pay lip-service to political critique while muffling its resonance through analogy, aestheticization, pre-emptive othering, or psycho-civilizational archetypes.[2] As such, his work is a bellwether for understanding contemporary theatre in the context of Singapore's broader aspirations, and, as regards his international career as a director and curator, more general trends concerning European, American and Australian cultural positioning *vis à vis* the Asian region. In Chapter Four, I discuss Ong's international collaboration *The Global Soul* as one of several performances addressing the theme and condition of globality. In the present chapter, I proceed to focus on a scale of economic and political activity and (albeit to a lesser extent) cultural production and affective identification, which is often overlooked by the determination of the global in relation to the local: the regional. To this end, my concern here will be with a three-week workshop, directed by Ong, which took place in Singapore in 2000, and constituted the third in an on-going bi-annual series called *The Flying Circus Project* (FCP). My concern, in this instance of an intensive intercultural process with a regional focus, is with the question of how the discursive framing of the FCP and the practical interactions of participants both reflected and responded to the broader dynamics of the Southeast Asian and Asian regions, and of Singapore's place in them. In this shift in focus, my aim is to identify several features of an intercultural relationality that avoids being pre-determined by the current orthodoxies of intercultural performance theory. This attempt at identification includes accounting for my own relations with the workshop participants in a way that signals the changed circumstances of enquiry - from that of a briefly co-present audience member, to that of an engaged participant-observer.

Shakespeare Trilogy: *Lear* (Tokyo, Berlin, Melbourne, Singapore, 1997-99), *Desdemona* (Singapore, Adelaide, Berlin, 2000), *Search: Hamlet* (Denmark, 2002).

[2] For example: *analogy* – In *First Emperor's Last Days* (1998) about the dilemma of a group of writers working on a glowing biography of an Emperor whose great achievements had come at a great social price, there was a strong parallel with recently-published profiles of Lee Kuan Yew. However, video montages of dictators such as Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot drained the analogy of its specificity in favour of a more spurious statement about power in general. *Aestheticization* – *Sandokan Threnody* (2004) was characterised by long periods of abstract – apparently improvised – gestures, which obscured otherwise historically charged relationships between the characters (such as they were) and between the Japanese, Australian and Singaporean performers. *Pre-emptive othering*: In *The Continuum* (2001), a Singaporean performer confesses rather superficially to her touristic attitude to the region, and therefore her inability to truly understand the experiences that the Cambodian performers are about to relate. *Pycho-civilizational archetypes*: in *Lear* (1999) and *Desdemona* (2000), critiques of patriarchy and dynasty-building in Asian societies are subsumed within spiralling symbolic narratives, hence Ong: "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 glows 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" (2001: 127).

2.

"The question posed by the Flying Circus Project", wrote Ong in 2001, "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?'" (126). It was in this context that seventy-two performing artists from East Asia, along with some "guests" from America and Australia descended on the Singapore premises of TheatreWorks in December 2000 for the third FCP. The workshop followed an intensive timetable, which included structured workshops, group improvisations (known as "reinventions" because they involved responses to the structured work), presentations and discussions. The primary aim was for each artist to interrogate his or her practice in relation to that of the others.[3] I attended in my dual capacity as a former Resident Artist with TheatreWorks, and as an academic researcher. As an informal (rather than invited) participant, I was able to observe, discuss, participate and perform as I saw fit.

This peripheral status, as academic and artist, observer and participant, Singapore resident and European, informs the multiple perspectives I have on the project, and illuminates the varied priorities which can be brought to bear in discussing it. There are, for instance, real questions to be asked about an arts organization from the most advanced economy in the Southeast Asian region, bringing in artists from surrounding countries, to help that organization address concerns that *it* has decided, *pace* Ong's statement above, are region-wide in their implications. Moreover, with both government and international foundation funding, one must take into account the question of the use of financial and intellectual capital to the end of further accruing symbolic capital, not only on behalf of the host theatre company, but on behalf of the host city and/or nation.[4] What these questions do not address, however – especially in

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[3] Further details from the FCP publicity flyer:

> The focal point is on cultural negotiation and process in the [*sic*] 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. The development of artists in external form, internal landscape, intellectual muscularity and politicization are major pillars of the FCP.
>
> This third phase in year 2000 involves artists from China, Taiwan, Philippines, Japan, Korea, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore. (FCP 2000)

[4] As Pierre Bourdieu points out, the "overt violence" of economic production is reconfigured as the "gentle violence" of symbolic capital precisely because they appear to be at odds. Those areas of human endeavour that initially seem most opposed to the "profane, everyday world of production", such as culture, can actually be seen as achieving the "pure consumption" of money and time, thereby amassing

a workshop situation where there is not even the opportunity for connoisseurship – is the actual substance of the artist's interactions, whose density, complexity and sheer volume require both careful and discriminating attention.

It is in attempting to take both these sets of considerations into account that I ask an opening question: How was the FCP framed, and what did the participants do in response? This is not only the most pressing question for me now, reflecting retrospectively on the event, but it was also the central challenge for many involved in the project at the time. In more specific terms, to position oneself in relation to a diverse group of artists required reference to the organizing binary of the project, ostensibly the "traditional" and the "contemporary". These were the terms used in the FCP publicity, for instance (see note 3), and in the early days of the workshop. However, it soon became apparent that the distinction was not quite appropriate. Not only had the previous two FCP workshops successfully called that distinction into question, but the diversity of the group profile notwithstanding, the skills-bases, interests and even histories of the core participants in the third FCP were such that all were to some degree "contemporary". This was underlined by the visits of Tibetan monks and Chinese ritualists, whose performance philosophy threw the contemporariness of even the most apparently traditional performers, such as the Cambodian court dancers, into sharp relief.

Alternative terms were therefore necessary to enable distinctions to be made within the group, and so it was that "contemporary" became gradually but persistently replaced by the term "conceptual". As a structuring principle, for example, the term "conceptual" was used in an exercise where pre-determined mixed groups of "conceptual" and "traditional" artists were invited to respond to the work of a practitioner whose expertise fell into one of the two areas. It was also widely used by participants as a term of reference in conversation and group discussions.

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greater cultural credit (Bourdieu 1990 [1980]: 133-4). The circulations and re-investments of such capital can be seen at work in relation to Ong's "pan-Asian" production of *Lear* (1997), which developed out of the first FCP in 1996. A review in the business magazine *Asiaweek*, which stated that "Singapore director Ong Keng Sen has made it [Shakespeare's *King Lear*] Asia's own...an unprecedented work of regional cultural collaboration, not to mention a brilliantly crafted gem of Asian theatre", was subsequently quoted in the *Renaissance City Report*. Featured in a pull-out box, the section alongside read: "By positioning Singapore into a global arts hub that welcomes international and regional collaborations...we can reinforce the concept of Singapore as the Gateway to Asia, not only in the area of culture, but in other fields as well" (2000: 35).

Thus did an apparently slight terminological slippage itself become the hinge upon which the whole project would swing between the two interpretive concerns outlined above. Primarily, its introduction cemented a mind/body split. In the traditional/contemporary binary there is a presumption that where the traditional is more concerned with physicality – in conjunction with a sense of spirituality – while the contemporary remains vague, often negatively defined, as what the traditional *is not*. As the term "conceptual" was increasingly employed however, it began to take on positive meanings that made the distinctions sharper, if simpler: the conceptual pertained to ideas, the traditional to the work of the codified body. In this the FCP came to institute a knowledge economy of performance that reproduced the guiding logic of the knowledge economy more generally.

As Ong described it in a conference presentation on the first FCP, one of the guiding principles of the project was that "[t]he traditional source became a raw material which could be molded into new life" (1997: no page numbers). Ong's use of terms more usually associated with economic production might be unsettling in the performance context, but it conforms to a certain logic. In so far as there is at least some correlation between traditional arts practices and traditional ways of life, then the practitioners are more likely to hail from those countries where "raw materials" are the primary produce and perhaps export. By comparison, ever since Singapore "leapfrogged" the rest of the region by attracting Euro-American multinational corporations in the sixties, it has been steadily climbing what economists call the "value chain" by becoming ever more specialized in adding value to the goods and products that pass through its port. Ong's "new life" is the "value-added" that Singapore excels in providing, be it industrial, technological or – in the present case – cultural. In that early formulation, however, the metaphor is mixed: what materials Ong begins with are more easily conceived of than what they will become. By 2000, the situation had reversed: Ong was no longer interested in the traditional as raw material, and the diffuse notion of the contemporary was reformulated in the day-to-day itineries and interactions as the more precisely conceptual.

As Anthony Giddens describes developments in modes of production over the past few decades, the Knowledge Based Economy (KBE) names the process by which "[i]nformation and knowledge have now become media of production, displacing many kinds of manual work" (Hutton and Giddens 2001: 22). In the case of Singapore, given its small size, lack of natural resources, and increasing labour costs, the

"displacement" identified by Giddens is literal. Manual work has gone elsewhere in the region, and while this adversely affects unskilled Singaporean workers, the state's investments in the region mean that its economy continues to profit by this transnational division of labour. As the development of the sub-regional economic processing zone known as the "Singapore-Johor-Riau Growth Triangle" demonstrates, Singaporean businesses are increasingly entering into agreements with others in the region to match expertise and finance with resources.[5] In addition, Singapore is pitching itself to the rest of the world as a "Gateway to Asia" (see note 4) – be it as a provider of cultural and economic intermediaries, or as a location for regional offices.

In the context of the FCP, I would argue that the development of the term "conceptual" as a means to better describe and distinguish the activities of some of the artists involved, replicated at the practical level certain aspects of Singapore's economic presence in the region. In addition to the "officially" conceptual artists, such as those from the Chinese and Japanese metropolises, for example, a second group emerged. These were the Singaporeans,[6] who, in distinction to others involved, were present less because they possessed a specific, identifiable skill, than because they could be identified as excellent generalists. Linguistically and culturally, I would argue that they served as intermediaries and translators, whose strength lay in an ability to absorb stimuli, and respond rapidly and incisively. In this sense, at least from the position from which I observed them, they were defined by their abilities to *conceptualise*, even to the extent that their physical skills were expected to be used primarily in a "conceptual" way. This transcultural adaptability rendered them "knowledge workers" *par excellence*, which, as I shall discuss shortly, had some intriguing outcomes.

Another development which emerged from the workshop processes themselves was the conflation of the "conceptual" and the "technological". The presence of the video artists and their equipment resulted in a significant multi-media element in the reinventions. In this regard, many artists who did not see themselves (or were not seen) as "conceptual", were able to explore technological mediation as a mode of

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[5] The "Growth Triangle", is a zone of economic and industrial activity in the South China Sea, that synthesizes the labour, land, resources, capital and expertise variously provided by Singapore, the Indonesian Riau Archipelago, and Johore, the southern-most state of peninsular Malaysia. Describing one of the many advantages of the set-up, Scott Macleod and T. G. McGee note: "Rural areas are...conducive to establishing new production complexes because of the characteristics of labour. These traits include: low cost; inexperienced in manufacturing and thus less prone to militancy; and more easily retrenched in the event of a slow-down (e.g. back to the farm)" (1996: 449).

broaching this field. However, a run of what were judged in feedback sessions to be clumsy and unspectacular results soon led to a backlash against the concept of the "conceptual", which came to be seen as lacking the substantive creativity of "live" performance. In particular, the onus shifted back onto the "traditional" artists to increase their input of skills (which were held to be able to generate a certain quality of output). I would argue more generally that this initial faith in the medium as embodiment of the idea can be closely related to the status of technologies in the knowledge economy as "productive media" (to use Giddens' phrase) in their own right. However, the backlash is of particular interest here, because it indicates the point at which negotiations on the floor – that is, in *practice* – started to supercede this logic.

For Bourdieu, writing in the late seventies, practice is that key aspect of human existence which generates the rules and regulations of social life, but cannot be fully named or described by them. A key reason for this apparent lack of fit is the extent to which our experience of the world is mediated by culturally specific, embodied knowledge, which Bourdieu calls the *habitus*, "a product of history" which "...ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action...gives practices their relative autonomy with respect to external determinations of the immediate present." (Bourdieu 1990 [1980]: 54). In other words, it is all the practical knowledge acquired in the process of growing up in a particular milieu which enables people – including professional practitioners in the context of devising material – to deal with novel situations and improvise a response which resists being entirely dictated by the laws of these situations.

Over the course of the FCP, as many artists' flirtation with the (apparently misunderstood) conceptual lost its lustre, they rediscovered their capacities for contesting the "external determinations" of the FCP in their performance practices. As an observer, I need to attempt to account for some instances of this rediscovery whose presence I could sense, rather than see. For example, a number of participants made reference to agriculture, be it as a way of life, an activist practice concerning rural land rights, a historical influence on codified gestures, steps and movements, or research into fertility and harvest rituals. This was no "back to nature" primitivism, but rather discursive and practical evidence of an agricultural element to the *habitus* of

[6] For the good of the broader argument, I generalise in two senses. First, there were exceptions to this rule. Second, the bulk of the Singaporean participants shared an approach to performance making which

many participants, which may well have informed their interactions in ways that evaded me and, I dare say, at least some of the metropolitan artists involved in the process. Indeed, I speculate that, beyond the outward manifestation of a specialized skill that those artists trained in a codified practice were able to demonstrate, it was elements such as the agricultural *habitus* that lent their work a "thicker" quality, to which other participants responded by using it as a basis for differentiating the resulting work from that of the "conceptualists".

A second example of practical contestation to the organizing logic of the FCP was contestation over interpretations of time. To ensure that everybody was able to impart and derive the maximum amount from the event, it was rigourously timetabled, and consisted of intensive sessions and long hours. It soon became clear, however, that it was the Singaporeans who were best able to keep pace with the timetable, and produce work accordingly. In other words, the timetable was operating to "Singapore time": a brisk mode of maximising productivity. In the FCP, each artist dealt with this issue differently, arguably depending, to an extent, on their *habitus*. Some slowly disengaged; others rebelled outright; many adapted more creatively. When challenged on an apparent submissiveness to Singaporean dominance, for example, several performers explained their actions in terms of personal narratives which were based on an experience of the workshop as a whole, and their journey through it, and bore only a tangential relationship to the scheduled timetable. The practical manifestations of these journeys were unpredictable (and therefore unproductive by conventional standards), but evidenced a processing of stimuli equal to if not more intense than that of swifter responses. At the other extreme, the Chinese video artists (viewed from my perspective) seemed to work at an intense, accelerated speed. They would hang back for long periods of time, and then make very quick, guerilla-style interventions into the proceedings, such as when they performed an unscheduled hair-cutting piece, with one artist cutting his hair while the other artist held a powerful fan to his head. As people approached to look more closely, they were repelled by flying hair.

It would be simplistic, however, to assume that KBE-influenced notions of the conceptual and *habitus*-informed performance practices describe a simplistic power relation, with the former dominant and the latter resistant. The time issue, for example, was subject to constant negotiation. First, the timetable was revised periodically, both in response to, and as a way of re-configuring anxieties about time

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reflected their past experience of working for Ong Keng Sen's company, TheatreWorks.

and speed. Not only was the timetable itself constantly evolving, but people were encouraged to use it differently – for example to pursue particular avenues at the expense of others. Although there was certainly more room to develop this aspect of the project, it nevertheless indicated a shift from a rather rigid, instrumentalist "Singapore time" to a more plural state in which different temporalities could co-exist, and it seemed to me that participants took advantage accordingly.

Rather than concluding this section with any broader observations, it is perhaps in the spirit of my engagement with the FCP that I describe one of the reinventions instead, which sets in play many of the points introduced thus far. The task was to work in groups to devise a response to the ritual performances that had been conducted by the visiting Tibetan monks. The performers were:

Ien	Japanese	Sound artist
Rikki	Phillipino	Tiboli tribal performer
Chang	Chinese	Playwright, dramaturg
Suhaila	Singaporean	Performer
Geejay	Phillipina	Performance activist
Kee Hong	Singaporean	Performer

Prior to the performance, Kee Hong spends a long time focussing a video camera on Ien's sampler – an orange square of light which he moves his hand across to alter both pre-programmed sounds and his voice as he sings. The blinds come down. Ien begins to drone. Suhaila positions herself at the sound desk. Kee Hong hands out red cups of sand – about fifty in total – and instructs the others to place them in a grid across the performing space. This done, thick bunches of incense sticks are lit, and about five placed upright in each cup. The studio swiftly becomes thick with choking, heavily perfumed smoke. The audience, sitting on the floor all around the space, start to cough, and hold clothing to their mouths and noses. The doors are opened because of a worry about the fire sprinklers being activated. From this point on, audience members periodically leave for fresh air. Ien's sound collage is building in intensity. Kee Hong gives each performer a small mirror, and switches on a video projector, which is linked to the video camera over Ien's sampler. The beam of light slices through the smoke. Kee Hong speaks briefly to the performers, and starts to position them, indicating how the light bounces off their mirrors. Geejay and Chang know what to do. Rikki doesn't get it. He wanders around, ineffectually pointing the mirror at things until Kee Hong takes him in hand. Crouched and concentrating, the four attempt to align themselves, to bounce the light from mirror to mirror – to use the smoke as a medium. They nearly do it...they fail.

Rikki gives up and begins to dance. Suhaila cross-fades an upbeat techno track with Ien's soundscape. The dance is slow and ponderous. Rikki moves amongst the smoking incense sticks as a giant through a burning forest. His face possesses a trance-like quality – eyes half-closed. He begins to speed up. Kee Hong, Geejay and Chang go to get brooms. Suhaila increases the volume. The blinds fly up. The sweepers brush everything outside – cups, sand, incense powder, still-glowing sticks, the unrealised possibilities of Rikki's dance. The audience streams out for fresh air. Show's over.

During the subsequent discussion, which focused on Kee Hong's dominance, the other performers were challenged to explain their passivity. Geejay spoke up. She explained that religion was important to her, and that to generate a response to the activities of the monks with a group of relative strangers in such a short space of time was simply not possible. She had therefore made a pragmatic decision to follow those who had more immediate responses, and to interrogate, as she went along, how these might relate to or inform her own. This is a self-determined strategy for coping with the rigours of the FCP, which I would argue is revelatory about *habitus*, conceptions of time, a relationship to productivity, and approaches to creative work. Indeed, following another reinvention several days later, Ong singled her out as making a clear and intense investment in her performance, which she identified as deriving from the cumulative build-up of emotions and experiences over the preceding weeks.

In this regard, the more enduring aspect of the reinvention was the image of the performers trying to align themselves with each other in such a way as to harness the beam of light (which was also a projection of the sound source) from the video projector. Their maneouvres seemed like a powerful metaphor for the FCP as a whole: all the more so for their failing to achieve their objective. This is not automatically to conclude the same for the FCP itself, but rather to claim that a strength of the event was the space it made available for failure. In so doing, no failure did not also possess the potential for future success: failure was always qualified, rather than abject. Such an attitude is a daily reality for practitioners, and anathema to funding bodies (which tend to quantify outcomes). However, even practitioners need to be able to account for the possibility of failure, rather than legislating for it. In conversation with Kee Hong not long after, I said: "I liked the mirror-image. It was a metaphor for the FCP as a whole." He said: "I'm glad somebody got it." I said: "It was even kind of appropriate that it ended in failure." And he said: "I meant it to."

3.

Although it was the coincidence of the Esplanade opening and the Bali bombing that, part-way through the writing of this thesis, revealed itself as the catalyzing moment around which all other components and ideas would fall into a relation (thereby provoking a concern *with* relation), as the *first* part of the research process, my participation in the 2000 FCP would also leave its own mark on the rest of the enquiry. Unlike my feelings of casual disinterest at the harbourside opening in 2002, however,

as I joined the FCP, I was already aware of its potential significance. I felt it would be a challenging way of discovering appropriate research strategies, and a benchmark against which I might measure the appropriateness of other modes of investigation as I later came to encounter them. It was in this spirit that I attempted to construct an appropriate mode of participant-observership. I sat in on sessions and discussions, took notes and chatted with participants at meal times. I had intended to shoot video footage, too, but felt somewhat constrained. TheatreWorks had several full-time archivists working on the project, as did one of the participants, the *butoh* dancer Min Tanaka. Added to this was impromptu documentation by other participants and visiting sponsors, the use of audio-visual media within the workshops and performances, and the presence of several video and sound artists engaged in the capture of raw material for their own work. The result was an environment that was already intensely mediatized, with the range of priorities meaning that few aspects of the workshop experience escaped the attentions of one form of digital reproduction or another. Short of filming the archivists, therefore, (who were largely unreflexive in their task), I was unsure what I could document, undecided about what I wanted to look at, and unable to identify what was distinctive in the dense tapestry of work that was going on. I became less and less convinced that I would find anything of value to my as-yet unrealized aspiration to write a thesis. Then, half-way through the FCP, something happened.

One afternoon, Ong Keng Sen set the following task as a reinvention: to make the thirty second journey between the two main spaces in which the FCP was taking place, in either direction, over the course of three hours. Travellers were to work with the stimuli provided both in and between the two spaces, and to further process what they had experienced in the preceding weeks.

TheatreWorks is based on top of a hill in the old civic district of Singapore, in a building called Fort Canning: originally a *keramat* – ancient Malay burial ground – subsequently a colonial barracks and administrative centre, and currently part of a national park. It is a favourite spot for newly-weds spilling out of the Registry of Marriages at the bottom of the hill, sweating joggers, school children visiting the museumized headquarters of Britain's disastrous wartime operations, public concerts, archaeologists, and anyone seeking to rise above the disorientating streets below for some fresh air and a sense of perspective.

The Black Box (BB) is a versatile studio theatre with a floor space of about 15mx6m when empty of seating. Today, the windows are open, and give onto bright sunlight and the banks of tropical green foliage outside. The air is warm and still. Stirring leaves give advance notice of a gentle breeze. The natural light, window-framed, is countered by the dull, static luminosity of twelve televisions. Each shows a close-up of skin being scratched raw by fingers. Each different. It is a video installation by Chinese artist Zhang Pei Li, and, it is hoped, it will agitate in each performer an itch sufficient to send them out into the sunlight on a journey. Each different.

Where the comprehensive blackness of the BB seems to swallow the light that penetrates it, in Studio 1, the light floods in. It is here that the musicians have taken up residence. Cables everywhere. Mixing desks, record decks and samplers sit amongst traditional wind, percussion and string instruments from Korea, China, Cambodia and the Philippines. Microphones hooked up to everything, from bits of wood and snakeskin, to other microphones. An almighty jam session is in process. For those travellers who begin in the BB, the destination is heard, rather than seen: they follow their ears. For those starting here, it is a grand send-off, which gets fainter as they head for the silent, but equally compelling draw of fingernails plucking at skin.

The journeys begin. As an observer, my own is of little account. I plan to spend three hours observing the journeys of others: at points I draw alongside them, a fellow traveller, but soon fall away to join someone else. I move frequently between the two spaces, videoing aimlessly from near and far. But as time passes, I become increasingly uncomfortable with this process. "Fellow traveller" in this context has a patronising, hollow ring to it. In terms of the investment most performers are making in their journeys, my flitting seems flippant. Moreover, I am troubled by my documenting of the journeys. Unlike most of the work that takes place in the Black Box and Studio 1, between the spaces the performers are singular, solo, isolated. To be near them, and turn a camera upon them heightens the invasive tensions I have felt during group work at the imposition of the many archivists.

