

Book Review

Alternatives: Debating Theatre Culture in the Age of Con-Fusion

Edited by Peter Eckersall, Uchino Tadashi, and Moriyama Naoto
(Brussels: P.I.E.-Peter Lang, 2004)

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During the 1990s, there were many performance productions that dealt with the issue of cultural difference in Australia. It is possible to say that, to an extent, they were an artistic response to official Australian multicultural policies and the right-wing political reaction sometimes called 'the Hanson phenomenon.' [1] Although their styles and approaches vary, a common concern for the artists who focused on these issues was to express their voices from the position of a non-white or a non-English speaking background, against mainstream white Australian society. Some artists asserted cultural differences, using a technique and style of 'storytelling' in the form of narrative-based theatre. Some works questioned and challenged the representations of the cultural other with the intention to reveal the power structure in the dominant representational system in Australia. [2] However, after achieving some degree of presence in the Australian performance scene in the mid-1990s, these counter-hegemonic cultural performances seemed to reach a dead end. It can be said that by repeating the same kind of criticism of mainstream Anglo-Australian values, the initial impact on the audience was lost; that is, the excessive repetition devalued the initial form of criticism. An alternative direction in theory and practice for a continuing discussion of intercultural performance was and is definitely needed, especially now in the age of terrorism, when the rhetoric of simplistic cultural dichotomies can prevail.

Alternatives: Debating Theatre Culture in the Age of Con-Fusion provides such a different perspective and timely critical insights in examining intercultural issues in theatre/performance. The anthology was developed from two conferences that were organised as part of the *Journey to Con-Fusion* project (1999-2002) – a three-year collaboration project in contemporary performance research and development between Not Yet It's Difficult (Australia) and Gekidan Kaitaisha (Japan). Unlike many intercultural projects, where commonalities and universality are often sought, this research project had 'the realities of cultural difference and subjective mode of being' as its central theme. The two performance groups deployed a strategic notion of 'con-fusion' for realisation and embodiment in performance, emphasising 'the sensibilities

of collaboration, montage and fusion without smoothing over difference' (11). The artistic objectives of the project are strongly connected to its focus on 'the politics of transaction and exchange' (42). Similarly, a group of scholars from Australia and Japan in theatre/performance studies investigated cross-cultural collaboration at the interface of Australian and Japanese theatre/performance practice. Instead of examining an intercultural theatre/performance production in which an influential director mixes different cultural elements, as in Peter Brook's (in/famous) production of the *Mahabharata*, or examining the type of production typical of the 1990s that asserts 'ethnic' cultural perspectives within the dominant cultural frame in Australia, the critics/theorists in *Alternatives* consider – for some, based on their direct experiences and observations of the collaborative performance project – complex viewpoints addressing the problematics and difficulties of theorising intercultural practices within the context of globalisation. Their discussions offer a new challenge for theatre/performance scholarship, providing 'an alternative to the more commonplace European-American performance studies nexus' (11).

In the opening chapter, 'Trendiness and Appropriation? On Australia-Japan Contemporary Theatre Exchange,' Peter Eckersall, co-producer of the *Journey to Con-Fusion* project along with Hata Takeshi, discusses the theoretical background and the motivation for their project. Eckersall critically examines the recent history of theatre/performance exchange between Australia and Japan, discussing Japanese productions that toured in Australia, which express an overt sense of physicality, an emphasis on visual appearance, and which are then regarded as 'the non-western primitive,' 'pure' and 'a potential site of avant-garde theatre renewal' (52). He also critiques unproblematised 'Japan-inspired Australian performance' productions that exhibit 'an excessively narrow depiction of Japanese culture reflecting a tendency towards stereotypes' (25) and that demonstrate 'the heavy imprint of two genres [of contemporary Japanese performance], *Butô* and the Suzuki Performance training' (35).

Eckersall argues that the Australian preference for the aforementioned 'ethnic' type of Japanese theatre/performance and the Japan-influenced local productions were part of the 'Japan boom' in the 1990s in Australia, in which representations of Japan were regarded as 'cultish and fashionable' (28). These productions appeal to an ongoing Australian orientalism, the 'taste' for a Japaneseness that is not supported by 'comprehensive knowledge of Japanese culture or contextual information about the location of these [Japanese] works in a historical continuum' (34). Hence, Eckersall states that the foundation of the *Journey to Con-Fusion* project was conceived with the hope of avoiding 'the pitfalls of past 'trendy' intercultural activities' (43).

Eckersall sees the success of the *Journey to Con-Fusion* project in its ability to maintain 'the processes of the [collaborative intercultural performance] event as the event' (49; author's emphasis). [3] The two companies have different aesthetics and approaches in their investigations of the political: while NYID's work is corporeal and deconstructive, Gekidan Kaitaisha presents performance of physical excess (and even pain) to examine the internalised politics of control and domination over the body.