Part of me reasons that if I influence the participants' journeys, then that is in the nature of the journeys. After all, this is a reinvention, not a rehearsed performance. Yet I have been disconcerted by the aggressive documenting of the project thus far. Intellectual property rights clearly belong to TheatreWorks, but there is little sense that what is being documented is an aggressively documented event. I have sympathy for

Keng Sen's idea of the journey. I think it is a good opportunity for the artists to process some of what they have been going through in what one might call a slow space.[7] Many of the previous reinventions have required rapid response. It occurs to me that this slow space necessitates some restraint on the part of observers – that a respectful distance be retained. It is not a sentiment shared by the official archivists. It is hard to get a shot from a distance that does not have another documenter in it. I lower my video camera, and start my journey.

I'm running in other people's shoes. I didn't really mean to do it...I just am *doing it. Everybody is performing in bare feet, because they started their journeys inside, and they are from Asia: they take their shoes off. I do one journey for each of them, saying their name, putting on their shoes and travelling from where they left to where they are going. If the shoes are too small for me, I "walk" them with my hands. I think I am trying to come to terms with the multitude of terrains such a variety of shoes have travelled. Boi Sakti's sandals are too big for me. Worn down. Soles crushed. His choreography is grounded in the* adat *of Minangkabau – a series of bodily and spiritual practices which sharply distinguish his powerful, martial work from the sinuous grace of Balinese court dance. One of the Japanese turntablists exhibits not so much a grammar of the feet (*pace *Suzuki) as an orthography (an ortho-paedics?), and it is spelt: P-r-a-d-a. Keng Sen has two pairs of shoes. I don't know why. I make two journeys for him.*

For him? Yes, for each of them. I am trying to acknowledge them. Acknowledge how far they have come, to be here, and do what they are doing. But if this is a homage, who, really, is it for? Afterwards, most don't know how their shoes got there before them. *I'm performing for me: for some reason, I've still got the video camera on, filming every step.* I'm still the observer...or at least, I'm being reflexive. I'll come back to that. *But first, it is very hot. Why am I running? Why am I making fifty journeys when everybody else is making one? Why am I doing it in forty minutes when everybody else is doing it in three hours? Mad dogs and Englishmen indeed.*

Fifty journeys in one. The video footage. Reflexivity. This is my reinvention. I am reinventing my observership. Let us not forget the multiple resonances of the term "to observe". To watch, yes, sure, but also, stemming from religious usage, to mark, acknowledge or perform. One might say that the abrupt shift from wandering around with a video camera to running in other people's shoes, was not from observer to participant, but rather from observation to observance: an act of due respect.

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[7] As the American performer Matthew Goulish writes in his *39 Microlectures: In Proximity of Performance*: "Most of us live in fear of slowing down our thinking, because of the possibility that if we succeed, we might find that in fact nothing is happening. I guarantee that this is not the case. Something is always happening. In fact, some things happen which one can only perceive with slow thinking" (2000: 82).

One must be cautious here. Respect, yes, but not atonement. I need to separate out several facets of my involvement in the FCP, for this observance is complex. The distinction I outline above is important because it involves a continuity of my role as much as it does a transformation. In the end, I, like the other participants, made a journey during which I attempted to process performatively some of my experiences from the previous sessions. However, since my contribution to many of those previous sessions had been reasonably passive, my journey needed to account for that. It is for this reason that it inevitably stood in a reflexive relationship to the other journeys, made as a journey *about* journeys. The homage derived from a desire to acknowledge all that performative investment I had consumed in the previous week.

Take an idea and run with it: My experience at the FCP that afternoon marked the point at which my research deterritorialized from the conventions of participant-observership and took on a more complex relationship with the material I was investigating. I learnt that there are certain obligations when researching performance in such contexts to be alive and open to the dynamic and unforeseen elements of the process. Subsequently, the researcher is beholden to make good on the initial deterritorialization, even if – *especially* if – this takes the form of a rather idiosyncratic and multiform engagement with performances, their processes and contexts. No cosmopolitan aesthetics of performance can be proposed that does not also seek to enact that which it articulates, and no theatrical deterritorialization can be identified without a reflexive effort to resist its reterritorialization in the process. In this connection, an instructive anecdote is told by the Italian theatre-maker Carmelo Bene about Gilles Deleuze, who wrote his essay on Bene's *Richard III* before he actually saw the production, on the strength of Bene's description of the project. Bene relates Deleuze's enthusiasm for the project after describing to him his plans thus:

> And he writes it, without having seen the performance. And he writes me. And I write the text he will see in my final Roman performance at the Teatro Quirino: four months after the publication of his essay. And at the end he embraces me in the dressing room, sits down tired in the armchair, the expected enthusiasm in his eyes:
>
> "Oui, oui, c'est la rigeur."
> And that's all. (cited in Bogue 2003: 116)

For Ronald Bogue, 'One Less Manifesto' positions theatre on a continuum with literature: "...minor literature is above all linguistic action, and...the theater is a paradigmatic instance of such action..." (91). However, this feels like a rather

reductive analysis of the relationship between theatre and writing, given Deleuze's apparent complicity in the creation of the performance he was ostensibly commenting upon. Moreover, it is not simply the case that Bene produced a performance to illustrate Deleuze's text, but rather that both appear to have sensed an involvement in a collective process of becoming, which manifested itself in and between essay, script and performance. The theatre Deleuze envisions at the close of his article on *Richard III* is indeed a *Richard III* that had yet to be produced at the time of writing. Deleuze's cryptic response after seeing the production is worth noting, for does it not suggest a confirmation of what, in his essay, he could only speculate upon?

In the present work, I have sought to develop a series of narratives and relations that do not simply pay lip-service to reflexivity in this undeniably fraught area of intercultural interaction, but retain within the study as it is presented here something of this sense of disjunction, of qualitative transformation, which informs the ideas it subsequently produces. Paradoxically, perhaps, it is only by remaining open to the unknown, uncodified and constantly varying elements in a culture or artwork, that one can say with any justification: *"oui, oui, c'est la rigeur"*.

4.

I don't remember how it begins. Realising it has begun is to realise that one didn't notice when it began. We have all cleared our bags from the edge of the Black Box theatre, and are milling about in the centre. The performers are leaning against the walls quite casually. Things happen, slowly at first.
- *Restu squatting, eating her lunch (rice, meat, vegetables.)*
- *Kee Hong joins her, chatting as if not performing, but he's trying too hard, and it seems forced.*
- *Song Dong works with two video projectors. One is static, in the centre of the space. He walks around with the other – it shows people and cityscapes: Singapore.*
- *Arif drags in a small tin bath-tub filled with water, and several bulging bin-bags. He opens one of the bags. It is full of all the discarded polystyrene plates, chopsticks and plastic cutlery from lunch. He begins to wash them. He is talking, but I cannot recall what he is saying.*
- *Zai improvises on his guitar. A sort of slow flamenco style, which he accompanies by low, grumbling, guttural sounds in a language he makes up as he goes along. (Now I think about it, maybe it was this that came first: a soft note struck on a battered guitar).*
- *I don't remember what Shih-Wen is doing.*
- *Kee Hong disappears into the technician's box to play music.*
- *Zai begins to play aggressor to Restu, grabbing at her food. She shrieks, protective and clucky.*
- *By this time, all the performers have gravitated to one end of the space, so it's more like a proscenium set-up. The audience members, meanwhile, have clustered together, sitting and standing in the centre.*
- *Somehow it builds up...energy, violence...The audience never settle down, they remain apprehensive. There is always a sense of threat.*

• Zai adopts an unsettling comic monster pose – t-shirt rolled up, trousers round his ankles, claw-like hands held aloft, growling and hobbling around. He dunks his face in a plate of rice, fills his mouth, stands and spits at the audience, spraying it all out.
• As one, the audience recoil. Rikki runs from the space in tears, crying that the performers have unleashed evil spirits.
• Music, getting louder.
• Arif's cleaning activities are increasingly frenzied. The boundary between cleaning and dirtying has been blurring for a while and finally, there is no more 'cleaning': filthy water, stinking detritus, rice, a bin-bag full of leaves emptied on the floor, Arif himself drenched and splashing. He empties out a bag of oranges, and dances a manic jig on them – the orange smell is sudden, alarming.
• Kee Hong plays a video tape of gay pornography on Song Dong's projector. Song Dong is moving it around, and projecting it onto people, so at first you can't see what it is. Then, when it hits the wall, it briefly becomes clear. Now, when Song Dong points it at people, they run away.
• Restu is squealing and acting like a chicken, berating the audience.
• Kee Hong plays Kylie Minogue's smash hit Your Disco *loudly and repeatedly.*
• Arif and Shih-Wen go into a sexy dance. They move towards each other, as if in a courtship ritual, until they're in each other's arms. Arif lifts Shih-Wen and places her in the bathtub. They embrace, and don't let go.
• It ends. How? Less is going on. After a few repeats, the music stops. The videos are switched off. Zai gets dressed again. Less and less is going on. The place is a mess. Oranges, rice, litter, leaves, water, smell, adrenaline...People leave, blinking in the sunlight.

Assuming that something can be said about such a performance – and indeed, it provoked fierce and lengthy debate at the time, and continues to provoke me now – how does one say it? The most appropriate interpretive framework for articulating the strategies and effects of the work described above appears to be intercultural performance theory. However, prefacing the question of interpretation with the description of the work means that irrelevancies are revealed with uncompromising swiftness, false priorities are summarily despatched, and overdetermining structures creak at the joints: all this regardless of questions, pertinent in other contexts, of the accuracy of the description, and of the "positionality" of the describer. How useful is it, for example, to know that Arif is a Malaysian Malay dancer and choreographer, Kee Hong a Chinese-Singaporean experimental theatre-maker, Restu an Indonesian contemporary dancer trained in numerous Balinese and Javanese traditions, Shih-Wen a Taiwanese performance artist with an interest in shamanism, Song Dong a Chinese video artist and Zai a Malay-Singaporean improvisational performer and musician? This A(rif) to Z(ai) of identities and skills is a limited and limiting litany that, for all its suggestive associations, both reifies difference and flattens distinction: either way, it is not the primary means by which one might understand and communicate what took place in the group's performance.

In consequence, the straightforward application of a semiotically-derived, binaristic model such as those most often cited in intercultural performance analysis (Fischer-Lichte 1990, Pavis 1992 [1990], 1996, Carlson 1996, Balme 1999) would fall far short of accounting for this richly cross-hatched performance; likewise one that resorts to the culturally agonistic conception of "power relations" and deconstructive "hybridity" proposed by postcolonially-inflected revisions of these models (Holledge and Tompkins 2000, Lo and Gilbert, 2002). The embodied perspectives and highly self-reflexive practice of "border theory" are less schematic (Gomez-Peña 2000), but ultimately too archly presentational and ironic to capture the relationship between cultural identity and performative intensity that this reinvention unleashed.

Meanwhile, an institutional critique of intercultural practice may cut to the quick of the context in which the performance took place (Bharucha 1993 [1990], 2000a)[8], as might reference to the cultural and socio-economic configurations of Asian Modernity (Bharucha 2000b, Wee 2001). However, I maintain that in seeking to articulate *what happened* in the performance I have described, all these perspectives remain secondary at best: a deadweight of expectation, calculation, dogma and critique against whose reductive inertia the improvisation by Arif, Kee Hong, Restu, Shih-Wen, Song Dong and Zai posits an intercultural dynamic that is markedly more complex, and light on its feet in a sense that is more than metaphorical. Their term of art for "in practice" is "on the floor", to which the coevality of traditional and contemporary forms that shapes their bodies and informs their improvisatory abilities is simply the very least that they bring.

On the other hand, having scrubbed the intercultural baby clean of its over-determining markers, throwing it out with the bathwater would not only be counter-productive to greater understanding, but, in light of my enumeration of the artists' cultural affiliations and aesthetic expertise, not a little disingenuous. Ceasing to take the distinctive backgrounds and the diversity of the group into account because the frameworks that draw attention to these factors are wanting, risks reproducing the same simplifying

[8] It should also be noted that Bharucha has recently used the "thick description" of another such reinvention – in this case, from the second FCP (1998) – to reflect on what he calls "the deceptions underlying Ong's inter-Asian negotiations." (2004: 10). However, I would argue that insofar as the "enormously layered and textured process" of an encounter between a Burmese puppet, a Singaporean performer (Tang Fu Kuen), a Kutiyattam performer (Margi Madhu) and a Delhi-based contemporary solo performer with a background in Kathakali (Maya Rao) is shown to have been "cut short and travestied" by a "pretentious and convoluted" (12) intellectual process of adaptation for performance, so the sheer weight of Bharucha's critique consistently drives a wedge between the "fragment[s] of uncodified

logic, and provoking a compensatory reification of other potentially reductive aspects, such as "the body", "desire" or "artistry". Instead, the challenge is to find a way of figuring the dynamics of interculturalism that matches the lightness of touch it manifests in performances such as that described. And while this may appear to be primarily a question of methodology, it cannot, ultimately, be isolated from more general issues about the nature of the intercultural, and what it reveals about the nature of relationality in theatrical performance.

Related concerns lie at the heart of a call by the philosopher of science, Isabelle Stengers, for the humanities to participate in an "ecology of practices" which she describes as "cosmopolitical". In *To Have Done with Tolerance*, the object of Stengers' critique is aligned with both cultural relativism and participant-observation as egregiously impervious to the demands of others and their "delegates" (objects and artifacts in which human agency has been located, such as texts). In an unorthodox move, Stengers looks to the hard sciences to articulate a form of cosmopolitical respect defined by openness to perturbation:

> Just as a scientific pronouncement must be capable of being put at risk by that which it addresses, so the so-called human sciences can only hope to produce reliable knowledge to the degree that they address themselves not to "humans", but to beings they know are capable of assessing the pertinence of the questions asked of them (1997: 104).[9]

The attendant interpretive risks notwithstanding, and having established the difficulty of bringing the available frameworks of intercultural analysis to bear upon the performance in question, I propose at this point to consider the performance itself in more detail, for in its genesis and effects lies an instructive parable about what might be termed the dynamics of intercultural respect.

The task for the reinvention is as follows: in small groups, interrogate one participant about their artistic practice, and make a performance in response. The artists focussing on the work of Chinese video artist Song Dong are drawn to his interest in transgressing rules and challenging authority. Following his description of an installation in which he projected an image of a caressing hand onto the bodies of unknowing "spectators", the form this transgression might take is identified as the inversion of established binaries, and the blurring of the distinctions between them. In this context, some dissatisfaction with the process of the FCP emerges, particularly with the way the participants feel themselves to be identified through constant reference to national and cultural markers, and their designations as "conceptual" or "traditional" artists. A connection is made with the pervasive authoritarianism of the

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performance" (10) he offers up by way of example, and his fleeting and abstract calls for "new democratic and more equitable structures of interaction and work" (8).

[9] All translations of Stengers' quotations are my own.

Singapore state, and how the FCP participants have experienced the city during their stay. Their discussion ranges widely over issues of development, sterility and order, and Song Dong says that he has some video footage of Singapore that he would like to project in a performance. Eventually, the group settles on a series of binaries to be contested: performer/spectator, centre/periphery, inside/outside, dirty/clean, freedom/oppression, setting an exercise/executing an exercise.

As the group talks through these binaries, taking issue with the authorities deemed to institute and police them, a collective decision is taken to stage an "anti-performance", in protest at the structures, expectations and demands of the FCP. It will not be rehearsed, and only minimally planned. The group informs the artistic director of the workshop, Ong Keng Sen, that they are "ready", and agree simply to meet shortly before the performance the following day for a brief chat.

Having participated in the discussion, I had deep reservations about the impending performance, and decided not to participate. The kinds of knee-jerk reactions to Singapore's legendary "sterility", and anti-authoritarian statements made by the group, seemed petulant and simplistic, akin to local "coffee-shop talk" – inconsequential griping about the "Gahmen" [Government] that takes place over strong, sweet coffee in eating houses across the island. In retrospect, what I failed to understand was the way in which the publicly performed refusal to spend the afternoon rehearsing together covered a personal commitment on the part of each artist to prepare for the performance in their own way:

Song Dong draws a diagram, Restu buys food, Kee Hong selects videos and music, Shih-Wen chooses a dress to wear, Arif collects litter, Zai doesn't do anything – this is his preparation.

The result, when it happened, was the single most powerful and compelling performance of the entire three-week workshop, ironically succeeding in producing a work of substantive intercultural collaboration where many more deliberate attempts failed. Perhaps this is because the enterprise was born of a paradox, since the group's desire to confront the privileging of the intercultural encounter could only develop out of interactions between members that were irremediably intercultural. Each artist was sufficiently sympathetic to Song Dong's experimental means and transgressive ends that the intercultural could be treated as a given, even if it *also* became the explicit focus of the discussion from time to time. In turn, this enabled the artists to sidestep the imperatives of what could be called the "strong" interculturalism of the FCP framework. Such interculturalism has a tendency to produce a self-defeating thematic circularity in practice (a group of people from different cultures gather to make a performance about a group of people gathering together to make a performance

about...), and a hermeneutic distortion in analysis, where the work is over-determined in all but a handful of instances by the isolation the intercultural signifiers from the experiential flow of the performance as *event*.[10]

Tellingly, it is in this experiential aspect that the second distinctive feature of the group's relation to the intercultural can be discerned. Neither deliberate nor accidental, the aesthetic innovation of the piece by comparison with that of other groups can best be described as a tacitly willed side-effect of the decision not to rehearse. In formulating the idea of the "anti-performance", the artists elected to withhold from each other any advance performative interactions, such as gestural transfer, translation, or the narrativization of experience, that have conventionally characterized intercultural theatre-making processes. By consequence, the intercultural dynamics of the piece had an emergent quality that stood in stark contrast to the more laboured narrative, mimetic or dialogic styles of other groups. All similarly primed to improvise, but each starting very much from within his or her own practice, the performers collectively staged the intercultural dynamic *in process*, their various disciplines playing an informing, rather than determining role in the unfolding action. This could be discerned in the sense of possibility that attended each interaction – as Zai set about Restu, for example, his fingers claw-like, hers fluttering dexterously around her head, or as Arif and Shih-Wen danced towards each other, their bodies first seeking out then locking into the same sensuous rhythm (figure 23).

This sense of possibility – now felt (by me and, it is reasonable to assume, others) as dizzying invention, now sinister threat – inflected the response of the audience, some of whom expressed deep reservations about the performance in the discussion afterwards. The unspoken contract of tolerance and consensus which all participants had observed up until that point was torn up by the unrestrained behaviour of the artists, and the immersive experience they produced. Crucially, however, for all the

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[10] Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert, for example, take Patrice Pavis to task for the fact that "[t]he hourglass model is premised on aesthetics rather than politics" (2002: 43), but their proposal to introduce feminist and postcolonial perspectives into interculturalism results in a rapid proliferation of textualist metaphors to describe the "praxis" they envision. Hence, the body becomes by turn a "sign system" and a "signifier" that can be "read" and "reread", "inscribed" and "re-inscribed", "marked and self-marked", "encoded" and "spoken through" (47). After all that, the claim that postcolonial theory "focuses on analyzing the gap between the material body and what it is supposed to represent" (47) rings somewhat hollow, since there is no way in which the "gap", let alone the "material body" can be approached that is not through the representational strategies of a linguistics-derived postcolonial theory. The more closely one looks at performing bodies "through the lens of postcolonial theory" (43) as Lo and Gilbert formulate it, the further one will find oneself from apprehending what they do on stage, and how this is inflected in processes of co-creation with spectators.

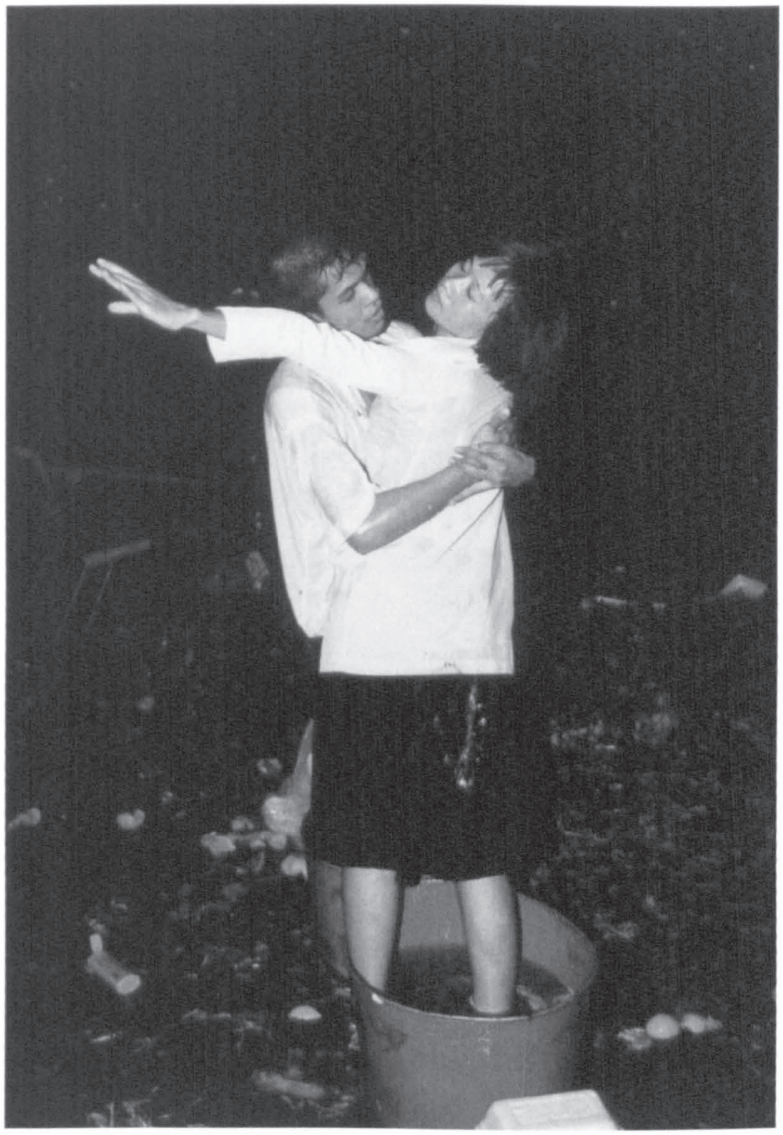

Figure 23. Arifwaran and Shih-Wen embrace during a reinvention at the *Flying Circus Project* (2000). Photo courtesy of TheatreWorks.

transgressive intent of the participants, I observed that the performance was not, *pace* recent "politicized" formulations of intercultural performance theory, culturally agonistic.

If anything, I would surmise that the tensions that arose out of the piece derived from the way in which the performers *refused* to privilege cultural identity as their site of interaction (or indeed, contestation), and instead allowed it to sit alongside other factors that habitually informed their practice, such as (what I already knew about) their political instincts, their senses of mischief and humour, their collaborative abilities, performance skills and preferences, and improvisational impulses. A piece that dramatized cultural conflict would have been the mere obverse of the general tendency amongst the participants to make work that aimed for tolerant consensus and representational parity. During the heated discussion that followed, one had the palpable sense that respondents were forced onto the back foot because they were unable to articulate their reservations without following the reinvention's lead, and speaking from a more nuanced and reflexively modulated position than the previously sufficient FCP default, which was their culturally-determined identity.

The moral of the story? *Don't take it personally.* To do so is to be left floundering with neither the register nor the vocabulary to articulate an appropriate response. In this regard, perhaps one of the few participants who *began* to find such a response was Rikki, the young animist Catholic performer from the Philippines, who ran shouting from the performance space. "Nothing is easier for a modern than to be tolerant", writes Stengers: "Tolerant are they who, or that which, measure out the painful price of our lost illusions, of the certainties we attribute to those we think 'believe'" (1997: 7). To have done with tolerance, therefore, is to allow for meaningful rejection by the other, and while it would be tendentious to infer from Rikki's obvious distress an index of the success of the performance, his behaviour is nonetheless instructive. By the time he took the floor to speak in the post-performance discussion, the tenor of the interactions between the participants had changed decisively. There was an unapologetic directness and a keener sense of engagement, which was to play out in manifold ways over the remaining days of the workshop.[11]

[11] This reached something of a peak when a Thai *khôn* [masked ballet] dancer staged a protest during a later reinvention by doing nothing for three hours but stand by a canned drinks machine and demand money from other participants and members of the public. As soon as he had enough, he bought a can of Coca-Cola, drank it, and started again. Crass in its symbolism, the performance was elegant in its simplicity, and in the fusing of the two, I found it to be very effective. It provoked one of those sudden revelations of the dynamics of global exchange which, in their ubiquity, and the brazen insouciance with which they are passed off, one constantly overlooks until something like this happens.

Rikki did not run from any other performances; not from later reinventions, nor from the strident rituals of the Tibetan monks or the arcane exorcisms of the Chinese *Dong Ba* shamans. Everything else in the workshop, one might conclude, was more or less in its place, however esoteric that place might have been. Something distinguished the "anti-performance" reinvention from the rest, a fact not entirely explained by its transgressive agenda. After all, the success of the piece, from my point of view, lay not in its negative self-definition as "not intercultural", "not 'about' Song Dong", "not consensual", but in the affirmative qualities that the performers paradoxically generated, by embracing these critical elements so whole-heartedly. While the performance itself, as an unrehearsed improvisation, has clear limitations as an exemplar of intercultural collaboration, it is this affirmative force, I want to suggest, which was its most salient feature, and bears further elaboration.

In response to a version of the familiar "always-already" argument that states "interculturalism is ordinary", Rustom Bharucha argues the contrary: "The challenge for any intercultural worker is to disimbricate his/her intervention from existing hegemonies by working consciously, if not subversively, against the grain of assumed norms. Perhaps, in its most radical manifestations, interculturalism is not ordinary, but an extra-ordinary act" (2000a: 41). Fine. But I should also want to ask whether, if the intercultural worker operates against the grain, it is not also the case that, like the "anti-performers" in the FCP, something is affirmed that exceeds the negative critique of established norms? Bharucha does not pursue such a possibility, but it is implicit in his characterisation of extra-ordinary interculturalism as an "act". Just as the process of disimbrication Bharucha envisions is itself enacted by the shift from a passive to an active mode, so the invocation of the "act" calls attention to questions of agency and audience, a combination that simply cannot be accounted for if an intercultural communication is reducible to mere two-way interpersonal transfer. In the FCP performance, I would argue that the artists were able to improvise so well together because they were operating with shared reference to a third party – Song Dong's work – that was exterior to all of their practices, including that of Song Dong himself.[12]

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[12] Following on from Stengers' "cosmopolitics", one can say that such a "third party" can equally be a person or an object. The phrase "third party" is used here with reference to Michel Serres' pertinent observation:

> A dialog which takes place between two parties, and only two, always collapses into war (which exists perpetually as a third party), for the power and glory of only one of the two of us.

Thus actualised, this is where the audience, too, was obliged to meet the work, and articulate a response. For want of a better name, I am calling this form of engaged disinterest, and the kinds of analysis it provokes, "weak" interculturalism.

That the "better name" is wanting is no accident, for "weak interculturalism" is deliberately unprepossessing. How else to perform a strategic enervation of the "strong" without instituting an equally over-determining alternative? In the realm of the intercultural, any concept one can really throw one's weight behind, is suspect. The weak, on the other hand, obliges one to look elsewhere for the active agent – preferably in the specific conditions of production and reception that attend the work being rehearsed, performed or analysed. Moreover, the animating agent of the "extra-ordinary act" is to be found not in the personalised action, however forcefully the cultural affiliations of the actor may present themselves, but in a supplementary field to which no one can fully lay claim. Thus does the ostensibly weak oblige intercultural collaborators to adopt an attitude of at least partial disinterest, which represents the difference between self-affirmation by individuals, and the affirmation of the group by that which they produce.

In the same way as cultures may be irreducible to each other without being incommensurable, so this capacity for disinterested action, of which expressive performance is one of the most powerful instantiations, *must* be held to be universal, even where different cultures themselves hold different conceptions of disinterest. For its part, very little intercultural performance analysis is itself intercultural. And although this is surely an imminent step, what weak interculturalism suggests is that a properly disinterested intercultural performance analysis is perfectly at liberty to deploy its hermeneutic heritage, as long as it follows the lead of intercultural performance practice in remaining open to perturbation. In my own case, I have drawn on a number of Euro-American formulations of performative civility to describe the actions of a group whose members can point to a range of alternative civil dispositions, from the Malay *adat*, to the anti-individualistic imperatives of contemporary Singapore's "Shared

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A contract can only come about through the constant presence of another instance, of a third party...I hear your voice as you speak to me about someone who is other than you and me; I see your face radiant with that of which you are speaking.

....

When we speak, we efface ourselves in relation to the meaning which our discourse transports. In Fra Angelico's portrayal of the Annunciation, God is the meaning; when we converse with each other, it is meaning that becomes God (1995 [1993]: 111-113).

Values".[13] Were I to pursue the analysis of this performance further, I would need to find ways of accounting for these alternatives that did not simply involve explaining the actions of each artist with reference to their "own" traditions of civility. Instead, I might start by reflecting on how and what gave them the confidence not to rehearse, when all I could foresee of the performance was a petulant (group) tantrum.

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Stengers remarks: "The existence of 'others' does not complicate our lives, but obliges us to recognise complication itself" (1997: 70). Similarly, "weak interculturalism" draws attention not simply to the exchange between one person and another, but the conditions of possibility for such an exchange. In this chapter, I have outlined the ways in which Singapore's economic relations with the region are reproduced – even in non-aligned contexts – at the level of cultural interactions. At the same time, I have shown that these interactions carry an experiential density and capacity for improvisation that means they cannot be contained by such pre-determined relations, and in some instances operate in opposition to them. Moving beyond this exploration, I have identified a quality of disinterest that lay at the heart of the most aesthetically and conceptually challenging reinvention of the FCP workshop. This quality is invaluable if intercultural performance work is to avoid the always-interested dynamics of regional political and economic interactions, which combine the financial and sometimes cultural transactions encountered at the global level with the issues of sovereignty, territory, history and destiny that accompany geographical proximity. The challenge, therefore, of regional intercultural work is to figure the material dynamics of regionality while generating the singular conditions of co-operation as a buffer against the pre-determining agendas they variously entail. Expanding the scale of engagement to the global, this challenge is further complicated, for artists must actualize on the space of the stage a condition that is otherwise experienced as diffuse, dispersed, and of unimaginable extensivity. It is to these issues that I now turn.

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[13] "*Adat* refers to cultural beliefs, rights and responsibilities, customary law and courts, customary practices and self-governance institutions....In some areas *adat* rules are detailed and sometimes written in ways showing characteristics of 'law' such as a high degree of predictability, application and adherence. In other societies *adat* is unwritten and exhibits itself in patterns of traditional ritual and kinship relations rather than prescriptive rules and maxims" (Moeliono 2004: www). For an elaboration of Singapore's "Shared Values", see Chapter One.

4. International Relations, or, Where Might the Cosmopolitan Stage Be?

1.

> The crowds swirl around the vast interchange that is the airport.
> "We're a long way, now, from the lone field and the crowded workshop. Our message systems nowadays affect whole populations.... All of humanity, virtually. There you have the heroine of today's tragedy: no more actor, no more choir, no more God, no class.... The whole of humanity in a state of interconnectedness."
> "It's true to say that it is a state of communication, but what is it saying to itself? And, once again, why?
> And can you tell me how the plot's going to work out, and how it will end?"
> "We don't live in a theatre, or the cinema!" (Serres 1995: 55).

We might want to argue that Michel Serres' almost casual alignment of the representational strategies of the theatre and the cinema with the socio-economic modalities of the agrarian and industrial ages is overly clear-cut. Nonetheless, his persistence in using the terminology of the theatre in particular to articulate the condition of globality is puzzling. Perhaps, for all the talk of performance as a global condition,[1] contemporary advocates of the theatre are simply unused to seeing it accorded such explanatory prominence. In response, one might dismiss the references in Serres' imagined dialogue on the philosophical implications of message systems, as being of rhetorical, rather than analytical value, having nothing at all to do with the theatre as it is actually made and experienced. At the same time, however, the additional significance the figurative gains in such carefully weighed contexts means such usages should not be dismissed out of hand. Assuming, if only for a moment, that there *is* something about the theatre that resonates both in distinction to and in accordance with the global as Serres conceives it, we might well want to ask what the implications are for the ways in which theatre itself is made and watched. How might it produce a mode of relationality that is appropriate to the singularizing impetus of the global? Serres' description of a qualitative transformation in the contemporary experience of space raises intriguing questions about how theatre makers are responding to the increasing interconnectedness that is a key characteristic of global economic and cultural processes through their use and framing of theatrical space.

"While theatre can take place anywhere," writes Gay McAuley, "the point is that it must take place somewhere" (1999: 2). Contrast this, however, with the fact that Ong

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[1] See, for example, Jon McKenzie (2001) and the final chapter of Richard Schechner's *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (2002).

Keng Sen has taken to signing off his email circulars with "See you somewhere", and it fast becomes clear that "somewhere" is not where it used to be – if indeed it can be said still *"to be"* at all. Similarly, for Serres, the increasing interrelatedness of everything from the buzz of message systems and the passage of bodies through space to the fluxes of wind and water currents, suggests the formation of a singularity, whose components are immanently bound in to each other to such an extent that "somewhere" and "everywhere" are practically one and the same.[2]

Given that the theatre continues to set considerable store by the blunt fact of corporeal co-presence, the extent of theatre's participation in such an apparently diffuse system is bound to appear limited. Yet such an interpretation misrecognizes the problem. While there is no denying that McAuley's "somewhere" underscores the indisputably *local* aspect of theatre that is affirmed every time it, quite literally, takes place, to deduce an inherent *parochialism* that forecloses on the global would be an error. In the theatre, "somewhere" and "anywhere" are not so much mutually *exclusive* as *informing*:

> Our psychic state, as spectators in the theatre, involves a continual movement from here to not-here and back again. The spectator is continually tossed from awareness of his own being at one moment to awareness of the being of the actor at the next...to the here of the theatre space, and the (multiple) here of the fictional place(s) (McAuley 1999: 86).

By this token, it might be argued that "globality" – the condition of the global – simply names an experience of space and place that the Euro-American theatre has been teaching at least since the Chorus of Shakespeare's *Henry V* first apologetically crammed "the vasty fields of France" into the "wooden O" of the Globe Theatre (I Prologue 11-13), and certain forms of Asian theatre for substantially longer. However, there remain important differences between the referential ambiguity of theatrical space as conventionally conceived, and the singularizing impetus of the global described by Serres, which is all-encompassing, and therefore admits of no point of reference outside itself. Contemplating the interlinking blocks of light from a montage of satellite photographs of the world's cities at night, he writes: "This slow filling-in with light is increasingly encroaching on the remaining black patches of fields, mountains, lakes and forests...We now live in Newtown-under-Light. This city is new, will soon

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[2] This is not to say that all things become equal: on the contrary, Serres is careful to highlight the gross differentiations in terms of power and income that, in many ways, a communicational singularity can only exacerbate, and this is a point to which I shall return towards the end of the chapter.

become the world's only city, and will have as much light as you can imagine.... It has no exterior" (1995: 62-3, 67).

For Serres, then, if the fields of France were not set to be "vasty" for very much longer, neither, at some significant level, would they be set to remain *French*, and it is here, at the level of the named-territorial, rather than in theatre's localism *per se*, that one can identify the challenge of globality to theatrical spatiality. As I mentioned in the Introduction, as the complex connectivity that characterizes globalization continues to intensify, so increasing numbers of performances are being made by artists whose cultural affiliations and implicitly informing national imaginaries differ both from those of their collaborators, and from those of their audiences. In Singapore, this difference takes the form both of international touring performances that feature artists from other countries, and of an explicit remit, on the part of the NAC-designated "Flagship" theatre companies (including TheatreWorks and The Necessary Stage), to develop their own international touring profiles. While the economic and ideological rationales for such developments are clear enough, the impact on aesthetic practice is less clear. Artists may travel more and more frequently, but the theatre, as it were, is not going anywhere.

Pegged as theatres are to the scale and capacities of the human body, the dimensions of theatre spaces are set to remain constant. At the same time, theatre-makers must find new ways of accommodating and articulating the expansive relation to place and people that both they and their audiences are increasingly bringing to their performances. It is with a view to my elaborating on this issue in greater detail that the focus of this chapter is on four performances, each of which has addressed the condition of globality in different ways, and with what I judge to be varying degrees of success. In line with the international nature of the present enquiry, only one of the performances was made by a Singaporean (Ong Keng Sen's *Global Soul*), while another (*Alladeen*) was performed in Singapore as part of the Arts Festival in 2003. Robert Lepage, who directed *The Far Side of the Moon* has also presented work at the Singapore Arts Festival, although not this particular piece, while the fourth example, Shakespeare's *Pericles*, directed by Neil Bartlett, was produced by the resolutely building-based Lyric Hammersmith, in London. In discussing works with a Singapore connection alongside these others, my aim is to give a fuller – if inevitably incomplete – picture of the international environment in which such works are shown, and with

which they resonate. It is in seeking to better understand these "international relations" that I pose the question: where might the cosmopolitan stage *be*?

2. Non-Place: Victoria *Theatre, Singapore, 7th June 2003 and Barbican Theatre, London, 22 July 2003.*

Alladeen, by the Builders Association (US) and motiroti (UK) is improbably, and therefore (from my own perspective) instructively, flawed. Inspired by a newspaper article about Indian call-centres, the performance attempts to stage a snapshot of global processes by teasing out the affective and communicational strands linking New York to Bangalore to London from the dense informational network that iconically encircles the globe. Unfortunately, the three cities also lend their names to the three parts of the production's uneven structure, which bookends a lengthy call-centre scene with identical images of "New York" and "London", where a generically-drawn "global soul"[3] makes inconsequential holiday plans in multiple languages on her mobile phone. The final scene is a multicultural shindig in a karaoke bar, where The Carpenters are given a Bollywood-style makeover to overblown, but in my view underwhelming, effect.

That *Alladeen* might be judged, after the event, to have been flabbily conceived, poorly written, indifferently performed, and sluggishly paced, would disqualify it from serious consideration, were it not for two important points. First, in its thematic concerns and aesthetic choices, it is emblematic of the kinds of stories the First World is telling itself about globalization; meanwhile in its funding, production and touring profile, it is as much an agent of globalization as a product of its processes.[4] Second, given the extensive experience of the artists involved in the project, the question is begged as to the source of its failings. The judgements with which I opened this paragraph are undeniably harsh, and I am intrigued by the strength of my own antipathy. I am wary of dismissing *Alladeen* simply as a bad piece of work, because I suspect that the difficulties encountered by the Builders Association and motiroti may be symptomatic of a more complex challenge that confronts theatre-makers when addressing the global: that there is no place from which it can be understood in its entirety; yet the fact

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[3] The reference to Pico Iyer's paeon to frequent-flyer cosmopolitanism (2000) is no accident: he is credited in the programme as providing additional texts.

[4] The production's website (http://www.alladeen.com) lists seven co-producing bodies (from the US, UK, France, Italy and Australia), five co-commissioners, and eleven US-based and five UK-based supporting institutions. It opened in April 2003 in Ohio, and will tour until 2005, playing at venues in the US, UK,

of its vastness is precisely what defines it. On the face of it, this presents a real difficulty for the "seeing place" of the theatre; but this is not, in fact, where the challenge lies. On the contrary, insofar as *both* globalization *and* the theatrical event are irreducible to individual experience, *and yet have always to be experienced by the individual*, it is in a structural (if not scalar) *correspondence* that both the risks and the potential for the theatre can be identified.

The reason that *Alladeen* falls, in my view, so comprehensively foul of these risks can be identified in a flawed conceptualization and use of space. The anthropologist Marc Augé has characterized as "non-places" those spaces that elude definition either in terms of identity, relations or history. "[N]on-places are the real measure of our time", he states. They include transport routes, sites of transit, retail and leisure, and "...the complex skein of cable and wireless networks that mobilize extraterrestrial space for the purposes of a communication so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact only with another image of himself" (1995: 79). At the opening of the "Bangalore" section of *Alladeen*, the audience is confronted with a case study in the creation of such states. A fresh batch of Bangalore-based "Electronic Relations Officers" are memorizing the minutiae of American culture, and straining to achieve "accent neutralization". Their preparation is complete when they take on identities named after the characters from the sitcom *Friends*. This enables them to "pass" as American to their US-based clients, who may never know where the person giving them flight details, selling them a first aid kit or telling their fortune is actually sitting.

When the call-centre itself is revealed, the operatives sit at workstations in a high-concept, brightly-hued set, surrounded by cameras and computers. A technician busies himself around them, and text flickers across an electronic messaging board. To play the callers, the performers go into booths whose glass walls have a touch-sensitive frosting effect. Hanging low over the stage is a projection screen showing computer graphics, constantly morphing live relays of the performers, snippets from old Hollywood versions of *Aladdin* films and documentary footage of the actual call-centre where the artists conducted their research.

I identify this as the source of the production's problems. The central design concept of the set is that it represents less a node in a network (as the call-centre itself would be),

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Singapore, Turkey, Hungary, Norway, Italy, France, Germany and Colombia. As of this writing (December

than the "complex skein" of the network itself. Audience members are encouraged to watch the performance as if surfing the Internet. Shifting one's attention from screen to screen to stage to message board, one tracks the developing and overlapping narratives of the operatives and their clients across a range of fleshy and mediated incarnations. However, the oppressive blandness of the office spaces depicted in the documentary footage enacts a kind of violent de-aestheticisation that ruptures not only the flow of this "surfing" process, but also the basic conceit of the design. *Here* are the non-places of the global economy: the same pastel colours, swivel chairs, beige computers, empty, anonymous desks and padded partitions that can be found in offices across the corporate world. *These* are the kinds of spaces where one relinquishes one's identity (and temporarily takes on another), suspends relationality (in the competition for sales), and eschews history (or even one's own time zone). By contrast, the use and representation of space in *Alladeen* appears showy, romanticized and glib: what is thereby figured is a failure of the imagination that has nothing to do with whitewashing the drab functionality of the actual call-centre environments, and everything to do with a failure to identify the extent to which they produce the dehumanizing processes they house.

Ironically, the lack of a reflexive buffer against this fact comes back to haunt the performance. Reflecting on the flexibilization and standardization of space under global capitalism, Richard Sennett writes: "[I]n Singapore you can buy 1000 square feet of office space in London. For this property exchange to operate, 1000 square feet in New York or London has to be something somebody in Singapore understands" (2002: 46). Sennett cites Singapore simply by way of example, but having watched *Alladeen* in both Singapore and London, I find his analysis to be disconcertingly apposite. While at pains to avoid reproducing the "non-place" of the office in Bangalore, the artists of *Alladeen* produced the theatre *itself* as non-place: a generic multi-media environment as easily understood by "somebody in Singapore" as in London or New York. Had there been a countervailing sense of *place* in the performance, this all too common bugbear of international touring productions could have been borne. For Augé, the non-place "...never exists in its pure form; places reconstitute themselves in it; relations are restored and resumed in it" (1995: 78). Distracted, perhaps, by the seductive correspondences between acting and being a call-centre operative, and between the anonymity of the office and the ambiguity of the

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2004), there are no advertised plans to perform in India.

stage, the artists seems to have focused only on the non-platial features of their subject matter. While the Indian interviewees in *Alladeen* come across personable, perky and humourous, their on-stage avatars reproduce them vaguely, understandably unsure whether to act or perform; while Bangalore itself offers a compelling instance of a locality,[5] *Alladeen* opts to ignore it, instead compounding the problem by doubling the non-place of the stage with the orientalist fantasia of the Aladdin myth.

Sennett goes on: "'I could be here or anywhere', 'I don't care', is something that is deeply embedded in the flexibilized order....It is a problem for cosmopolitanism that there is a kind of 'no place' relationship, produced precisely by the churning instability of capitalism" (2002: 47). Mimicking only the anonymous, and therefore lacking interest, and the ahistorical, and therefore lacking a political edge, it is nevertheless the relational aspect of theatre that is most sorely missed in *Alladeen*. It is here that I identify the source of my resentment towards the performance for not being everything the theme and the calibre of the artists suggested it could have been. "I don't care", the performance seemed to say. Worse, coming out of a second viewing of the show, whose manifest flaws six weeks and a change of continents had done nothing to diminish, neither did I.

3. Mundi Theatrum: *Barbican Theatre, London. 25th October 2003.*

In *The Far Side of the* Moon by Robert Lepage, by way of contrast, I would argue that one cares too much. A narrative of a maladroit, outer space-obsessed "loner" coming to terms with life following his mother's death, is played out in a constantly metamorphosing stage environment. The fiction portrays characters whose spatial relationships with the Earth are varied and varying: on an airplane, stuck in a lift, telemarketing, sending a film into space, presenting weather reports, being Canadian, being Quebecois, dreaming of other places, being x-rayed, being bedridden, moving around a flat, going to Russia. The set brings these experiences into the phenomenological ambit of the audience. Doors become walls, walls become ceilings, an ironing board becomes an exercise bike becomes a motorbike, and a washing-

[5] A brief article by Janika Nair would appear to bear this observation out. Against an interpretation of Bangalore as non-place, she draws attention to a number of city planning issues that demonstrate the recalcitrant pull of affective and historical conditions, and importantly, draws attention to the broader political implications of this: " [B]eneath every move to render 'place', which has social, religious, economic or political meaning, into neutral, saleable blocks of 'space', there lies a struggle and a context which, in our context, we may call the operation of democracy...The city is thus a far more disturbed zone than the planners, technocrats and builders would like it to be" (2001: 36).

machine becomes entrance, exit, porthole, window, projection screen, moon and birth canal down which travel infant-sized space-men, who alter not only the scalar co-ordinates of the performing space, but also, by suggestion, its gravitational pull. Cumulatively, the play might be said to update the Renaissance concept of the *Theatrum Mundi* – which used the theatre as a metaphor for Man's place in the world, and his relationship to God – to represent a decidedly postmodern cosmology. "Here is a man", the play seems to say to its audience, "adrift without an anchor; whose dreams, desires and relationships are mediated by satellites, video cameras, and telephones; whose daily routine takes place in public spaces, private spaces and non-places; whose ethical choices are made against a backdrop of global conflict and imperialist misadventure to a soundtrack of international pop music; in short, whose experience of the world is very much like your own" (figure 24).

What if, however, the world can no longer be allegorized – can no longer *be like* anything else? This is the problem that animates Serres' interlocutors in the dialogue that opens this chapter, for if the world is experienced as a singularity which has no exterior and resists absolute internal distinctions ("no more actor, no more choir, no more God..."), then it is beyond comparison; it is irreducible to any representation that is not also a part of it, and therefore falls short of it. This is also the central problem which I would argue is posed by and in *The Far Side of the Moon*: the title gives its name to the only place from which the world might be comprehended in its entirety, since it is not encompassed by it. But by the same token, such a place is accessible only at the expense of the world itself. This paradox is what drives Philippe, the central character of the play, who suffers from an *anomie* similar to that identified by Hannah Arendt, shortly after the launch of the first space satellite in 1957, as "world-alienation":

> The fact that the decisive shrinkage of the earth was the consequence of the invention of the airplane, that is, of leaving the surface of the earth altogether, is like a symbol for the general phenomenon that any decrease of terrestrial distance can be won only at the price of putting a decisive distance between man and the earth, of alienating man from his immediate earthly surroundings (1998 [1958]: 251)

What is lost by world-alienation, therefore, is an experience of *worldliness*, without which humankind is at a loss to act in and upon the world in a meaningful – or at least constructive – way. For Arendt, writing in the fifties, worldliness was an unstable but necessary state, neither completely divorced from natural processes (as, for example, is proposed by research into "artificial life"), nor entirely subject to the vicissitudes of animal existence (as exemplified by the reductive but overriding imperative, under

Figures 24-25 *The Far Side of the Moon* (2003) by Ex Machina. Photographs: Sophie Grenier, courtesy of Ex Machina.

current patterns of production and consumption, to "make a living".) While *The Far Side of the Moon* does not operate on such terms, I would argue that the task of the play is to attempt a similar kind of accommodation of the world. Caught between internecine squabbles with his brother and former lover and impossible dreams of building structures in space, it is no coincidence that a video tape made by Philippe for transmission in space is the closest any of the characters come to resolving their existential difficulties. Giving his imagined extra-terrestrial viewers a guided tour of his flat, and strapping the video camera to a motorbike to ride through his favourite parts of the city, he finally finds a way of relating to the world which is personalized yet disinterested, located yet expansive, reserved yet hospitable: in a word, cosmopolitan.

In arriving at this cosmopolitan condition, *The Far Side of the Moon* suggests a more subtle way of manifesting the singular state of the global than *Alladeen*'s non-place of the theatre, for it creates not a *Theatrum Mundi* but a *Mundi Theatrum*:[6] not so much "all the world's a stage", nor even "all the stage is a world", but "the stage is *all* a world". While the Elizabethan theatre might successfully have *represented* the wider world beyond its walls, to the extent that metaphors pre-suppose a distinction between the figure and its referent, this implicitly spatial distinction is not one that a singularity can support. This impossibility being the case, the onus is on the contemporary theatre not so much to *stand in for* as to *produce* a world that, however specific in its settings and execution remains nonetheless suggestive of the complex and interconnected whole in which it participates.

The cosmopolitan promise of *The Far Side of the Moon* lies, therefore, in performing, for its audience, what the home movie performs on behalf of its central character. As it is made, so a possible world is invoked that contains the scenarios it depicts, but whose ethos and constitution far exceed them in significance. As the audience watches, so *it* is reframed as extra-terrestrial in the most literal sense: partially hoisted out of grounded individual experience by the cumulative effects of the staging, and implicated as witnesses to a narrative and to a performance whose concerns intersect with their own "global context" in myriad different ways. In this complex figuring, the paradoxes of the global, cited above, can begin to be resolved, and the theatrical risks revealed by *Alladeen* are reconfigured, by Lepage, in terms of potential.

Unfortunately, a key component of Lepage's production leads me to conclude that this promise is not honoured. "Should the emancipation and secularization of the modern age", writes Arendt of humankind's eagerness to escape its perceived imprisonment by reaching for the moon, "which began with a turning-away...from a god who was the Father of men in heaven, end with an even more fateful repudiation of an Earth who was the Mother of all living creatures under the sky?" (1998 [1958]: 2). While Arendt's portentous prose is elsewhere tempered by her philosophical analysis, in *The Far Side of the Moon*, the figure of the central character's dead mother exerts a decisive pull over the symbolic topography of the play that never lets up. In this schema, the title names the site of a motherless existence, spinning out of orbit without the force of a satellite to draw it back.

Primed for singularity, *The Far Side of the Moon* is ultimately recuperated under a single, dominant metaphor. This is exemplified in the closing image, where Philippe finds an elegiac moment of liberation in a departure lounge (figure 25). As the set inclines to become a tilted mirror, Philippe falls to the floor and slowly begins to stretch and curve his body. Against the black floor of the stage, his reflection resembling a lone figure tumbling through space, it is a physical expression of worldliness in whose combination of the transcendent and the mundane I would argue that the audience share. And yet, such is the cumulative force of the maternal metaphor over the course of the play, that the foetal symbolism of his movements threatens to over-determine any more subtle or fantastical significations: this final moment of self-realization is possible only at the price of a return to the womb. Formally, such circularities are undeniably pleasurable, but in terms of the narrative, they close off the play from its expansive potential with a final demand on the audience to invest emotionally in the fate of the character. In so doing, I suggest that it hawks persuasive psycho-drama and impressive showmanship at the expense of a properly cosmopolitan expression of the world.

4. The Virtual: *15th September 2003, Rotterdamse Schouwberg.*

In contrast, *The Global Soul*, directed by Ong Keng Sen and featuring performers from Thailand, China, Korea, Benin/Denmark/France and Sweden, is determinedly depersonalized. The stage space is abstract, white, defined by a set made of inclined

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[6] I'm taking an executive decision here to prioritise stylistic symmetry over grammatical accuracy: properly

planes, and the changing colours of the cyclorama. To a soundtrack that combines contemporary Japanese electronica with singing from the Korean, Swedish and Chinese performers, a dance-drama unfolds in which each performer makes a separate journey through the space. Now, it appears to be invested with a quality of extensivity: simultaneously stage and world. The journeys are informed by the artists' own area of aesthetic expertise. Hence, the character identified in the programme as "Miss Ping" uses the walks, gestures and delivery of the Chinese Liyuan Opera style that the performer, Zeng Jing Ping, specializes in, while "Millie" (Sophiatou Kossoko) improvises contemporary Euro-American dance moves around her French train-of-thought travelogue narrative. Along with Pichet Klunchun's reinvention of Thai classical dance, Charlotte Engelkes' presentational dance-theatre persona and Kang Kwon Soon's traditional Korean *Kagok* singing, it is tempting to assume that the performers' personalities will emerge in their distinction from one another, but they remain muted, obscure. "I have nothing to declare", says Millie at one point, and it refers to more than her imagined presence at immigration. Engelkes is the only performer to address the audience directly, but her vignettes are allusive and opaque, meaning that she is no more intimate with them than the others, for all her apparent frankness.

As the performers circulate and the journeys progress, it is the forms that are foregrounded and, given their diversity and individual complexity, my first reaction as an audience member is to focus less on the execution and signification of specific gestures, than on their cumulative effect in the space. In this, one realises that the performers do not embody individuals, nor, despite their contrasting forms, do they represent distinct cultures or ethnicities. Instead, they collectively produce a sense of the global multiplicity of travel; a reminder that while no one person is always on the move, there are always people on the move. Travel, in other words, is better described as a condition of the global, than as a global condition. In the abstract space of the white box, it is this multiplicity that is staged.

However, travel is never experienced purely or indefinitely as – for want of a better word – *travelness*: it is made between specific places in specific ways for particular reasons. Similarly, although, as an audience member, one can *intuit* a sense of generality, there will always remain the desire to reterritorialize one's response back

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inverted, the term should be *Mundus Theatri*.

onto the performers as individuals: "Does Charlotte Engelkes normally wear those shoes? Do those movements mean that Sophiatou Kossoko plays tennis? Why did Kang Kwon Soon choose that colour lipstick? Is it popular in Korea? Is Zeng Jing Ping pretending to be younger than she really is? Why is Pichet Klunchun sweating?" As the trite and speculative nature of these examples indicate, however, the performers largely succeeded in deflecting questions that might draw a more substantial (and ultimately reductive) connection with their on-stage personae ("did Engelkes have a miscarrage, or was it just her character?"), and while this is partly due to the recessiveness of their personalities relative to their actions, it is also because of a quality to their choreographies and delivery that is simultaneously distinctive and dispersive.

Indicatively (of the distinctive and dispersive), given that Kang sits in the same spot on the stage throughout the performance (figure 26), the most convenient assumption to make about her journey is that it is metaphoric, or symbolic, or "all in the mind". When she begins to sing, however, it becomes apparent that her relationship with travel is of a different order. Because of the impassive demeanour and circular breathing technique that *Kagok* requires, the sound continues even when Kang does not appear to be singing (recalling bagpipes that can be played even when the piper is not blowing). It emanates from her without being locatable *in* her, and in this regard, I was struck by the feeling that the sound produced *her* as much as she the sound. Moreover, in so far as audience members share in this experience, sound appears to do the same thing to them as to Kang. In other words, Kang's voice cannot be said to travel, in the sense of carrying signification to a destination. Instead, introduced into the already-established milieu of the stage as extensive and generalized, it fuses proscenium and auditorium, audience members' bodies and performers' bodies in a singular resonating environment. There, *ex*tensivity is experienced as *in*tensivity, recalling Pina Bausch's famous maxim that she is not interested in how people move, but what moves them; but it continues, in this latter aspect, to produce a form of travel in place.

A second example of the distinctive and dispersive – less spectacular, but perhaps more typical – occurs when, about two thirds of the way through the performance, the character called "He" (Pichet Klunchun) walks backwards up an inclined walkway (figure 27). Coming at the end of a busy ten-minute sequence of movement-based work by the four mobile performers, the walk represents something of a climax. The

Figure 26. Kang Kwon Soon, Charlotte Engelkes and Zeng Jing Ping in *The Global Soul* (2003). Photo courtesy of TheatreWorks.

Figure 27. Pichet Klunchun in *The Global Soul* (2003). Photo courtesy of TheatreWorks.

sound intensifies into a compressed throb, and Pichet walks very slowly, leaning back steeply, back almost parallel with the slope, feet pointing forwards and legs extending out straight at every step. As the time taken to execute the walk lengthens into several minutes, Klunchun's posture becomes increasingly compelling and disconcerting. The angle is so improbable and yet so sustained, that it flies in the face of one's constantly renewed assumption and expectation that he will fall over. His persistent failure to do so invests his body with a quality that it is tempting to describe by analogy – supernatural, spectral, ghostly – but whose actuality demands a more sober assessment. A better explanation is provided by Brian Massumi's discussion of the "real but abstract incorporeality of the body", which he calls the virtual.

"When a body is in motion", Massumi writes, "it does not coincide with itself. It coincides with its own transition: its own variation...In motion, a body is in an immediate, unfolding relation to its own nonpresent potential to vary" (2002: 4). This nonpresent potential is the virtual, which "fringes" all movements at their point of emergence. Usually, the trajectory of a particular movement is back-formed almost instantaneously, thereby banishing the virtual into the wholly abstract realm. However, in the case of Klunchun's backwards-walk it may be that the intuitive empathetic mechanisms that told me he should have fallen over were trumped by a body that seemed to be forging through the virtual, and creating an experience of remarkable intensity as a result. Writing with reference to Zeno's paradox, Massumi states that "movement, in process, cannot be determinately indexed to anything outside of itself. It has withdrawn into an all-encompassing relation with what it will be. It is in becoming, absorbed in occupying its field of potential. For when it comes to a stop in the target, it will have undergone a qualitative change" (7). On arrival at the top of the slope, "He" sits down in the lotus position, and there is a white-out. This journey, it is suggested, has changed him in profound ways, for now he has achieved a state akin to enlightenment.

Expanding my reflections on this experience, I would say that *The Global Soul* was most successful in producing an on-stage environment that could testify to the virtual as a way of exploring the condition of globality. A final example, however, also demonstrates that this was as much a weakness of the production as a strength.

Near the beginning of the performance, Miss Ping sings as she sets out on her journey. The background soundscape, heard as if far away, mixes a soft, repetitive

pulsing sound with samples of Chinese stringed instruments, and fragments of Chinese opera. Heard in this way, the music seems to resonate with Miss Ping's actions at a distance, as if, to use Massumi's phrase, above, her body does not coincide with itself: as if she is the virtual to the sound's actual, which is being realized elsewhere: perhaps on a Liyuan opera stage with a more recognizable storyline. This distancing, in turn, suggests that it is not specific movements or actions that occupy their field of potential, but that the whole of the stage is constituted as such a field in relation to the "real world" of travel and encounter, where such potential is constantly being actualized in specific journeys and interactions.

The notion of the theatre space as a kind of soul-machine is an intriguing one that explains the title of the performance without reference to the more individualized – indeed, atomized – interpretation that is otherwise suggested, and it makes sense of what I took to be the vague, dissipative tone and detached performances. However, there is also a flaw in this implicit spatialisation (the virtual here, the actual there) which is indicative of a broader failing of the piece. "Concepts of the virtual in itself", writes Massumi, "are important only to the extent to which they contribute to a pragmatic understanding of emergence, to the extent to which they enable triggerings of change (induce the new). It is the edge of the virtual, where it leaks into actual, that counts. For that seeping edge is where potential, actually, is found" (43). In the examples of Kang and Klunchun, I have suggested, the audience member encounters that "seeping edge", but when the production as a whole takes on this quality, it does so as an allegory. The performers produce and inhabit "a virtual world", but as they circulate through the space, they never dramatize the points at which this emerges into the actual world; points that, in the context of theatrical performance, are the sites of and spurs to recognition and substantive interaction by the audience.

In other words, *The Global Soul* seems to me to suffer from *too much immanence* – in other words, *nothing happens*. In an empty space where the performers' actions must be self-generated, there is no scope for sociality. They never touch or interact directly, so their movements only ever coincide in mimicry or by chance, as if they can sense the existence of others, but have no means of proving it, let alone of making contact. When Millie falls to the floor after running furiously on the spot, no-one picks her up, for to do so would be to bring cause and effect into play in an environment that precludes it. This situation adversely affects both the structure and the theme of the performance. While one can identify moments of varying intensity over the course of

the performance, this does not amount to the kinds of modulation that would enable or effect change. Structurally, *The Global Soul* seems to me to do little more than *throb*, a situation that gradually came to be at odds with my experience as an audience member, where my thickening, cumulative response to the material was increasingly difficult to reconcile with the persistent thinness of the material itself. Thematically, too, it is experience that is lacking. In the absence of cause and effect, the characters cannot learn anything. For all their apparent gravity, they are neither worldly nor wise, and the result is an oppressive blandness to the piece, which can account neither for humour, nor for passion.

As these missed opportunities for connection accumulate, the virtual mutates into the more mundane quality of self-absorption, and the dynamic potential of the performance is reconstituted in more modest terms as personal honesty. Precluded from making even associative connections with actual conditions of globalized existence, the artists' actions remain resolutely formalistic. The mise en scene does not permit them to represent anything or anyone other than themselves engaged in their practice, and it is the Global Soul as international artist that I would argue they are shown overall to be exploring (or indeed, showcasing). This is honest, but it is also oppressively circular, suggesting that the artist can only perform her or his personal experience as an artist who travels the world, performing her or his personal experience...and so on, without any scope for the world – for other people – to intervene into this experience, or for this experience to be related to others that may draw attention to its privileges. Is this the paradox of globality? – that its very extensivity breeds such self-regarding circumscriptions? My final example suggests that performance need not be this way.

5. Unlocalized On: *18th October 2003, The Lyric Hammersmith, London.*

"[I]f *Pericles* is a journey, then it is an interior one. It has no literal geography; its maps are maps of the heart." So writes Neil Bartlett (2003a: 6), who directed and designed the Lyric Hammersmith production of William Shakespeare's play – a picaresque tale of love lost and found in a range of locations by turn iniquitous, magnificant and mystical. Bartlett's observation itself threatens to reduce the expansive scope of the play to a manageable metaphor of a "journey of personal discovery" on a par with the emotional travails of Philippe in *The Far Side of the Moon*, and at first blush, the staging does nothing to dispel this suggestion. The setting is institutional, with

swinging hospital-style doors, an array of besuited functionaries, and Pericles himself pyjama-clad, as if the whole fragmented tale is imagined by a madman, and acted out to humour him. Happily, the effects – for a spectator – of the production subsequently prove themselves to be somewhat at odds both with this scenario, and with Neil Bartlett's analysis. This observation is not to counter-claim that its geography *is* literal and the journey actual, although it is true that Pericles is bewilderingly peripatetic, and the audience member who does not keep up with the changes in location will be hard pressed to follow the fragmented narrative of corruption, death, birth, resurrection and recognition as it shifts from location to location around an antique Mediterranean. Rather, there is no journey – interior or exterior – to speak of. The characters – indeed *all* the elements of the play – are suspended in restless relationality akin to that described by Serres as he develops his characterization of a "world city":

> Newtown is an unimaginable mediator, invisible and all-embracing, informative, pedagogic, stable in its rapid intercommunications – cars, aircraft, satellites, transmissions and messages may circulate as fast as they like, but there still remains in movement a more or less equivalent number, which makes the city and with which it hums – realizing intimate proximities across immense distances. I never leave the woman who waits for me, and whose voice I hear all the time wherever I go, and whose face I see likewise, in image: invariant albeit varying, moving but not moving – Newtown has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere (1995: 71).[7]

The latter half of this quotation seems particularly apt when tested against a play in which the central character is haunted by the loss of his wife at sea and his daughter on a distant shore, only to be reconciled with both, after fourteen years which pass in the blink of an eye. However, the contemporary references in the first half of the Serres quotation are no less resonant, for Bartlett's tersely-adapted, stripped-down production seems to me to make of the text a chamber play for the hypertextual age.

While conventional commentaries on *Pericles* despair of its "most uneven and puzzling" narrative (Hoeniger 2000 [1962]: vii),[8] Bartlett's spare and subtle production draws out the latent corollary of its constant fragmentation, which is a fine web of connectivity between all its component parts. This in contrast to *The Global Soul*, where each part is treated as a singularity in its own right. In their speech, for example, the characters are made to work consistently to link body-parts to corporeal wholes, meanings to their intended actions, and relations to identities. "Take in your arms this

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[7] The text is spoken by one of Serres' nominal characters, Pantope, "a traveling inspector for Air France", about the other, Pia, "a doctor at the airport medical center" (8).

[8] All subsequent references to the script will be taken from the Arden edition of the play, and given parenthetically in the body of the text. Where Neil Bartlett's adaptation differs, I reference his rehearsal version of the script instead (Bartlett 2003b).

piece/ Of your dead queen" (IIIi17-18), says the nurse Lychorida as she passes Pericles his newborn daughter, who, when later reconciled with her family, exclaims in turn: "My heart/ Leaps to be gone into my mother's bosom" (Viii44-5). By contrast with the maternal symbolism of *The Far Side of the Moon*, the terms in *Pericles* are too densely packed to gain the distance on each other required to produce a representational – and therefore metaphorical – relationship. The compressed logic of Marina's identity – "Whom, for she was born at sea, I have named so" (IIIiii13) – links characters, bodies, words and the elements in such a way as to suggest that the connectivity of the play is of a structurally different order from than that of its narrative, and offers the key to its effective realization on stage. Bartlett's achievement is to highlight such interrelations across the constituent aspects of the production, while differentiating them sufficiently that they do not collapse into each other, excluding the active participation of the audience in the process. In so doing, he treads a fine line between the generic globality of *Alladeen*, the ultimately reductive individualism of *The Far Side of the Moon*, and the asocial immanence of *The Global Soul.*

A good example of how this is achieved lies in Bartlett's use of Gower, the play's chorus. His first scene-setting in the published script...

> This Antioch, then, Antiochus the Great
> Built up, this city, for his chiefest seat, (I Chorus 16-18)

...undergoes a subtle but significant change in Bartlett's adaptation:

> This, Antioch, then; Thank you
> Antiochus the Great
> Built up this city for his chiefest seat, (2003b: 1)

The insertion of a comma after the first "this" draws out the performative implications of the term over and above its descriptive function, naming the stage-space as Antioch without need for props or scenery. It is a repeated strategy of ostention akin to the effect of a hand icon clicking on a hyperlink: "Here he comes"; "we there him lost"; "Send"; "Aboard! Suddenly!". Adroitly played with avuncular, if slightly pompous, charm by Bette Bourne, Gower moves about the stage pointing, revealing, opening doors and closing curtains as he speaks. There are no journeys in the play because no-one *goes* anywhere: at a word or a gesture, the stage is refreshed, and *there they are*. "Moving without moving", like the intimate proximities realized across great distances described by Serres, a succession of scenarios whose logic has nothing to do with linearity or

location engages the audience, and presents a world that is multi-faceted, but without volume. As such, the experience approaches the condition of the cyberspatial, where, as Alice Rayner puts it, there is no hypothetical space: "The 'as if' that creates such space is flattened by the fiat of digital systems. That is, the digital act must always be done; it cannot be held in suspense because it exists only when it is done" (1999: 289).

Given that the incontrovertibly three-dimensional space of the theatre cannot achieve this condition, Bartlett's *Pericles* charts an intermediate course between the "flattening" of digital systems, and the "as if" of representational strategies. Gower's "Thank you", a repeated affectation, reinforces presentational flatness on the one hand, and binds him into the narrative as a character of self-congratulatory quality on the other. Such doubleness inheres in the structure of the play from its opening lines: "To sing a song that old was sung,/ From ashes ancient Gower is come,/ Assuming man's infirmities,/ To glad your ear, and please your eyes" (I Chorus 1-4). As these first words of the play become flesh, albeit infirm, so too do all those that follow. Bartlett's *Pericles* is epistolary (figure 28), proceeding by means of messengers and apparitions who bear letters, commissions, inscriptions, devices, riddles, predictions and passports in sealed envelopes on silver platters. The actors behave accordingly. Through the swinging doors, across the clinically anonymous vestibule of the set, they glide on and off stage with exceptional fluidity. Dumbshows materialize and dissipate suddenly and precisely, as if in a bid to minimize the informational and emotional "noise" of full characterization. Indeed, all the actors can be judged to wear their characters lightly, although not without conviction, and this is key, for in this delirium of communication, flesh also becomes word: whatever form the message takes, it is always also the messenger. After her attempted murder of Marina, Dionyza doubts that "Some little bird of Tarsus will fly hence/ And open this to Pericles" (Bartlett 2003b: 50). Her fate is sealed, however, the instant Marina, trapped in the brothel at Myteline, wishes herself free even if it means being changed into "the meanest bird/ That flies i' the purer air!" (57).

Reconciled with Pericles, Marina sings Dionyza's treachery. As the characters are their own messages, so, too, are the actors. The constant doubling of roles builds familiarity with the performers, over and above an engagement with characterization. Finally in the improbably long recognition scenes, whose fiction is impossible for any actor to sustain convincingly, the spectator's attention is shifted decisively from

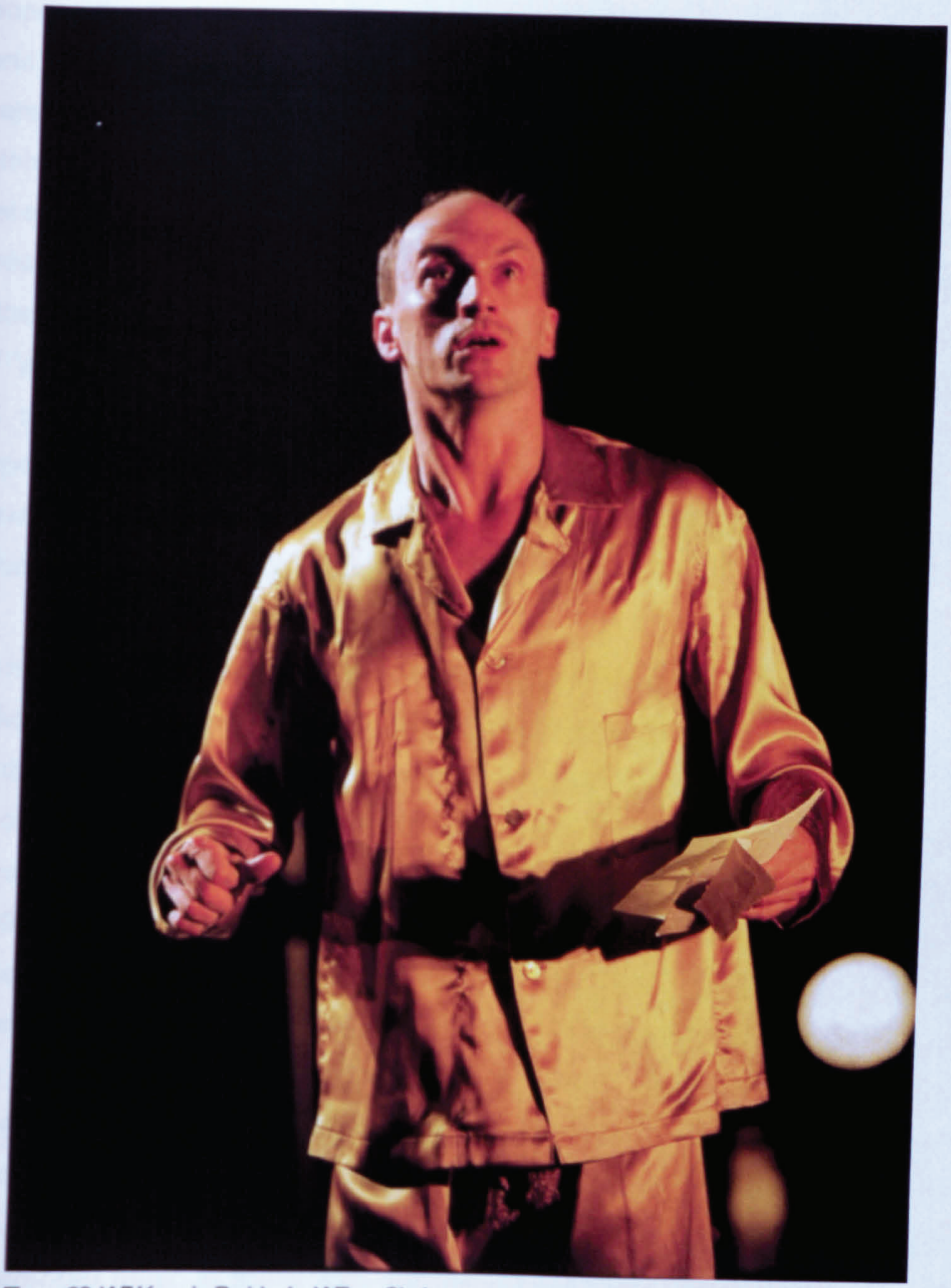

Figure 28. Will Keen in *Pericles* by William Shakespeare, at the Lyric Hammersmith (2003). Photograph: John Haynes, courtesy of the Lyric Hammersmith.

character to actor. In Bartlett's production, my attention was riveted not so much to Pericles and Marina, but to the actors, Will Keen and Pascale Burgess. In their apparently disinterested commitment to reproducing recognition in and of each other, and in my analogous (but interested) attempt, in whatever way, to recognize them, I sensed the potential of the stage to produce a mode of relationality appropriate to the global age. Just as Marina, who lives "Where I am but a stranger" (65) can only be reconciled at sea ("born at sea.../And found at sea again!" (68)), so it seems the stage must take on this unpredictable, unstable quality before strangers can recognize each other, and recognize each other *in* each other, without needing to disavow that quality of "strangerness" that must even shadow familiarity. In maintaining the stage as a site of swiftly circulating, fleetingly materializing, messages and connections, the experience Bartlett offers at the close of his production seems to me to echo the "invariant albeit varying" experience by which Serres describes human constancy in an informational age: recognition without reconciliation.

Generalizing the kind of spatiality that can produce such an effect is necessarily difficult. A provisional term can be suggested in response to McAuley's late twentieth century notion of the "unlocalized off", a fictional stage space which refers to "...those places that are part of the dramatic geography of the action, but which are not placed physically in relation to the stage, the contiguous offstage, or to the audience space" (1999: 31). By contrast, the kind of space I am seeking to describe here, which constitutes the singular geography of the global *as the condition of* what takes place on stage, might be captured in the paradoxical formulation of the "unlocalized on". This sort of shift aims to provide the context within which the individual can find an experience of spatiality that reconciles the fact of interconnectedness to the inconceivable extensivity of those connections, and an experience of sociality that recognizes the stranger without compromising the disinterest upon which their identity *as stranger* must, at some level, be maintained. This would be a twenty-first century experience, that is, approaching the cosmopolitan.

6.

That the condition of the "unlocalized on" has political implications is not immediately apparent in the four examples discussed above, yet the delineation of these implications is no less imperative for being elusive. A cautionary tale in this regard is provided by Yukio Ninagawa's production of *Pericles*, performed in London at the

National Theatre several months prior to Bartlett's staging. The actors mounted the stage from the auditorium dressed in rags and carrying suitcases, and three sumptuous hours later, they donned the same garb and left the way they had come. This trope of the "refugee aesthetic", which aligns the themes of a given play and, by implication, the vocation of acting, with the generically wretched of the earth I found to be disingenuous, to say the least. That the actors in Ninagawa's production should enter through the auditorium, as if to represent the dispossessed Other of the audience, is a tendentious disavowal of those actors' own privileged position. Committed artists in a philistine world they may be, but they are members of a global cultural elite nonetheless, and their very performance of marginalization itself plays a legitimating role as the *bohemian* Other with whom corporate cosmopolitans can share finger-food in airport lounges and theatre foyers. These *loci operandi* of the frequent-flyer class are a far cry from the gruelling overland journeys and punishing working conditions that confront those whom actors such as Ninagawa's affect to represent.

To a certain extent, such discrepancies are intractable, and this sort of critique limited in its implication. On the other hand, as we have seen in the case of *The Global Soul*, to ignore such issues is just as problematic. While the enduring appropriateness of such gesture politics must be thrown into question, therefore, the more complex sense of connectivity I am advocating here offers an affirmative mode of proposing and identifying alternative political configurations. A related argument is made by Alice Rayner, who proposes an experiential approach to understanding the theatre, which she calls "haunting":

> Theatre so often becomes too real, too familiar, too merely significant, important or meaningful. Perhaps this is why so few actual productions or performances produce the haunting that belongs there. Empirical and rational values more often than not dominate the readiness of theatrical space to be haunted. Real haunting actually requires some element of an uncanny lack of signification, a non-signifying presence..."(2002: 540).

For Rayner, this "non-signifying presence" in the theatre can be found in the work of the stage-hands and technicians: "The backstage world is theatre's other, internal double. It is the space of the dark matter of the real in distinction to the blinding light of the stage representation"(539). This careful interweaving of work and labour with the aesthetic and representational structures of the theatre can be further opened out to consider the place of theatre in the context of globalization, and *vice versa*. In light of international touring productions such as Ninagawa's for example, the "internal double" of the theatre represented by the backstage world stretches far beyond the stage door

to encompass all those "behind-the-scenes" activities, places and non-places that smooth the global passage of theatre-makers, their audiences, and many others besides. In this regard, Rayner's "dark matter" names a generalized phenomenon of Serres' "Newtown-Under-Light", since the extent to which processes of labour and production are integral to the operations of the marketplace is often obscured by descriptions of the global economy as dematerialized. This is a point emphasized by Saskia Sassen, when she observes:

> [G]lobalization is not only constituted in terms of capital and the new international corporate culture (international finance, telecommunications, information flows) but also in terms of people and noncorporate cultures. There is a whole infrastructure of low-wage, nonprofessional jobs and activities that constitutes a crucial part of the so-called corporate economy (2000: 243).

The question of how the multiple economies and work cultures that constitute the global can be made manifest on the cosmopolitan stage is a tough one, but it must be addressed if a more appropriate mode of figuring structural inequities than that proposed by Ninagawa and ignored by Ong is to take shape. A single moment in Bartlett's production provides a glimpse – and only a glimpse – of how this might happen. A half-naked actor falls part-way through a door and lies prone. Gower points down at him and states: "This, Tarsus...Thank you." The famine-stricken city that he names is materialized strikingly and abruptly in and upon the pale contours of the actor's body. Meanwhile, however, affable self-congratulation takes on the sinister complexion of an agency deriving credit from bringing a situation to light, without acting upon it. The vignette actualizes with compelling discomfort a desperate, but familiar, scenario described by one of Serres' interlocutors: "we see the myriad peoples of low-life Oldtown, suffering from malnutrition...while we strive to build egotistical moralities and refined ethical concepts" (1995: 197). The example provided is limited, but it is also suggestive of the ways in which bodies and other material forms, and the relationships between them, can make manifest the inequitable dynamics of the global that are currently part and parcel of the "unlocalized on". Abrupt intensifications within the diffuse space of the cosmopolitan stage, they materialize a "non-signifying presence" that may well mark points of blockage or tension in the differentiated field of the global, and which must be signaled if the "unlocalized on" is to be anything other than a whitewash. There is a connection here with the "border thinking" of artists such as Guillermo Gomez-Peña.[9] However, in a singularity that has, as Serres argues, "its centre everywhere and its circumference nowhere", the

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[9] See, for example, the work discussed and documented in Gomez-Peña's *Dangerous Border Crossers* (2000).

differentiating impediments that so energize Gomez-Peña's brash intercultural border aesthetic are now redistributed in ever finer and more indiscriminate fashion throughout the field.

***

Having earlier taken issue with the description and invention of a social, political, historical and geographical entity like Singapore in singularizing terms, the basic premise of this chapter has nevertheless been that, in significant ways that are related to the financial markets and communications systems, the world is coming to be formulated as a singularity. I have therefore explored the ways in which four theatrical performances have sought to stage (rather than simply represent) the experience of the global by working both with and against the constitution of the stage space as singular. In the case of *Alladeen* and *The Global Soul*, the singularizing potential of the theatre was harnessed as a way of doubling the singularity of the global. However, in failing to acknowledge this fact (*Alladeen*) or in making too much play of it (*The Global Soul*), I suggest that both productions fell short to accounting for the full complexity of the experiences they aimed to explore. *The Far Side of the Moon* turned this complexity to impressive theatrical effect, but in a bid for thematic cohesion, the openness that I found so inviting as an audience member was eventually closed down in favour of an emotive personalization. Finally, in the Lyric Hammersmith's *Pericles*, I suggest that the peripatetic narrative was successfully rendered by Bartlett's evocative and economical use of the stage space, with the result that a sense of globality was able to pervade the performance and my engagement with it.

An issue that remains unresolved in the performances that I have discussed, however, is whether it is possible to successfully stage globality in singular terms, while continuing to testify to the social differentiations than now appear to inhere *within* the singular. Nor is this difficulty unique to these productions. My personal experience of watching performances that have sought to grasp the global as a socialized singularity (rather than, say, refracting it through a more localized or individualized perspective[10]),

[10] Writing in a Deleuzo-Marxian vein, and with a more militant inflection than I am using here, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri nevertheless describe a related problem. They claim that the "localization of struggle" by traditional leftists is flawed because it fails to account for the ways in which "what appear as local identities are not autonomous or self-determining but actually feed into and support the development of the capitalist imperial machine". They go on to state: "It is better both theoretically and practically to enter the terrain of Empire and confront its homogenizing and heterogenizing flows in all their complexity, grounding our analysis in the power of the global multitude" (2000: 45-6).

is that structural difficulties appear to inhere in the very subject matter, and inhibit the successful realization of the work *as theatre*. For example, the recent work of Robert Wilson (such as *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (2003) and *I La Galigo* (2004)), seems to have lost the compelling force of its aesthetic logic at precisely the point where its dense connectivity of gesture, light and language seemed finally to have come into its own as *the* experiential condition of the information age. Perhaps, for the moment, we will have to settle for the fact that, just like the audiences for such work, constituted anew for every performance and combining cultural identities, national imaginaries, local dispositions and global relations in ways that are impossible to predict, this work is yet to come.

This ambivalence inevitably begs the question of where, in terms of the scalar expansion that has characterized the development of these chapters, we go from here. Of course, the term "cosmopolitan" includes within it a reference to the cosmos, and there is no doubt an intriguing study to be written on recent theatrical evocations of spatial co-ordinates beyond the global. However, for all its extensive research and development into defence technologies, and unlike its neighbour Malaysia, Singapore has no space programme to speak of, and no tradition as yet of theatrical productions that have made such explorations. Nevertheless, there does remain at least one more area of enquiry that falls under the ambit of this study, although its scope and manifestations are somewhat more diffuse than in previous chapters. To get there, we need to bid farewell to the jet-setting we've done over the course of this chapter, and prepare for touchdown back on Singapore soil.

5. Environmental Relations: Nosing Around the Garden City.

1. Changi

Let's say you arrive by plane, as 29 million do annually. The scent trail begins before you know it: high altitudes suppress the scent organs, and as you leave the gate for the first travellator, they're still struggling to adapt to the abrupt return to sea level. No matter. Maybe you can smell again by the time you hit immigration. But you wouldn't necessarily know it. Passport given, scanned, stamped, returned. Welcome back to Singapore, where the only thing you can smell is yourself.

"While many new airports purport to symbolise the countries they welcome us to", boasts a glossy coffee table book on the airport, "few can claim to be icons amongst their own people. To Singapore's four million inhabitants, Changi *is* Singapore" (Kishnani 2002: 11). Air-conditioned, efficient, and squeaky clean: public-friendly private space. This is presumably what Singaporeans think of when they equate "Changi" with "Singapore". Orchids are in abundance here. Go closer, smell them – they are scentless, fake. Expecting plastic, you feel them, drop your nose down to the roots – their velvet texture and faint damp odour tell you otherwise. Flowers so real they look fake. Perfectly postmodern? Perhaps, but it's the conjunction, not the inversion that is of interest. These orchids, planted in charcoal so their tentacular roots can gather moisture from the humid air, have been adapted to survive in significantly cooler, dryer conditions at the cost of their scent and all that entails. Sterile. Recall that in Kuo's *Descendents of the Eunuch Admiral*, Singaporeans have become modern castrati, emasculated by materialism and the state. If Changi is Singapore, are these orchids Singaporeans? Let's not get too glib, at least not yet. You've only just got off the plane.

But spend a bit more time in the terminal, to find out how such cleanliness comes about. Pick out a cleaner from the army that patrol the floors, and follow them. They circulate with their cleaning carts like lost luggage on a belt. Slowly. Disconsolately. At times, their eyes are glued to the gleaming floor, on the lookout for the tiniest scrap out of place. But often they are in a state of drift, animated only when their paths cross with colleagues, and they stop, briefly, to chat. Others, meanwhile, are at work cleaning the acres of glass separating travellers from relatives and friends, and pulling apart the many lighting fixtures to wipe the grilles clean. And then it dawns on you that

these tasks are only mock-Sisyphean: that in fact these cleaners have *nothing to do*. Changi is too clean, if such a condition is possible. Some kind of glitch in the system causes the cleaning turnaround to operate at a faster rate than the accumulation of dirt. The result: exponential efficiency that, ultimately, will be no efficiency at all, but, because of the self-erasing nature of the work, will take a while to become apparent. In the meantime, the excess manifests itself as performance.

A cleaner is on the move on an upper floor of one of the terminals, where the restaurants and viewing gallery are. You observe, from a distance. He looks over the balcony for a while, and then, bored with doing nothing, attends to his work. He grabs his "cleaning in progress" signs, paces out an area of tiled floor and begins to mop. Once finished, he packs up, and drifts off. The area of floor selected for cleaning was apparently random: no less spotless than any around it, and now no more so for the extra attention lavished briefly upon it. What was important was not the effect, but the act. And yet the act achieved nothing demonstrable, let alone lasting.

The cleaner's behaviour is indicative of three things. First, that tracking the ways in which people respond to and utilise smell invariably gives rise to questions of performance. Second, that the specific social, political and atmospheric conditions that constitute Singapore today make it a fascinating place to investigate the relationship between the two phenomena. Third, it is suggestive of a methodological approach to engaging with and interpreting performance in Singapore, of which more later. Hovering between act and effect, deriving from an over-eager efficacy and a process of environmental control manifested as erasure, the performance of cleaning presents itself as supremely apt for this authoritarian republic. In this sense, at least, you can agree: Changi is Singapore.

Inevitably, then, there is little else to sniff out at the airport apart from the perfume outlets. Perhaps avail yourself of a bottle of *Raffles*, named after the British colonialist who "founded" modern Singapore in 1819, or *Singapore Girl*, a scented tribute to one of Singapore Airlines' most renowned and resilient brands: their be-saronged female cabin crew. It's an intriguing choice. Who do you want to be today?

If you are not already in Terminal 2, take the skytrain from Terminal 1. From Terminal 2, take the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT, or Underground) train from Changi, change lines at City Hall, and alight at Orchard MRT station.

Figure 29. Orchids at Changi Airport. Photograph: the author.

Figure 30. Cleaner at Changi Airport. Photograph: the author.

Figure 31. Spice stall at Tekka Market.
Photograph: Low Kee Hong.

2.

If the preceding four chapters have traced a scalar expansion, exploring how performance produces relationality with reference to the individual/community, city/nation, region and world, then on the face of it, this chapter bucks the trend. Having gone international, here we are again, touching down at Changi, and heading back into the city. However, as the discussion of singularity in the last chapter already began to demonstrate, in an age of global processes, scalar expansion does not necessarily correlate with territorial extensivity. In this chapter, therefore, I am more concerned with *in*tensivity. Indeed, I contend that such a turn is integral to any cosmopolitan enquiry worthy of the name. While articulations of cosmopolitan projects from a range of positions and locations retain a close and sometimes sustaining connection with humanism (the example of Edward Said, discussed earlier, is one that will have to stand for many here), it is always worth remembering that this connection resonates most powerfully with the latter component of the term's etymology, *politês*, meaning "citizen". In *kosmos* – "world", and subsequently, "universe" – there lies a corollary obligation to think more expansively about what a concern with the cosmopolitan might encompass.

A useful starting point is to note that both "cosmopolitan" and "cosmopolite" carry secondary, ecological, meanings as adjectives and nouns that describe flora and fauna found all over the world. Beyond this residually anthropomorphic interpretation, there lie alternative perspectives on engaging with nature. Making a cosmopolitan-ecological argument from a Confucian perspective, Tu Weiming notes that although there is much to commend the humanism of what he calls the "Enlightenment Mentality", its anthropocentric aspect has had profoundly negative effects on the "life-support systems" of the world. This is most immediately an environmental issue, but it is precisely Tu's point that it cannot be separated out from the full spectrum of human concerns and activities. Even despite recent critiques of the Enlightenment ideology from within the Western academy, its global influence is such that "[i]t seems self-evident that both capitalism and socialism subscribe to the aggressive anthropocentrism underlying the modern mind-set: man is not only the measure of all things but also the only source of power for economic well-being, political stability, and social development" (2002: 251). For Tu, the advent of globalization is both a threat and an opportunity. He spares no quarter in decrying the "sharp difference, severe differentiation, drastic demarcation, thunderous dissonance, and outright discrimination" of the "global village" (257): contrasts that have never been so

markedly drawn. On the other hand, he points to a range of spiritual, intellectual and creative resources that are "available to us for the sake of developing a truly ecumenical sense of global community" (256). From his own perspective, he draws attention to the integrated and relational aspects of the Confucian vision, including the fact that "[h]uman beings are sentient beings, capable of internal resonance not only between and among themselves but also with other animals, plants, trees, mountains and rivers, indeed nature as a whole" (259). This, in tandem with further dimensions concerning self, community and transcendence, is what characterises the Confucian outlook as "anthropocosmic". While there are inevitable limitations to the Confucian ethos in an age of pluralistic modernity, at the very least Tu usefully underscores issues of ecological reciprocity, responsibility and restraint that even a cosmopolitan perspective might otherwise overlook.

In the context of the present study, it is probably Tu's general critique and aspiration that are more significant than the precise moral resources he invokes towards the end of his essay. This not least because, as he ruefully points out, the rise of Singapore, along with other industrialized East Asian nations, "symbolizes the instrumental rationality of the Enlightenment heritage with a vengeance" (255). It is noticeable, for instance, that the ecological dimension is as absent as the aesthetic dimension from both the Shared and Asian Values as they were articulated in the nineties by Singaporeans like Tommy Koh. Given that, as the Singaporean geographer Ooi Giok Ling points out, "[n]ature and the space it has occupied has been conceived as generally no more than a land bank in the scheme of things planned by the state" (2004: 83), this is understandable, since all aspects of Singapore's ecology are first and foremost instrumentalist issues of economic or resource management, or governance.

Both the benefits and limitations of such an attitude became apparent in early 2003, during an outbreak of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (Sars) virus, which killed thirty-two people. A raft of strictly enforced hygiene and quarantine measures built on already-existing programmes of environmental management and social control were introduced to curtail the spread of the disease, drawing effusive praise from the World Health Organisation. However, a simultaneously-conducted mass cull of stray cats led to outrage among animal-loving Singaporeans. Although the government claimed that the cull was part of a more general hygiene programme – "Singapore's OK" – it came on the back of rumours that Sars had been spread by civet cats (a kind

of weasel) in China, and indeed 140 cats were tested for the virus in Singapore. The negative results did nothing to halt the cull, and an unprecedented protest campaign was launched in response. This took the form of petitions, a press conference, performative actions such as memorial services for culled cats, and the widespread freeing of cats from traps waiting to be picked up by the authorities.

As Ray Langenbach points out in an appropriately forensic analysis (2003: 216-221), the Singapore state has long employed metaphors of disease to characterise what it sees as the potentially harmful effects of foreign and/or politically undesirable cultural influences on the body politic. However, what the cat-culling episode exemplified was the extent to which the government had come to misrecognize its own rhetoric of what Langenbach calls an "essentialised narrative of epidemiological assault" (219) as a faithful representation of the situation on the ground. While admirable in itself, the concerted attempt by civil society to counter the government's actions and to disseminate more accurate information about the relationship (or lack thereof) between cats and Sars, and the benefits of spaying over culling for population control and management of Singapore's resiliently feral ecology, also served to highlight a general dearth of counter-narratives that would offer a more nuanced interpretation of the island's urban, marine and rainforest ecosystems than that of the government's "managed nature" (Ooi 2004: 84).[1]

In bringing this discussion round to performance, it is tempting to see its primary function as contributing to this educational and consciousness-raising role. However, although in Chapter Three I discussed the connection between the theatre practice of The Necessary Stage and the concerns of Singaporean civil society groups, with reference to issues of ecology, this would be a somewhat reductive interpretation. Indeed, it perhaps more appropriate to describe the ways in which performance relates people, animals, organisms and environments as, itself, informed by an ecological perspective. In this, performance produces such relations in many different ways, of which environmental advocacy is just one.

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[1] It is to only fair to note that one of the most active civil society groups has been the Nature Society (Singapore), which has the rare distinction of some tangible successes to its name. It provided sufficient evidence of biodiversity to dissuade the government from turning a secondary rainforest into a golf course, and to postpone reclamation works that would have destroyed a local tidal mudflat ecosystem. Nevertheless, Ooi's overall assessment is downbeat: "The state...has essentially made some concessions [to civil society] but the grounds for its land-use development decisions have not shifted the slightest bit" (84).

An emerging body of work on the connections between performance and animals concerns both the way in which animals function in and against received ideas about performance and behaviour, and about how performance can open up less anthropocentric sites of encounter with humans. In the social sciences, concepts of performance and performativity are being used to explore both the dichotomous and continuous relationships between Culture and Nature. For instance, Nigel Clark identifies a performative quality in the self-organising capabilities and generative iterations of biota, arguing that "[a]s against the 'end of nature' argument, a performative approach invites a reading of human interactions with the non-human world that allows for opportunities as well as constraints, for mutual implications that might have generative as well as degenerative consequences" (2003: 166). While such statements raise clear questions about how far a term like "performance" can be useful before it becomes something else entirely, in this chapter I share Clark's assumption that it can be used to elaborate a range of behaviours and interactions with nature. In particular, I pursue two complimentary strands of enquiry. The first, already begun, describes a scent trail through central Singapore, which uses smell and the act of smelling as the occasion for identifying points of intersection and convergence between nature and culture, and for probing the limits of what might be described as performance in the city state. It also carries over a methodological discussion begun in Chapter Zero with reference to Rem Koolhaas. The second strand is concerned less with the imposition of performance, than with the kinds of performances that nature seems to draw out from us, or, to put it another way, to kinds of performances we find ourselves compelled to do at the point of encounter with nature. In Singapore, this takes a number of different forms, some more coercive than others. Again, there is a methodological issue at stake here, since to address performative relations with nature is to encounter limits of cultural understanding that are beyond both my competence and my experience. I am personally reminded of this limitation every time I pass one of the several tree altars that are within walking distance of my house (figures 32-34). They are simultaneously mundane – I see them every day – and opaque: I do not understand what they mean. I see evidence that people have performed rituals before them, but short of waiting around until they come, and then quizzing them, I can do little. Practised by people of several faiths, and, judging by the large number of altars, that widely, it is a feature of Singaporean life that simply does not figure in English language public discourse. Since English is the language of instrumental rationality in Singapore, this is perhaps not surprising: but

Figure 32. Altar, Hampshire Road. Photgraph: Yuen Chee Wai.

Figure 33. Altar, Northumberland Road. Photgraph: Yuen Chee Wai.

Figure 34. Offerings, Norris Road. Photgraph: Yuen Chee Wai.

chances are that English speakers practice such rituals. Their silence reveals to me the limits of an over-reliance on discourse, and the opacity of "private practice".

Ultimately, however, it is theatrical performance to which I return, for despite Baz Kershaw's sweeping condemnation of theatre as irremediably commodified under globalization, and therefore "*inexorably*...part of the pathology producing the environmental crisis" (2000: 129 italics in original) it should be clear enough by now that the qualities of relational experience I have articulated over the course of this study suggest that the theatre remains a vital site for exploring how the aesthetic, here in correspondence with the ecological, might do otherwise that submit to the vicissitudes of economic totalization.

3. Orchard Road

Congratulations! You have managed to travel from wherever in the world you departed to the heart of Singapore without leaving the comfort of an air-conditioned environment. And your temperature-controlled experience need not end here. The fragrant fruit trees that gave the road above your head its name are long gone. Flanked by huge malls, Orchard Road now forms the backbone of Singapore's central commercial and civil district. At the subterranean station exit, you can take passageways south towards Wisma Atria, and the huge Ngee Ann City mall, or east, towards Tang's and Isetan without ever needing to expose yourself to the open air.

It is this preponderance of air-conditioning, and the resonances carried by the term, that gives context to the cleaner's performance you observed in the airport. When asked by the *Wall Street Journal* to name the most significant invention of the millennium, Lee Kuan Yew named the air-conditioner, stating: "Historically, advanced civilisations have flourished in the cooler climates. Now, lifestyles have become comparable to those in temperate zones and civilisation in the tropical zones need no longer lag behind" (quoted in George 2000: 14). Lee's blunt pragmatism is perfectly in evidence here, but for Singaporean commentator Cherian George, "there are few metaphors that more evocatively crystallise the essence of Singapore's politics" (15). The government exercises a high degree of "conditioning" control, one of whose results is the affluent "comfort" of the population: "[P]eople have mastered their environment, but at the cost of individual autonomy" (15).

Inevitably, that "mastering of the environment" has increased in inverse proportion to the breadth of Singapore's olfactory spectrum. On independence, Lee inherited a city notorious for its squalor, disease and over-crowding. Today, after forty years of public housing and sanitation projects, social engineering and disciplinary hygiene campaigns, intensive infrastructure development and rapid economic growth, nowhere else in the world with such correspondingly high levels of humidity and population density smells so little. Anyone who has spent time in the equatorial capitals of the world will recognise the scale of the Singapore government's achievement the minute they stick their nose out of the door. George understates the case, for the metaphor goes full circle: it is Lee and his government that have been Singapore's air-conditioners. Literally.

The result, as the aspirational mimicry latent in Lee's quotation, above, suggests, is a certain kind of obligation to perform. Cooled and comfortable, the populace is generally willing, and a nose around the "Home" department in the basement of Tang's department store indicates the degree to which such an obligation has been domesticated. With air-conditioning fitted as standard in all homes now, a new range of air-conditioning-conditioners is on sale and permanent demonstration, which are at every level surplus or excessive. Catch a hint of lemon or apple in the air? That will be one of the fruity water-based air fragrancers, which can be set to bubble away to themselves, and sporadically emit a waft of sweet scent to compensate for the arid olfactory desert your hermetically sealed home has become. And speaking of "arid", was that a gentle puff of steam that just enveloped you as you walked past that oversized kettle? Why, that's no oversized kettle: it's a humidifier, because, after all, it may be 80% humidity *outside*, but how else can you guard against the skin-drying, sinus-ravaging effects of your air-conditioning system? And don't forget that the deluxe model comes with an aromatherapy option, which will infuse your home with "exotic Asian scents", to soothe, heal and relax after a hard day in the office.

On top of Changi's forensic cleanliness, such high-street gadgets are further evidence that, at least as far as you, who are yet to surface, are concerned, Singapore has been comprehensively deodorised. It is an observation that Rem Koolhaas makes at the opening of 'Singapore Songlines':

> I turned eight in the harbour of Singapore. We did not go ashore, but I remember the smell – sweetness and rot, both overwhelming.

> Last year I went again. The smell was gone. In fact, Singapore was gone, scraped, rebuilt. There was a completely new town there (1995: 1011).

It is from this initial observation about the deoderization of Singapore that Koolhaas goes on to construct his theory of the city state as a "theatre of the *tabula rasa*". Back on the scent trail, the broad terms of his argument *appear* to be borne out. Deodorization to capitalist ends is inevitably followed by the controlled re-introduction of scent into the environment, as scent that *performs*. On Orchard Road, several smells are synthesised to bypass the cluttered visual field and rouse the busy shopper from their consumerist reverie. "Free smells", announces the Famous Amos cookie store, further down the road at Centrepoint shopping centre. But it has been there too long – the joke has worn thin, and people are used to the smell. If you want to really go where the action is, step directly out of Tang's on Scotts Road, and follow your nose to "Bread Talk": at time of writing, bakeries are all the rage in Singapore, due in no small measure to their canny placing of extractor fans above the doorway (as well, it has to be said, of their innovative and wildly popular "pork floss bun"). Looking more carefully, you soon realise that the smells also compensate for an authenticity deficit elsewhere in the set-up. The "bakers" may busy themselves endlessly around their eye-catching glass-fronted chromium kitchen, but the comically over-tall chef's hats and the meagreness of their cooking activities reveal them to be nothing more than glorified heater-uppers. Indeed, as you chew disappointedly on the sweet, cloying dough of a pork floss bun, it dawns on you that perhaps the primary aim of the whole in-store "cooking" rigmarole is, in fact, the creation of the smell that drew you there in the first place.

And so it goes on, with variations. A Bee Heng Liang stall offers the seasonal scent of *bah kua*: flat squares of processed, sweetened barbecued meat for Chinese New Year. Mac cosmetics deploy fragrant images to sell their latest range of floral shades. With nothing to sell but smell itself, Calvin Klein invert the process, with their new product, "Crave", coming a poor fourth behind the video of the sexy guy falling off a skateboard, the interactive promo-editing computer game, and the allure of their sales team. "It's starfruit", one of them mutters, as he jabs at your wrist with his atomiser, and when you realise that that's the closest Orchard Road is going to get to living up to its name, you know it's time for a change of scen(t)ery.

Step out of Tangs, and catch bus number 85, 106 or 111 down Orchard Road towards Serangoon Road. Ask someone to tell you when you get to "Little India". Alight accordingly. Should you wish to explore Little India while you are in the area, you are

referred to the relevant literature published by the Singapore Tourist Board. But we're not going to Little India today. We're going next door.

4.

On 7th November 2004, Lee Kuan Yew planted a tree in his Tanjong Pagar constituency as part of the city-state's annual Clean and Green Week (figure 35). To the extent that the event could be staged, it was thoughtfully done: decked out in matching green and blue batik shirts with floral motifs, Lee and his fellow MPs were veritable avatars of Cleanliness and Greenness. Like baby kissing, though, there's only so much pizzazz the performance of popular politics can or should support. A spade is a spade whoever's digging, and the act itself was nothing new. In 1963, Lee, then Prime Minister,[2] initiated a planting campaign that has since seen the addition of over half a million trees to the otherwise highly urbanized island. While the vast majority have been planted by the armies of workers from Thailand, Burma and the Indian subcontinent whose low-cost labour has been integral to the rapid infrastructural development of Singapore, a search at the National Archives reveals several hundred images of Lee, spade in hand and surrounded by onlookers, ministrating to a series of likely-looking saplings. This is how political performance secures the certainties of the present against the caprices of the future – again, and again, and again.

It is, after all, an iconic image, condensing some of the most distinctive characteristics of modern Singapore. On the one hand, a verdant Garden City in the tropics, easy on the eye in line with a general trend towards user-friendliness, which has in turn drawn foreign investment and multinational corporations, and kept an increasingly affluent population overwhelmingly in a state of uncomplaining contentment.[3] On the other hand, an authoritarian government practically synonymous with the state and continuously overseen by the paternalistic Lee for almost half a century, that exercises high levels of control over both its people and its environment. "[I]n 1967, I launched the Garden City program to green up the whole island and try to make it into a garden", recalled Lee in 1995 (1). Subsequently, the greening of Singapore by means

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[2] Lee Kuan Yew was Prime Minister of Singapore from 1959-1990, whereupon he took on the title of Senior Minister. When Lee Hsien Loong became Prime Minister in August 2004, his predecessor, Goh Chok Tong, became Senior Minister (SM), and Lee Kuan Yew adopted the title Minister Mentor (MM).

[3] The conjunction of these factors was vividly illustrated in the 2004 National Day Parade during a section in which Garden City themes were realized in a mass display by the government-linked People's Association. As over a thousand participants thronged the field of the National Stadium in brightly colored costumes, the two announcers providing the television voice-over interpreted their actions:

Figure 35. Picture on the front page of *The Straits Times* of Lee Kuan Yew planting a tree, 7th November 2004.

of fast-growing imported exotics proceeded in tandem with an extensive social engineering program which, most explicitly in this connection, included a eugenicist and civilizational dimension aimed at improving the quality of Singapore's stock.[4]

It is important, however, to understand that the image of Lee Kuan Yew planting a tree does not merely *symbolize* the Singaporean condition, for, in a strict sense, interpretation is unnecessary. In the *Analects*, Confucious states: "The virtue of the gentleman [*junzi*] is like the wind; the virtue of the small man is like grass. Let the wind blow over the grass and it is sure to bend" (12.19). In so far as Singaporean ministers style themselves as *junzi*,[5] the effect of Lee's iconic performance is direct and unmediated. Appearing sporadically in the pages of Singapore's politically constrained media over the course of forty years, the image reiterates and legitimates the social order, and interpellates the viewer accordingly. It is by means of such repetitions that Lee's People's Action Party has combined radical socio-economic transformations with a deepening acceptance of the political status quo. Yet even under a semiotic regime

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"This beautiful sea of green now...shows a giant leaf, aptly representing growth and diversity."
"You know, this choice is very significant – leaves are where every part of the plant gets its life from and similarly Singapore can be thankful for its pioneers, who upon Independence, took the task of building Singapore upon them."
"That's right. Bending and swaying in the wind the participants portray Singapore's flexibility and strength."
"And now watch as the garden begins to blossom. 240 orchids streaming into the field now, and they will help to complete the formation representing Singapore as a Garden City."
"The orchids are about 1.5 metres tall each, and they are accompanied by forty butterflies fluttering in the wind. A graceful progression there as the garden blooms."
"This really ties in with Singapore's transformation over the years into a cosmopolitan modern city one that attracts butterflies – or multinationals – to come and work here and set up office."
"This Garden City concept goes beyond representing Singapore as a Clean and Green city. The Garden concept reflects Singapore as a Garden City where flowers of all types – people of all races – grow in harmony. Where our cultural diversity – like the many flowers in a garden – compliment one another, and bring out the beauty of each ethnic group" (NDP 2004).

[4] In the past, Lee Kuan Yew has made statements with a strongly eugenicist flavour, noting, with reference to the controversial book by Charles Murray and Richard Bernstein that "the Bell Curve is a fact of life" (cited in Mauzy and Milne 2002: 55). The Graduate Mother Scheme of 1984 offered financial benefits for graduate mothers having more than two children, and sterilization services to women with little education who already had one child and whose household income fell below a certain level. The scheme was unpopular, and was replaced by another in 1987, which made no reference to educational levels, but continued to discriminate in favour of those on higher incomes.

[5] This was most clearly articulated by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong on the witness stand when he, then SM Lee, and a number of other members of the Singapore Cabinet sued NCMP J. B. Jeyaretnam for defamation for comments made during an election rally:

> In Singapore, we believed that leaders got [*sic*] to be honorable men, what we called jun zi (gentlemen)...We are different from the western societies. The way elections are fought over there, maybe there you can just knock your opponents backward with accusations about their integrity, nothing is done. But here, if ministers and politicians do not defend their integrity, they are finished, This is, by and large, in the Asian society with a very large component of Chinese, very Confucianist in their values... (in Jeyaretnam 2003: 84-5).

The damages awarded to the claimants bankrupted Jeyaretnam, and he was obliged to relinquish his seat in Parliament. In the last election (in November 2001), the People's Action Party won 82 out of 84 seats.

as carefully policed as Singapore's, the tree-planting image falls foul of anthropocentric hubris. When the Archive images are gathered in sequence, the persuasive power of the single act recedes before the cumulative effect of the whole series: against the unvarying repetition of the props – spade, sapling, eager onlookers – Lee grows older. From a stripling bedding down his plant-kingdom familiars, he becomes the octogenarian custodian of spry whippersnappers, and where the formers' futures entwine, the latters' bifurcate: now the sapling stands in mute testament to a Leeless future. Worse: although the accompanying plaque may memorialize him when he is gone, the tree as such is indifferent, a splinter of otherness, materializing a concept otherwise almost as inconceivable as death itself.

Official steps have been taken to stabilize the meanings of trees in Singapore. In 2001, the Heritage Trees Scheme began to identify specific trees that would "help to create a sense of permanence and identity to the place we live" (NParks 2004a: www).[6] Meanwhile, Singaporeans have been collectively framed as aging *alongside* the trees, with then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stating in 2003 that "as Singapore matures as a society and our people develop a natural affinity for greenery, the Government's role [in realizing the vision of a Garden City] should increasingly be complemented by civic participation" (www).[7] Re-visiting the 7th November planting, one notes how the event dovetails into more pragmatic reflections on the future. In the following day's front-page story 'Future bright with polls results', Lee reportedly observed that the US, Australian and Japanese election results augured well for Singapore, despite an ongoing loss of jobs to outsourcing giants like India and China. Urging jobseekers to retrain for the service industries, he stated: "I feel that the future for the next 10 years...will be as bright as it has been for the past 30 or 40 years" (in Chia 2004). As if to shade the future from the three- or fourfold-glare of the past, the caption accompanying the image salved the sunstroked logic of Lee's non-sequitur by informing readers that the sapling "is the scion of the last Hopea Sangal (chengal) tree found in Singapore" (Chia 2004). Relief. A reminder that just as Lee's singular achievements in growing and greening Singapore make him one of a kind in the eyes

[6] Substantial contributions to the Garden City Fund, which was established in 2003 and provides for tree conservation, infrastructure development and botanical research, are rewarded with the dedication of a Heritage Tree.

[7] In a 1991 speech, then Acting Minister for Information and the Arts, Brigadier General George Yeo, used an arboreal analogy to explain how he envisioned the relationship between the state and civic institutions, which included the arts community: "The problem now is that under a banyan tree very little else can grow. When state institutions are too pervasive, civic institutions cannot thrive. Therefore it is necessary to prune the banyan tree so that other plants can also grow". However, he went on to caution that "...we

of admirers and detractors alike, so a scion has recently taken root to retard the prospect of a Leeless future for one more generation. In August 2004 Lee Kuan Yew's son, Lee Hsien Loong, was sworn in as Singapore's third Prime Minister.

Even here, though, the smooth extension of the present into the future is thwarted, for if there is one thing that resonates even more profoundly in the Singaporean imaginary than the fortunes of the Lee family, it is an enduring, if sporadically expressed, attachment to stray fauna and threatened flora. Indeed, despite the caption's evasiveness on the subject, who amongst the *Straits Times'* readers could encounter a reference to "the last Hopea Sangal (chengal) tree found in Singapore" and not recall the saga a mere two years earlier? In September 2002, jubilant nature enthusiasts announced the positive identification of a 150 year old Hopea Sangal tree, previously thought extinct on the island. Two months later, a developer illegally felled it, claiming it was a threat to nearby buildings, and that they were unaware of its uniqueness. The news unleashed a flurry of angry letters to the press, and galvanized debate about the costs of development on Singapore's "natural" habitat. The developer received a stiff fine, the trunk was turned into a sculpture park at the zoo, and seeds from the tree were hot-housed for Lee's planting two years hence. In their own way, all these events sought to repair the damage done by the felling, yet they inevitably fall short. The tree's age and indigeneity demand reparations that cannot be met in a single generation, if at all. In contemplating its fate, one confronts an association with place and a span of time that vaults beyond any one person's lived experience. Lee's planting ritual, and its implicit association with his son's recent inauguration, is an attempt to domesticate the uncanny disinterest of trees by means of performance. But even at the tender age of two years, the sapling signifies otherwise. Looking carefully at the picture on the front page of the *Straits Times*, one realizes that where its leaves overlap with Lee's batik shirt, they blend in to the pattern. Ironic intimation: that it should be one of the earth's youngest, reaching out to reclaim him.

5. Tekka Market.

If any public site remains imbued with the Singapore scent-scape that pervaded the city before it became, superficially, at least, a "a city without qualities" (Koolhaas 1995: 1077), it is the intensively smelly wet market. A tiled enclosure found in many parts of Singapore, the term "wet market" connotes both the fresh produce on sale there, and

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cannot do without the banyan tree. Singapore will always need a strong centre to react quickly to a

the liquid run-offs and molten ice that accumulate on the floor over the course of the day. By contrast with Changi's over-cautious cleaner-performers, the wet market revels in a hose-down at the end of the day that is both ebullient in its execution and perfunctory in its effects: for whatever is not washed away in the process thrives in the resulting dampness, and stinks. Rules are broken here: meat is left out; chiller cabinets remain open; stall-holders engage in practices of questionable hygienic merit. And by contrast with the pricier, but increasingly popular supermarkets, there is no air-conditioning. The atmosphere is warm and wet – possibly soupy, certainly close. Five minutes off the bus and you're sweating. Welcome (at last) to Singapore!

As you enter the wet market, the combined smells of meat, fruit and dried goods hit you from nose to stomach, and the attendant noise, chaos and action have a dizzying effect. Here, the smells are far in excess of those carefully produced and packaged scents on Orchard Road. Rather, they are released through direct action and real effort: chopping, grinding, skinning, peeling, slicing, dicing.

The market reconstitutes Singapore as the bustling contact zone out of which it grew.[8] Colonised by Raffles for its strategic position on the trade routes between India to the West, China to the North and the spice Islands of Indonesia to the East, labour – forced, indentured and free – blew in with the trade winds: from China, India, Indonesia, Arabia and, of course, Britain and other Western European countries. It was a place of intensive buying, selling and ship chandlering between a highly cosmopolitan group of merchants, all engaged in the performance of cross-cultural bargaining, commerce and exchange.

Tekka market, at the north-east corner of the ethnic enclave known as "Little India", captures this historical resonance more acutely than most. Its location means a greater-than-average ethnic diversity of patrons, stall-holders and produce, and the result is more action, more interaction, and a more strident clash of smells. Across the culture-gap, the performative element expands. In the absence of a sales patter, smell becomes a correspondingly more crucial way of deriving information about the

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changing competitive environment....In other words, we prune judiciously" (1994: 9, 11).

[8] "Contact zone" is a term introduced by Mary Louise Pratt to describe "the places where cultures from disparate historical trajectories come into contact with each other" (1996: 3). Pratt's own interest lies in the resultant heterogeneity of meanings and identities, often deriving from the asymmetrical relationships of the colonial context. James Clifford has influentially brought the term into the ambit of discussions of cosmopolitanism by using it to explore practices of "border crossing" in his book *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997).

produce, and the bargaining process begins with the customer's post-sniff reaction. Bargaining takes place with fingers, faces, and a combination of *pasar* (market) Malay and Singlish. In response the stall-holder deploys an entire repertoire of gesture, exaggeration and dexterity in the scent-releasing processes of display and the preparation of your selected cut.

Observing this, however, brings you up against a limit of participation. The undeniably performative quality of the transactions is clearest to you because you are a stranger here. Their mundane repetition is inaccessible to the casual observer, likewise the gradual "naturalization" of the scent-scape to the nose of the daily visitor. To press on, you need to take a step back and look to your own place in the scheme of things. Amidst these most pungent practices of the everyday, it is you who are the performer. Play it up. Hitch a ride on a more available identification: the tourist.[9] Perform a little journey of your own, for to plot a scent-map round Tekka market is to smell your way through Singapore's history and place in the world. With Little India a popular tourist destination next door, you won't look too out of place in your shorts and ever so slightly loud shirt, and with a quizzical look upon your face. You carry a camera, too, but don't expect to get the pictures you want by asking: then people will nod their assent, and disappear, leaving the produce to pose alone. Being a tourist here has its merits though, because as soon as they realise you're not there to buy, the stall-holders will respond differently. The sales pitch recedes and you can apprehend it as it goes. They leave you to your own devices, or hang around to talk about football.

Start at the sweet-smelling south-east corner – the universally loved fruit stalls. Head north past the earthy bean-sprout and tofu displays and scentless vegetables to the throat-pricking dried fish stalls, an integral ingredient for many Chinese and Malay condiments and garnishes. Cutting along the top, the unmistakable smell of pickled vegetables and bamboo shoots announces everything you could want for a Thai feast. Soon after, the sickly, heavy odour of ground coconut flesh draws your attention to the coconut milk outlets, a crucial stop for anyone contemplating a creamy, mild Southeast Asian curry. Heading south brings you past the only two pork stalls in the market to the specialist crab and fish stalls. People come from all over the city to buy Sri Lankan crab here, to make, amongst other things, the Singapore favourites chilli and black

[9] You are not alone. American celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain glides past with camera crew in tow, poking his nose into things, filming the television series accompaniment to his book *A Cook's Tour*. Watch carefully when it is aired. You may see yourself there. Performing.

pepper crab. Further on, to the left, halal chicken, and to the right, beef, and then freshly ground spices: ginger, chilli, coriander, cumin, garlic. Finally, the most pungent smell of all: in the full glare of the sun, the *kambing* (goat meat) stalls, thickening in your throat like curdled blood, the butchers hacking away, sweat pouring down their faces.

As you journey, you realise that you often smell something before you see it, especially when what you see is familiar, and what you smell is not. You cannot help but sniff out what you don't know. Standing amongst huge sacks of dried fish, squid and chillies, you ask the stall-keeper what he can smell. He answers in Singlish, with a grin: "Nothing lah. Waste so much time here cannot smell already." The comment is a telling one, hinting at reasons for desensitization other than sanitization, and this has important implications for Koolhaas' conspiracy theory.

Although opening with a first person body memory, the planner's position Koolhaas subsequently adopts forecloses any further reflections on smell. For, as John McKenzie, following Marcuse, observes, smell is a "proximity sense", which "entails the disintegration of forms, the mixing of subjects and objects" (McKenzie 2001: 202). Within Koolhaas' architectural remit, this is not a position he is obliged to adopt, and his analysis reflects this. "A city without qualities" would appear to posit performance as its basic condition of habitation. But such performance can only be apprehended up close, since it plays itself out in embodied and improvisatory ways. In ignoring how everyday meaning-making processes respond to such imperatives, Koolhaas misses a trick. Revisiting his opening anecdote, one realises that it conceals as much as it expresses. When Koolhaas returns, it as a cosmopolitan adult, observing the city with the detached eye of the urbanist, and *not* celebrating his birthday. That is why "the smell was gone", and it is a pertinent reminder that there are multiple ways of experiencing a place. In subduing the "proximity sense" of scent at the outset, whole realms of experience are precluded from analysis. This is not to say that Singapore is somehow more "authentically present" on the ground, but rather that once one has foreclosed certain modes of investigation, one's interpretive options will inevitably follow suit. How, then, can one make the kinds of distinctions between the controlled re-introduction of synthesized scents into the deodorised environment of Orchard Road, and the unruly infusion of smells in Tekka?

There is one smell, however, conspicuous by its absence even from the fruit stalls of Tekka. It infuses a still more complex scent environment in another part of town, and that's where you're going now. Take a deep breath!

Get in a taxi and ask for "the durian stalls at Geylang". The driver will know where to take you.

6.

On first acquaintance, *The Silly Little Girl and the Funny Old Tree*, by Kuo Pao Kun, is a simple, even simplistic, play. A misfit girl whose parents work long hours strikes up a relationship with a tree in the carpark of her school. They dance, sing songs, and talk about time and human behaviour. An attempt is made to exorcise the Tree, but when bulldozers come to clear it for a housing development, the Girl stages a protest. She is removed to a sanitorium, and although the Tree is allowed to remain standing, its unruly branches are hacked back so that, as the developer says, "it will blend in perfectly with the new landscape design" (Kuo: 2000: 115). The Tree dies, and the Girl dances in homage.

First staged in 1987 against a backdrop of rapid industrialization and urbanization, the play can be described as a cautionary tale about the intangible costs of materialism to the human spirit. As such, all the tropes are present and correct: the child as preternaturally sensitive to her surroundings; the Tree as a source of timeless wisdom; rapacious developers, and philistine authority figures who interpret the girl's behaviour as evidence of insanity. This strand arcs through the play from beginning to end, tracing an anthropocentric trajectory, whereby, as the Girl says, "trees are like people" (99), and her relationship with the Tree symbolizes those aspects of human-to-human interactions which are threatened by over-zealous development.

There is, however, a second strand to the play that complicates and compromises the first. It can be discerned in three different operations. Thematically, the Tree disavows the too-eager attribution of wisdom by the Girl by consistently turning questions back on her, or refusing outright to answer them. This side-stepping of the reciprocal and the dialogic clears the ground for a more tangential procedure. When the Girl states that trees can only sing and dance when there is wind, the Tree replies: "That's what the wind says. Actually, it's only when we sing and dance is there wind; only when our leaves and branches swing is there wind. Wind mustn't be so proud" (107). In this de-

Figures 36-38. Cindy Sim as the Girl in the English language version of *The Silly Little Girl and the Funny Old Tree* (1989) by Kuo Pao Kun. Photo courtesy of The Theatre Practice.

linking of cause and effect there is an implicit political challenge to the Confucian dictum that would see the people bending obediently to the will of the *junzi*, and there is also a demand that the Girl re-think her own position in less anthropocentric terms. Later, when she goes to the Tree at night, she is at first startled that it sees her in the dark, but goes on: "Why can't humans see in the dark? Because human eyes are made to see only light. *(Reflecting for a moment)*" (110). In this reflection lies not only a moment of personal realization, but a space for the audience, too, to think through the ecologized epiphany that derives not so much from the precise answer as from the shift in logic that it entails.

In terms of structure, this ecological aspect constantly derails the linear trajectory of its human story, and suggests alternative temporalities along the way. The Tree tells long, digressive stories without a clear denouement, suggesting that in their entirety they last longer than the span of a human life. Both Girl and Tree return periodically to a refrain from the Chinese song "Longing for the Spring Breeze". Even more disjunctive is the physicality of the performance, and the physical relationship between Girl and Tree. The stage directions are simple but gnomic, demanding real inventiveness in the staging: "The little one teaches the old one to sing the song from the distant past"; "The Old Tree...goes through a series of mimed actions tracing its own past before coming back to reality and tells her the story in words" (103); "The Tree goes into a series of movements, turning and going around, shaking and wagging. Girl totally absorbed, but can't understand" (109).

This latter direction describes the Girl's encounter with what the Tree calls the Bee Dance, and it is in this that the Girl – and the performer – feel out a less human-focused relationship with the Tree, and therefore a more inventive interaction with the audience. Another dance, the Tree Dance, is described, but the Tree is pruned before the Girl can learn it. As the Tree describes it, this dance has a revolutionary flavour, where trees interlink not only to withstand but to thrive from a storm, "caressing the wind as they arch" (113). The storm over, "the trees have become deeper rooted, the branches have become tougher, the leaves have become greener and lusher" (114). The Bee Dance, by contrast, is a solo: "With this dance, the bee is telling its comrades: There, there is honey that way. In the direction such an angle to the sun, there is honey" (109). At the close of the play, "[p]ainstakingly, she executes the Bee Dance in solemn seriousness....In stark concentration, she searches her memory and the environment" (116). The image is a complex one. Far removed from whimsy or New

Age mysticism, it combines the becoming-bee of both Girl (by way of the Tree) and performer, with a gesturing towards political possibilities whose contours remain unclear. It is perhaps no surprise that the first actress to play the Girl was Ang Gey Pin, a remarkable physical performer, who went on to practice extensively at the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards in Pontedera, Italy. Even today, and having not seen the original production, watching Ang's distinctive combination of exploratory and intensive physicality I find myself bound-in to an affective and inventive relation whose origins I trace back to that imagined deterritorialization out of Kuo's play.[10]

A final challenge to a strictly humanist reading of *The Silly Little Girl* concerns the figure of Kuo himself, who died in 2002. In a strange pre-figuring of the Hopea Sangal incident, the Old Tree in the play is identified as the last of its kind, and when reflecting on Kuo's unique character and influence, it is tempting to identify him with one or both of these trees.[11] Once again, though, this assumes that "trees are like people", a claim subtly refuted by one of the most thoughtful responses to Kuo's death, the installation *A Tree in a Room* by the artist and performer Zai Kuning. Installed in a former Methodist chapel in early 2004, *A Tree in a Room* consisted of a thick, six metre long horizontal tree trunk which had been sawn in two and "stitched" back together again with hundreds of crisscrossed nails and wire. The accompanying text referenced an earlier project, made when Kuo was still alive, which took the form of a tree sculpture for the premises of Kuo's Theatre Training School.

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[10] Some of the terminology here derives from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's attempts to understand the relations between animals, plants, people and inorganic objects in non-signifying terms. In the present context, it is an intriguing coincidence that one of their key examples concerns bees and orchids:

> [T]here is constituted a conjunction of the flux of deterritorialization that overflows imitation which is always territorial. It is in this way also that the orchid seems to reproduce an image of the bee but in a deeper way deterritorializes into it, at the same time that the bee in turn deterritorializes by joining with the orchid: the capture of a fragment of the code, and not the reproduction of an image (1986 [1975]: 14).

In the case of *The Silly Little Girl*, I am suggesting that the Bee Dance, as demonstrated by the Tree and recalled with reference both to memory and environment by the Girl, is better understood as an attempt by the Girl to deterritorialize towards both bee and Tree, than simply to represent a bee. Additionally, I propose that Ang's subsequent performances can be described as tracing what Deleuze and Guattari call a "line of flight", which was initiated by a deterritorialization out of the play.

[11] The basis for identifying Kuo with these trees can be found in a book of extracts and tributes published shortly after his death, where a central motif is the drawing of a stalk of maize, accompanied by a poem, which Kuo made during his political detention in 1977. Kuo is implicitly and explicitly aligned with the stalk, and one of the lines from the poem, "and love the wind and rain", is taken as the title of the book (Kwok and Teo 2002). It might also be noted in passing that the discovery of the Hopea Sangal tree was announced just two days after Kuo's death on 10th September 2002. These are the kinds of coincident events whose significance becomes entwined as they pass into memory. In the furore that followed the felling of the tree two months later, the Chinese language newspaper, *Lianhe Zaobao* consistently referred to the Hopea Sangal as the "lao shu", or "old tree".

The tree is therefore associated with Kuo, and recalls not only *The Silly Little Girl*, but other well-known plays of his such as *The Coffin is too Big for the Hole* and *Descendents of the Eunuch Admiral*. And yet, however one tries, something about the materiality of the trunk – its dense mass and monumental presence – deflects any attempt to identify it directly with Kuo, or Kuo in it. The very *treeness* of the tree affirms itself, as mere correspondences recede. One is left, instead, with a sense of the labour of sawing and nailing required to meet this materiality. Between imagining this physical act and confronting the raw heft of a once-living-and-still-organic object, one encounters a depersonalized, dispersed remembrance of Kuo. The Chinese critic Yu Yun described him as "a rude intruder in a beach resort" (2000: 55), and *A Tree in a Room* reinforces the sense that Kuo's perpetual untimeliness is more closely associated with the *longue durée* of tree-time than it is the more self-serving notion that "his spirit is still with us".

7. Geylang

The durian stalls of the Geylang district announce themselves to nose and eye like the checkpoint of some breakaway Republic of Stink in a land of the bland. All that's missing is a flag flying over them, with the "nefarious fruit"[12] as its symbol. Under the glowing, pear-shaped bulbs that bedeck the roadside stalls, the racks of spiky, green rugby balls are resplendent in the night. And as you alight, the full force of the odour hits you: it is not so much the *smell* – heavy, ripe, sweet – that is noxious, but the way it infiltrates you as if through the pores, like a gas. It has the pervasive quality of hash smoke on a London street, and something of the same illicit quality. For although the durian is not illegal, it *is* subject to a travel ban: this fruit is under house arrest.

That's one of the two reasons the stalls are open until 5am. Banned from public transport because of its excessive and lingering stench, the durian is invariably enjoyed on its own, *in situ*. As you watch, carloads of the discerning pile out for a bite. Irony of the durian: everything is hard work apart from its savouring. At rough-hewn tables, next to bamboo baskets for the detritus, sweating strong-men, stripped to the waist, shuck the fruits with specially curved knives, as if they were industrial-sized oysters. For the aficionado, within lies the pearl of pearls. Fist-shaped lumps of creamy

[12] This was the term used by a spokesperson for the Queensland fire service when describing how the pungent smell of the durian had caused a full-scale security alert aboard a passenger airliner due to fly from Brisbane to Adelaide. (See 'Durian grounds Aussie airliner' *Straits Times* 2003).

Figure 39. Durian stall in Geylang. Photgraph: Yuen Chee Wai.

Figure 40. Eating durian in Geylang. Photgraph: Yuen Chee Wai.

Figure 41. 'The Durians': The Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. Photgraph: Yuen Chee Wai.

yellow flesh, each wrapped round a hard seed. The taste is both heavenly and volatile, a combination of ice cream and raw onion. As you eat, the smell fades: or maybe you no longer notice it because your body has achieved some state of olfactory equilibrium with its environment, equally pungent both inside and out. There is something defiant in this unambiguous celebration of the pleasures of the flesh. Oh, and by the way, that's the other reason the stalls are open until 5am. Geylang only really "works" at night. It is Singapore's most popular red light district.

You are surprised, perhaps, to learn that within designated areas, brothels are legal in Singapore. Once again, history permeates the present, bringing with it whiffs of a tropical port notorious for the services it could offer sailors. Geylang, the largest of these areas, consists of rows of neon-lit detached houses (backing onto teeming unlit alleys), and towering hourly-charging hotels (prominent among them, the "Fragrance" chain). Between the durian stalls on Sims Avenue, and the red light *lorongs* (streets) to the south lie some of the best late-opening food outlets in the city. Take a stroll. Past roasted duck and chicken stalls; past the homely, steaming dim sum shop; past the first of many Thai massage parlours ("Herbal massage" extra); past porridge and soya bean; past chicken wings and frog's legs; past Chinese herbalists selling acrid aphrodisiacs; past beef noodles and oyster omelettes. "Breakaway Republic of Stink" is not so very far off the mark. By contrast with the unruly but generic environment of food smells in Tekka and other wet markets, Geylang has a character all of its own, one that is not only gloriously pungent, but derives from a particularly potent mix: food, sex and superstition.

It doesn't take you long to notice the preponderance of other features in Geylang ostensibly unrelated to the sex industry, in particular the Buddhist institutes, lion dance headquarters, and clan associations. Merchants from China set up the latter in the nineteenth century as a way of safeguarding and representing the interests of the community. As the social geographer Brenda Yeoh points out, the clan associations played a key role in mediating between their members and the colonial administration, and were well placed to resist colonial initiatives when they saw fit:

> The conception of a municipal authority working towards the 'public good' was alien to Chinese society which revolved around a clan-centred culture visibly demonstrated in the urban landscape by the proliferation of *kongsi*, clan-owned temples, burial grounds, sick-receiving houses, schools and lodging houses catering exclusively to the needs of members and affiliates (1996: 67).

In Geylang, this sense of alternative organisation persists, asserting a diversified dialect-based sense of "Chineseness" against the Anglophone and Mandarin cosmopolitan Confucianism of the state. Within the local scent environment, this manifests itself most directly in the pervasive smell of incense, ubiquitous in the lorongs. Every brothel has a Taoist altar outside, and several bored-looking men to oversee it, when not busy inviting you in.

The performance of ethnicity and faith in Singapore is complex and multi-faceted. Lily Kong has noted that Chinese Singaporeans observe many traditions that died out in China with the Cultural Revolution (after the Singaporeans' immigrant forebears had already departed). This sometimes causes them to regard themselves as "more *Chinese than the* Chinese", which: "underscores the importance of the recreation of *rituals and performances in maintaining meaning and identity*" (1999: 229). In Geylang, such rituals take on a more pressing aspect *than elsewhere, for these men and* women live on the perimeters of legality, and the hither side of social acceptance. With a traditionally close link between prostitution and Singapore's Triad-like Secret Societies – themselves subject to a panoply of superstitious observances – Geylang's altars and incense serve to maintain an identity that is at once brazenly displayed, and haunted by anxiety.

The same can be said for the area as a whole. At its most ebullient, Geylang revels in a *re*-odorization defiantly counter to the olfactory suppression that grips most of the city. Yet such defiance is anxious, and faltering. You pass through perfume, cigarette smoke, open drains stinking of urine. Behind you is where Geylang Stadium used to be – the last event there was the appropriately named *Exodus* by The Necessary Stage: you know a place is carrion when the site-specific vultures move in. On your left was Gay World amusement park. Also Gone. Chinese *wayang* (street opera) is petering out. Only the clan or gangster-affiliated lion dance troupes remain, and the Chinese, Thai, Indian and local women of the lorongs sitting indolent behind glass in their ultra-violet "fish tanks", waiting for custom. Nothing doing. Geylang stinks, but the theatre has gone elsewhere. Follow it.

From the durian stalls, hail a taxi and ask to go to "the Durians". The driver will know what you mean.

8.

On 8 February 2004, Zai Kuning staged a performance in the gallery where the tree lay. In a series of choreographed actions he moved towards the trunk, then walked casually back to his starting position. He repeated this sequence for approximately twenty minutes. It was his version of the Bee Dance, and as time passed, and actions accumulated, my attention fastened on the way in which trees – or, more properly, our perplexity in their presence – draw performances out of us. Some, like politicians' tree-planting ceremonies, establish a comprehensive and instrumentalist framework to infuse the present with the promise of future growth. Others, such as the exorcism carried out at the foot of the Old Tree in Kuo's play, draw on established cosmologies and belief systems for the purposes of accommodation or appeasement. A few, like Kuo's own act of writing, and Zai Kuning's response, endeavour to encounter the indifference of trees, and to open human experience to a temporality where assumptions of futurity are as flawed as describing what's past in terms of "heritage". This is why there is wind. This is why there are trees. People mustn't be so proud.

9. The Esplanade

From the taxi stand of The Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, you are unable to take in the full effect of its distinctive architecture. You cross through to the waterside, and look back towards the twin spiked domes that delineate the main theatre and concert hall. That they resemble durians is an identification that has been well taken by the brand managers who run the centre, and by their government paymasters. In the middle of a severe economic downturn at opening, the Esplanade's price tag was a touchy subject, and any opportunity to endear it to the populace a welcome one. Accordingly, the official media, in particular *The Straits Times*, Singapore's only English language broadsheet, has laboured long and hard to gain the sobriquet common currency. In addition to cooking up countless articles with durian-themed headlines ('Durians of All Tastes', 'Durians Flambé', 'Will the Durians feed the soul?' and so on), a leader column entitled 'Durian Tasting' engaged in a spot of wishful projection when it opined:

> As earthy as it sounds, the charming moniker is destined to stick. In an unintended way, the people's well-developed sense of irony has conferred on the complex the ultimate compliment – that of democratising a $600 million performing arts centre that is not by its nature socially inclusive (*Straits Times* 2002).

Well and good, but take a deep breath. Smell anything? (Democracy, perhaps?) Go inside, take a nose around. Observe the dull sheen of marble and granite in the monumentally bland main concourse. Browse the Asian exotica – futons, *cheong sum*

dresses, Chinese teapots – in the shopping arcade. Catch if you can the fleeting scent of gourmet noodles and curries as they disappear up powerful extractor fans in expensive restaurants, and...wait, was that a faint whiff of durian you caught just *there? Yes, but...that was you, residually "durianed" – amongst other* things – by Geylang, for, with a growing sense of *déjà vu, you come to realise that you are the* most pungent thing in this place: the Esplanade, like Changi, has no smell.

Even for a "city without qualities", this is something of a coup. To appropriate the most potent symbol of Singapore's most pungent area, and to effect a complete deodorization in the process. It begs the question: what is the fate of performance – ostensibly "the Durians'" *raison d'être* – in all this? Little point in looking to the programme for performances that will kick up a stink. However noxious their content or aesthetic – and to date, none have been – the effect lies circumscribed by a context that is less given to enacting conventional notions of normativity or resistance, than shuttling, as McKenzie describes it, "quickly between different evaluative grids, switching back and forth between divergent challenges to perform – or else" (2001: 19). In Singapore, the current mantra, and pressing reason for selling "the Durians" to its people is: perform – or else be rendered economically obsolete by China.

And yet, you've been around. You've seen too much to conclude that *this* is the fate of performance in Singapore. Haven't you? Recall McKenzie's description of smell's effects: "disintegration of forms, the mixing of subjects and objects". He goes on to propose a "funky" (in the scent sense of the term) riposte to the performance stratum which he terms "perfumance":

> Unlike this formation [the performance stratum], where forms of discourse and practice are constructed and maintained, in the atmosphere of forces performatives and performances dissolve, disintegrate, become elemental. We're interested not only in the order, but in the odor of things and words....[C]arrying the scent of exteriority, perfumance haunts the stratum's interior with odors emitted by certain incorporated remains (203).

There you stand, inside "the Durians", smelling of durian and all the other "incorporated remains" that have accumulated about – and been secreted by – your person since you stepped off the plane at Changi (or indeed, stood on the harbour and watched the fireworks). You have carried these odours into this scentless performance venue, and your journey is reconstituted as a perfumance. Maybe, dear reader, you've never been to Singapore, and even if you have, the trajectory you have performed at and upon each of the preceding stages has been vague: the only thing you know in

precise detail is how to travel between them. But that vagueness is no accident, for it mimics the diffuse permeations of smell itself: in nosing around Singapore you have yourself enacted a perfumative drift. By sniffing out scent as an end in itself, you have engaged with Singapore's complex performance stratum without subjecting yourself entirely to its "forms of discourse and practice". You have played the observer, detective, consumer, tourist, client, spectator: but you are none of these things alone. The trail ends here. You are now free to follow your nose.

Conclusion: Cosmopolitan Aesthetics.

1.

On the East side of Singapore's former Parliament building, known since March 2004 as The Arts House, stands a bronze elephant atop a plinth (figure 42) that bears the following inscription in English, Mandarin, Thai and Jawi:

His Majesty
Somdech Phra
Paramindr Maha
Chulalonkorn
The
Supreme King of Siam
Landed at Singapore,
The first foreign land
visited by a
Siamese Monarch,
On the
16th March, 1871.

Around the corner, at the entrance to the building, there is a more recent inscription, taken from a speech given by Kuo Pao Kun in 1993 (figure 43). "How can we in Singapore", it asks, "living quite comfortably, and more and more wealthily, how can we produce art?". Kuo goes on to cite the example of the Swiss-German playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt, who overcame this "poverty of poverty" by transcending the limits of the Swiss cultural and historical experience to become a "world-citizen". The inscription concludes: "I see this as the only possible future for us in Singapore; you have to find a process to temper yourself and you have to look beyond, to all the cultures and civilizations of the world".

While governing binaries tend to explain the present era in terms of the local and the global, of primordial attachments and airy nothing, taken together, these two inscriptions suggest otherwise. In the memorial, Singapore is identified as a place that draws people towards it from out of their habitual, even historical, environments. In Kuo's inscription, it is a place that compels an expansive openness to the rest of the world. These are the poles of cosmopolitan experience, between which the identities of people and even nations take shape. As landing pad, springboard and home, Singapore establishes itself to the extent that it relates to rest of the world.

This relation to the world is by no means unproblematic. The rhetorical glibness of Kuo's phrase, "poverty of poverty", obscures the ways affluence increases disproportionately and sometimes discriminately under a globalized economy; his

Figure 42. Elephant statue at The Arts House showing inscription in English and Mandarin. Photograph: the author.

Figure 43. Kuo Pao Kun inscription at The Arts House. Photograph: the author.

attitude to other cultures hints at appropriation, while the fact that he is quoted only in English speaks volumes alongside the quadrilingual memorial a few steps away. However, his reference to a "tempering process" shows that his dialectical instincts, though muted, remain true, while his unsqueamish acknowledgement of Singapore's increasing wealth is the attitude of the realist. Wealth is a problem for art, and while it may be one many artists from less dynamic economies in the world would be happy to take on, it is no less perplexing for that. Kuo's concern is a genuine one, for it touches on profound questions of identity and belonging, as well – we might add – as the responsibilities of being wealthy in a world where others are poor. The answer, if it lies anywhere, is to be found partly in the content of Kuo's vision of setting oneself at odds with the run of things in a spirit of openness to the world, and partly in the tenor, which matches the urgency of his concerns ("...how can we produce art?") with what I take to be a sense of fundamental affirmation.

In order to conclude this enquiry, I want to reflect on the implications of Kuo's words for the concerns that I have been pursuing. This is not to say that those words need to be taken at face value, for, as the discussion above already indicates, they participate in a broader context whose full extent they do not acknowledge. In addition, they arguably contribute to a discourse whose associations are beyond and possibly in distinction to those Kuo initially intended. Specifically, I am thinking about what it means that those words exist in physical form at the entrance to The Arts House. For although there is a pleasing complementarity between them and the 130 year old inscription on the elephant's plinth, Singapore's newest arts infrastructure development currently exists in a deeply anomalous relationship with its past, a relationship that is unlikely to be resolved while its present *raison d'être* remains index-linked to the cultural imperatives of economic globalization. In these closing pages, then, my aim is to retain the stubborn focus on the specific that I have pursued since the beginning of this study, with a view to letting the more general points develop as I progress. Three events at The Arts House crystallize for me the problems and the promises of the ideas and practices I have charted in the preceding chapters, thereby enabling me to address myself once more to the question of how performance in Singapore might produce an encounter with and an interpretation of what I have called "cosmopolitan aesthetics".

2.

We end, then, as we began, at the opening celebrations of an arts complex. On the 23rd March 2004, The Arts House was officially opened before a crowd of eight hundred invited guests (including myself). With parts of the building dating back to 1827, it is the oldest surviving structure in Singapore, and was long used as a courthouse by the colonial administration. In 1954, substantially renovated, it became the home of the first Legislative Council, a stepping-stone to home rule, and in 1965, the Parliament of Singapore's first national government. In 1999, the government moved into a new building next door, and the old one was given over to the National Arts Council. As The Arts House, it now features shops, restaurants, a gallery, function rooms, a ninety-seat studio theatre, a hundred-seat cinema, and its centrepiece, the Westminster-style Chamber, complete with original décor and furnishings, which is for hire as a performing arts venue. The inaugural performance of the Chamber, which took place on opening night as part of a programme of events entitled "No More Walls", was Kuo Pao Kun's *No Parking on Odd Days*, produced by TheatreWorks, and featuring the actor who had originally performed the role in 1986, Lim Kay Tong.

It was with some anticipation, then, I sat down in Lee Kuan Yew's old seat (marked with a brass plaque, along with those of the rest of the first Cabinet), complimentary Tiger beer in hand, to watch the play. But my excitement was short-lived. I found the production to be an unedifying experience, flawed in almost every respect. Some of this was unavoidable. The acoustics are not suitable for low-key monologues, and the white walls bleed focus away from the actor. However, there were also real problems with the way in which the artists had tried to compensate for these difficulties. The distracting set resembled a scaled-down version of a road, with two bright red chairs to signify where the bureaucrats and judge referred to in the script sat (figure 44). This inadvertently cartoonish imposition bore no relation to the aesthetically distinctive and historically resonant space, thereby creating problems rather than solutions for Lim. His pacing was too fast for the narrative to build or the jokes to register, the acting was overblown, and he seemed to be struggling to keep in play an audience that was ranged in the Members' benches on both sides, and in the public gallery in front of him. In short, the performance did nothing to dignify either the play or the space, and the affirmative potential of relationality was suppressed, rather than fostered.

In an important respect, none of this mattered, for in the context of the play's presentation, the *fact* of its having been performed was much more significant than whether or not it was artistically successful. After all, the assembled dignitaries had

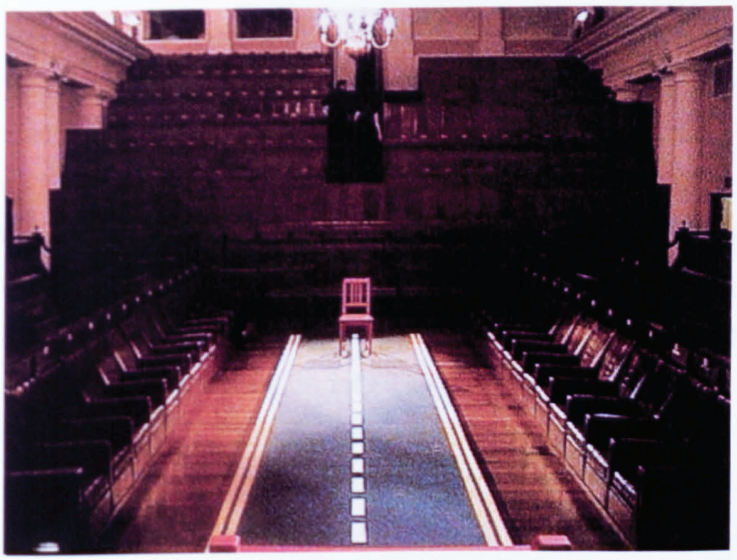

Figure 44. The set of *No Parking on Odd Days* in the Chamber of The Arts House (2004). Photograph: the author

Figure 45. *Reading to Corpses* by Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook in the Chamber of The Arts House (2004). Photograph: Adi Soon.

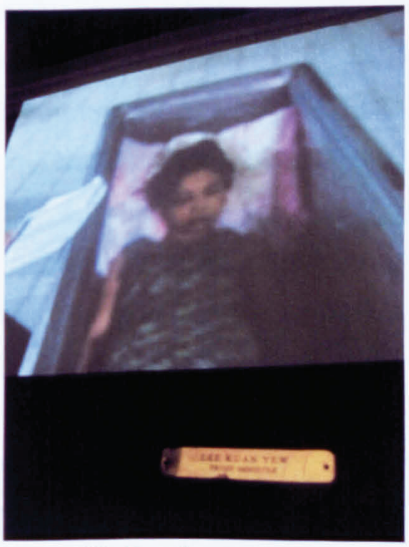

Figure 46. *Reading to Corpses* by Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook in the Chamber of The Arts House (2004) Photograph: Ben Slater.

already been assured in the opening address by Edmund Cheng, Chairman of The Arts House, that "all sixty-five programmes in "No More Walls" foster innovation, fun and enthusiasm", and that their high quality and accessibility promised "fabulous fun for all". This impeccable cultural industries rhetoric extended into the political arena, with the programme explaining "No More Walls" by stating that "all the walls surrounding [*sic*] have come down...giving the public open access to a building which has been closed to them these past 60 years...The handover of the Old Parliament House and its transformation into The Arts House is a sign of a more receptive society, willing to engage in a more open exploration of new forms of expression" (Arts House 2004). In this respect, there could be no more exemplary event than the performance of a play by one of Singapore's very few independent public figures – one who had been detained, no less – which featured a character taking issue with laws that had been passed in that very Chamber. Nor should one underestimate the degree to which, for the PAP, this really *was* an instance of a new political openness. In instrumental terms, the most useful achievement of the performance was its own performance: the symbolic capital banked with both Singaporeans and the invited diplomats and foreign media. Aesthetic judgements, grace-noted with political "relevance", could and would come a distant second.

However, as so often over the course of this study, the fate of Kuo's play provides insights into a situation that may be distinctively Singaporean in complexion, but cuts to the quick of issues that are equally at stake in other parts of the world. First, there is the place and function of theatrical performance under global capitalism, profitable participation in which strongly influences policy – including cultural policy – for many governments. Cheng put the case bluntly enough in his speech, when he contextualized the advent of the Arts House by stating: "Where efficiency and productivity were common drivers of economic success previously, creativity is now an additional engine of economic growth." It is this that lies behind his promise that the work in "No More Walls" would "foster innovation", and while one may be hard-pressed to prove such a direct link, there is no doubting the economic benefits of a dynamic cultural scene in terms of job creation and quality of life, as well as to the more diffuse concerns of the *Renaissance City Report*, such as "creativity", "cultural capital", "multiplier effects", "halo effects" and "image-branding". A problem arises, however, when, to use another term from the *Renaissance City Report*, the "flow-on benefits" of art threaten to determine the nature of the art being produced, and the terms on which is it received. From the point of view of the artist or critic, this problem is tempting to

ignore. After all, it seems premised on a highly reductive state of affairs that accounts neither for the creative agency of the artist, the irreducible complexity of aesthetic experience, the plurality of audience responses, nor the fact that bad art will fail even on instrumental grounds. And yet, as the example of *No Parking* at the Arts House shows all too starkly, there is a political dimension to this that is not so easily disregarded.

That the PAP, who have long set such store by what they call "strong government" as an integral part of nation building, should be willing to sign over the symbolic and historical centre of Singapore's political institutions to the arts is evidence of a remarkable faith in the continuity of the artists' interests with their own. One reason for this can be found in the *Renaissance City Report*, which characterizes as "timeless" the dictum that the arts "give a nation its unique character and provide the much needed social bonding to hold the people of the nation together" (2000: 30). A second reason lies in the seemingly bottomless pragmatism of Singapore's leaders. Given that as recently as the late nineties, Lee Kuan Yew was suggesting that in the event of economic decline, Singapore would need to re-merge with Malaysia, to relinquish an old building for the sake of the Knowledge Economy seems a relatively small price to pay. Third, the "openness" that is symbolized by the opening of The Arts House is just the sort that earns political capital without directly threatening votes or seats. It is openness without accountability.

Together, these points beg the question as to whether art counts for anything else. However, it is not sufficient, in such a scenario, simply to affirm the autonomy of aesthetic experience, nor to identify qualities whose sole value lies in their description as "resistant". Rather, an argument needs to be made for the ways in which art – meaning, in this particular context, performance – does something else, something, as Adorno puts it, "entirely other". Given that such otherness, while never fully reducible to its effects, must nevertheless *not* remain absolute, then the process of bringing the event into the ambit of the familiar is one that may or may not be suggested by the performance itself, and may or may not begin *during* the performance itself. What *is* certain is that this process is one of relating, in both senses of the word. The otherness of the performance, requires a re-telling, in the course of which familiar relations can be seen afresh, and new ones forged. Since the terms of reference currently governing the broad context into which such performances intervene concern

"globalization", I describe this combination of encounter and response by using an associated term: "cosmopolitan".

3.

As the combined failings in the realization and execution of *Parking* in the Chamber remind us, this alternative valuing of performance must begin with the encounter between performer and audience. From there it develops outwards to take account of the contexts that the audience are now encouraged to see afresh, and re-evaluate accordingly. A second event that took place in the Chamber suggests at least some of the ways in which this might happen.

Reading to Corpses, by the Thai artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, is a video piece that was installed in the Chamber over the course of "Insomnia 48", a weekend-long programme of performances, installations and workshops curated by Ong Keng Sen in September 2004 as part of *SENI*, Singapore's dress-rehearsal for its 2006 Biennale.[1] A large projection screen stood at the back of the opposing banks of Members' seats, and another above the dias where the Speaker's chair used to be. A fourth, smaller projection surface took the form of a trapezium-shaped mattress, which lay on the dias itself.[2] The only light in the room came from the projections, which passed through a cycle of three twenty-minute sequences of images featuring dead bodies partially or wholly covered by shrouds or clothes. Audience members could sit on the parliamentarians' chairs (thereby only ever seeing two out of the three main screens), or in the raked public gallery, from which they could see more, although at a greater distance, and at a more acute angle. The installation ran from midnight to six o'clock in the morning on the two nights of "Insomnia 48", and on the final afternoon.

Although "Insomnia48" took place in rooms all over the Arts House, *Reading to Corpses* was one of very few components to foster a direct relationship with its environment. This did not take the form of an overt material intervention, so much as the evocation of a profound resonance between the themes and pace of the videos, and the layout and historical conditions of the space. Having spent several hours sitting in the Chamber, I identified a certain unevenness in the success of its component parts which, in the present context, I find to be instructive.

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[1] The Biennale – Singapore's first – has been scheduled to coincide with the Annual Meetings of the Boards of Governors of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank Group, which are projected to attract about 16 000 delegates and observers.

The first sequence, which showed slow panning shots over three corpses partially submerged in water in see-through Perspex boxes, demanded a focused attention that viewers seemed unwilling or unable to give in such a novel space. They showed more interest in posing at the lecterns, taking photographs of each other in the parliamentarians' chairs, or looking for Lee Kuan Yew's seat. The Chamber as art-space was overwhelmed by its simultaneous identity as a museum of governance. In the second sequence of images, Rasdjarmrearnsook walked the length of a mortuary, passing between rows of covered corpses. The tape was slowed slightly, rendering the artists' movements at once purposeful and slightly ethereal. In the interaction between the present-absence of the corpses and the monumental absent-presence of the parliamentarian's chairs, the Chamber took on the cast of a memorial. Sitting in the pixellated glare of the projection of the mortuary lights, switching my attention between the scene there and the serried rows of Members' chairs, I could not help but see the latter as paying testament to something absent: of standing-in in the present for some other time, or place, or event. Again, however, the resonances of the Chamber interposed. If the strength of the artwork lay in suggesting an invented and ambiguous memorial, here I could not help but interpret it as a memorial to democracy. Lined up in opposing rows (as in the British Parliament upon which the design was based), the Members' chairs anticipated the cut and thrust of deliberative, participatory, dialogic democracy. Now, however, half a century on, they sit in what might be taken to be silent reproach to the monologue of the one party state that emanates with only whispers of dissent from the mausoleal new Parliament House next door. In consequence, the images suffered from overdetermination. They memorialised dead ideas, stillborn debates, ill-starred challenges, and politically fatal, ultimately libelous pronouncements.

Were such a politicized interpretation deliberate,[3] it would have been intriguing. As it was, it was distracting. In the third sequence, by contrast, I discerned a more productively ambiguous relationship between the work and the space. In one slightly unfocused shot, a young woman lay made-up and well-dressed in a coffin, as the artist read to her from a sheaf of papers. In another, the artist sat on a chair in a large, tiled room, and read from a book to a semi-shrouded corpse in a Perspex box. Other images showed close-ups of hair, feet and hands. Several overlapping tracks of the

[2] In the discussion that follows, I shall not be making reference to this feature of the installation, which suffered from technical difficulties, and whose relation with the rest of the image sequences was not clear.

same voice – presumably the artist's – intoned a repetitive, haunting series of phrases in Thai, that I took to refer to the text she was shown reading in the video. By contrast with the previous sequences, where image and space seemed locked in a tussle for attention to which spectators could only ever be visitors, witnesses or stand-ins, in this sequence, artwork and environment coincided in the perception – and self-perception – of the viewer. The artist's recorded voice was crucial here, since it raised the question: "if she is reading to corpses, what does it mean that I can hear her?" Already in the posing of the question comes the eerie realization that just as much as the work is the object of our attention, we are framed – at least in part – as its subject: we, too, are corpses. From this, the subject-object distinction starts to dissolve. Who, for instance, is speaking? We see the artist with the book, and we see the corpse. But the camera angle is such that we do not see the artists' lips move. Are the corpses speaking that polyphonic lament? And if we are partially identified with the corpses, is that beguiling, lilting sound that we hear somehow inside us, emanating *from* us? After all, I can still recall the way the words sounded in *Reading to Corpses* – the tone, tune and pace – even if the meaning remains inaccessible to me. If they weren't inside me to begin with, they are now as I write, and am I really in a position to identify the point at which they began to possess me? At the time, I identified myself both *with* and *as* a corpse, and this experience will not go away.

Here, then, is an example of the way in which the aesthetic encounter, even when taking place in such strongly signifying surroundings, first engages the spectator on its own terms. In this immanent experience, one finds oneself in a direct relation with the work, whose component parts (which include the spectator) are yet to be separated out. Of course, separated out they inevitably become; by language, time, the re-interposition of the space, and a dawning self-consciousness or reflexivity. Now, though, one sees things in a different light. In the Chamber, I feel colder. The Members' chairs continue in their play of absence and presence, but I also have the sense of being watched by shadowy figures seated in the public gallery – figures outside the immediate address of the images and the sound, as if in another world, outside-looking-in. Beyond museum and memorial, the space is reconfigured as a mortuary. I have been out of time, unsure how long I have been sitting there. I have been inhabiting the non-time of the dead.

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[3] I took it not to be so.

Over the course of this thesis I have sought to identify the point of aesthetic encounter in a number of different theatrical events and performative processes. These range from the energetic constitution of "a life" in the performances of Ivan Heng and Darren Chiam, the collective and disinterested reference to a "third party" as an instance of "weak interculturalism", through the exploration of the globe as a singularity in *Global Soul* and *Pericles*, to the deterritorializing potential of the Bee Dance in *The Silly Little Girl and the Funny Old Tree*. I have established some of the contexts into which such events intervene, such as a state-sponsored conception of the individual, the social production of space in the city, the influence of economic frameworks on intercultural interactions, and the inter-relationships between scent, performance, nature and social control. I have addressed the ways in which these aesthetic experiences suggest and feed back into their contexts in relational form. This includes a heightened sense of the imaginative co-creation of the performance by audience and performers, the subversion of expectations and conventions about space and its meaning, the re-interpretation of such contexts by means of embodied practice, the material marking of differentiation and distinction within the singular environment of the global, and the reconfiguration of prevailing attitudes towards nature. Finally, I have noted that all such interpretations will be given to inventive response on the one hand, and limitations of cultural and experiential competence on the other. I have sought to signal my own limitations of this sort where I am aware of them, without compromising the scope for expansive and creative interpretations of the work that has provoked this study.

Taken together, and contextualized within the distinctive and dense web of narratives, events, policies, personalities, practices, places, aspirations and affiliations that defines the place of theatrical performance in contemporary Singapore, I have aimed to identify a cosmopolitan aesthetics of contemporary performance. In so far as the cosmopolitan entails relationality, this "aesthetics" refers both to the experience of the event, as co-created by artists and audience members, and subsequent processes of interpretation and response. This is because it derives from two interwoven forms of relationality: the singular, which is a direct encounter with the emergent qualities of the work (I identify *as* the corpse), and the social, in which the various components begin to be separated out into a more recognizable set of interactions (I identify myself *with* the corpse). Such intertwinings are complex, because it is in the nature of the singular to produce its own, otherwise unforeseeable, terms of reference. In each of the preceding chapters, I have sought to testify to a range of relations and relational

practices, without being too quick to undo the rather knotted connections between the singular and the social that generally obtain *in practice*.

4.

In the case of *Reading to Corpses*, the expanding relations between the initial, immanent experience, and the contexts for its interpretation, take a number of different directions. These include those that are immediately apparent, such as the effects of introducing the theme and image of death into a politically charged site, those that are culturally bounded – such as the fact that I cannot understand the language spoken by the artist; and those that are disclosure-dependent, such as the information I later read informing me that the corpses were unclaimed, and that the text recounts themes of death and desire. All these might be taken into account in a more comprehensive reading of the work, along with references, amongst other things, to the Elephant statue downstairs, the presence of Thai construction workers in Singapore, and comparative death rituals.

There are two further features, however, that *Reading to Corpses* cannot illuminate. One, the co-presence of audience and performers, has informed the broader discussion I have pursued over the preceding chapters. The other, where cosmopolitanism connects with democracy, opens up a site of further enquiry. To the end of drawing both these features into the present discussion, I want to recount one final event.

The staging and dramaturgy of The Arts House opening sought to balance a necessary reverence for the old, with an enthusiastic infusion of the new. Accordingly, in advance of the inevitable high-energy razzamatazz of the finale, the Master of Ceremonies introduced "three important people to represent three important periods of the Art House": the British High Commissioner ("representing the original builders who laid not only the foundations of this House but also the foundations of our society as well"), Elizabeth Choy ("representing the transition [in 1954] from a House of Jurisdiction to a House of Legislature), and Tan Soo Khoon (current MP and former Speaker). Frail but dignified, the octogenarian Elizabeth Choy stepped forward to the microphone, and time slowed down. Her cut-glass accent was more impeccably English than the High Commissioner's, and certainly more than mine, a fact I had plenty of time to ponder as each word of her speech followed the next at ever

lengthening intervals. The assembled dignitaries sat forward in their seats, no doubt silently urging the respected war heroine to get on with it. Instead, apparently nearing the end of the speech, Madam Choy began the second half again, word perfect, but equally protracted. As the dread moment approached at which she had glitched back to the beginning the previous time, the tension mounted, and was on the brink of transforming into a flush of embarrassment, when she overcame the hurdle, and made a dash for the finishing line, which she pronounced with aplomb.

Was it only relief that made the ensuing applause so loud and long, or was it recognition of a remarkable performance? At the risk of trivializing the very real traumas of the ageing process, I like to think it was the latter. Intentional to the extent that she sought to present a firm, sincere and dignified figure and speech, but unintentional in its ponderousness, by contrast with the pomp that preceded it, and the all-singing, all-dancing bluster that followed, here was a truly compelling experience. Speaking as if from another era, the unwaning deliberateness with which Madam Choy pronounced each word – a certainty that did not diminish with repetition – meant that the most appropriate response on the part of the viewer was to join her for a moment in the alternative temporality she inhabited, and was producing.

This empathetic relation was only possible because the audience shared space, as well as time, with Madam Choy. Aware, on the one hand, of all the pressures of performance and the weight of expectation they bring to bear, we were nevertheless powerless to do anything but let the seconds tick by in her company. The relinquishing of expectation in such situations is a salutary one, for it pares down the relation to its essentials. Since the moment cannot support any more significance than it is capable of, itself, producing, then this relation develops into one of empathy, responsibility, and responsiveness.

This is significant, but it should not be romanticized. Madam Choy's amnesia was also sobering, and potentially distressing. In addition, it was a reminder that the voices of her peers in Singapore's political development, whose stories tell the fate of democracy in the building behind her, are fading fast, subject to the inexorable law of mortality. These other voices – be they dissenting or tangential to, or corroborative of, the PAP's monologue – risk being silenced, or ventriloquised by the victors. An image in the corridor display outside the Chamber, for instance, shows the 1965 Cabinet seated in the Chamber for the first time. What goes unmentioned, however, is the fact

that all the seats on the Opposition side of the Chamber are empty, because of a boycott by the Barisan Socialis, a left-wing break-away party from the PAP.

A more recent example concerns the symbolic moment of transition between old and new Chambers. On 6th September 1999, Parliament sat for the last time in the old, before moving to the new to continue the session. In recognition of this event, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong tabled the following motion:

> That this House, at its last meeting before it moves to its new Chamber across the yard, (1) notes the progress in establishing the system of parliamentary democracy since its early beginnings in this Chamber on 22nd April 1955; (2) records its appreciation for the contributions made by past members in establishing the confidence of the electorate has in its integrity and the openness of its proceedings; and (3) urges present and future Members to build on the accomplishments of their predecessors (cited in Jeyaretnam 2000: 126).

In response, Worker's Party leader and Non-constituency Member J. B. Jeyaretnam proposed an amendment to the motion which would alter the wording from after the words "across the yard" to read:

> ...regrets the persistent attempts and measures of the governments since 1965 to impede the growth of genuine parliamentary democracy and urges the present government to take such measures as may be necessary to facilitate the growth of genuine parliamentary democracy in Singapore (127-8).

The relative merits of the two motions need not detain us here. Suffice to say that nowhere in the museum of governance that the Arts House has become are such profoundly divergent interpretations of history entertained. PM Goh invokes the future to secure the present against the past, and well he might. For despite the fossilized spectacle of state power that the Chamber has, in the main, become, and despite the deadweight of ideology that enables the Singapore Story to press down so heavily upon the island's history, Madam Choy's performance remains instructive. There remains a remarkable potency in being able deliberately to synthesize, as performers can, the disjunctive contemporaneity that Elizabeth Choy seemed to be only partly aware of producing. This is not to say that artists should tell stories in place of these voices or on their behalf, but rather to testify to the persistent potential that these voices carry to see things otherwise. Again, Singapore is a distinctive example, but it is not alone. As artists increasingly deploy the *matériel*, language and opportunities of global cultural and economic processes, so they open up the potential for new connections. There is nothing inherently benevolent about these. But at the very least, they complicate things that would otherwise be over-simplified, forge local densities

that may otherwise appear seductively transparent, and produce affiliations whose long-term effects may prove to be productively at odds with disengaged short-termism. In this production – even, in time, in Singapore – there lies the scope for democracy with cosmopolitan characteristics.

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