They share, however, an interest in exploring social and political issues that constellate around marginal bodies, such as refugees, in a dystopian view of globalisation. This common interest was pivotal for the *Journey to Con-Fusion* project, allowing the two companies to explore 'issues of exchange and negotiation to performance making itself' (44), rather than an apparently seamless intercultural eclecticism. The learning and transference of forms and styles between the two companies was clear and noticeable. For Eckersall, the moment when NYID's performance slowly 'dissolved' into what he discusses as the Kaitaisha performance of pain – 'a performance without critical distance, where only the pain of bodies remained to speak for our age' (49) – was powerful and important. For Eckersall, the sense of otherness arising from this artifice can make us rethink our understanding of the politics and modalities of border crossing.

Likewise, the scholars who witnessed the *Journey to Con-Fusion* project responded and examined the corporeal encounter between the two performance groups from various theoretical perspectives, resulting in pertinent and significant accounts of this unique intercultural venture. In her article 'Violence, Corporeality and Intercultural Theatre,' Rachel Fensham discusses the embodied transference of pain in this collaborative project in relation to Hannah Arendt's discussion of violence. In Fensham's view, theatre must understand 'the actualisation of violence as corporeal' (91) and should not shy away, via representation, from its bodily processes. She discusses the final exchange performance of the project, in which a dance duet by performers of the two companies was punctuated by the repeated action of one man violently throwing the other against the wall. For Fensham, the NYID/GK collaboration project, exemplified by moments such as this, succeeded in presenting 'actions that violate cultural certainties through work on the body' (101) and in interrupting systems of power behind violence.

Edward Scheer's essay 'Dissident Vectors: Surrealist Ethnography and Ecological Performance' examines the inter-corporeal exchange between the two companies, referring to 'the cube,' in which, in a squadron-like running formation, David Pledger of NYID took the GK/NYID members on a run in the streets of Tokyo. Scheer suggests that the members of the groups, through their experience of the tight jogging formation in a 'shapeless' city environment via 'the unstructured moments of the performance itself' (56), could discover a common performance language. He discusses the interaction of varied bodies – of different physique, age, gender and nationality – in terms of GK director Shimizu Shinjin's concept of a 'neural system' of gesture that moves between 'drone like dance moves and obsessive compulsive repetitions and the jittery, fragile edge of gesture' (56). The neural-system gesture is understood to grow 'out of real physical friction, the contact between bodies which produces heat and movement' (57), and it is neither of interiority nor imagery, nor it does aim to be transcendental nor transhistorical. Scheer instead links it with ecology. He argues that, referring to Felix Guattari's notion of 'virtual ecology,' the collision of differences between the two groups was not about 'poetic futility,' but generated a performance ecology that aimed to mobilise 'practices which shift centres of meaning and

deconstruct outdated oppositions of East/west [sic], Australia/Japan, dance/theatre, body/mind, form/formless, etc' (56).

Denise Varney's 'Rhizomatic Dramaturgy: Alternative Performance Practices' discusses an aspect of the process of the collaboration with reference to the Deleuzian notion of the rhizome. The rhizome is an open-ended structure, and therefore its possibilities for the project are discussed in terms of a break from hierarchical and linear structures of performance making. Public performance showings of the project were all regarded as works-in-process: 'the performances are not the privileged end-products' (121). Varney suggests that the rhizomatic flows of the development of the project are themselves 'performative in that they are becomings in time and space' (125), which allow an exploration of the unforeseen. From this perspective, Varney argues that 'there is much to say for the putting of difference into theatrical space and letting it wander' (125).

At the end of the anthology in 'Afterword: After 9.11,' Uchino Tadashi describes the character of the *Journey to Con-Fusion* conference with the concept of 'performing "we"' as a singular and temporal unity at the moment of the conference where there were 'no "we," essentialised subject positions' (165). This notion usefully prompts us to consider the complexities of the cross-cultural performative encounter with particular attention to slippages, incommensurabilities, and points of negotiation.

In contrast, comments made by some Japanese scholars seem to express a slightly more cautious position on intercultural theatre. Nishidô Kôjin in 'The Journey to Con-Fusion: Between Australia and Japan' (a transcript of Nishidô's commentary at a post-performance discussion organised as part of the collaboration project) suggests that the meaning of intercultural performance can only be discovered by the audience on the spot 'when the audience and the performer stand in an equal position sharing one stage' (148). Examining the complexity of the politics of the performing body, in which the existing power structure conceals its pervasive influence and seeks to maintain the status quo, Nishidô points out that, despite the artists' intentions for the intercultural project, the performances could be read in ways outside or the opposite of their intended frames. Hence, he argues that the importance of the collaboration can be found in recognising "'indeterminable values' in intercultural performance (148).

Kitano Keisuke's 'Intercultural Practices in the Field of Theatre: An Examination of Gekidan Kaitaisha's Performance in Hong Kong' discusses the difficulty of theorising intercultural theatre. Despite Kaitaisha's critical intent to complicate the reference to the Japanese Emperor system with regard to the age of the multinational corporation and globalisation, the representation was seen by the Hong Kong audience in terms of the past image of imperial Japan. This misapprehension reminded Kitano of the 'theoretical presumption of the universal applicability of the aesthetics of representation in reading the body' (70).

Other writers in this anthology also touch upon unresolved issues concerning the Japanese imperial system (by Moriyama Naoto, through the work of Kawamura Takeshi) and the representation of Japanese history. Takahashi Yuichirô writes, for example, on Shôwa Hall, a national history museum named after the late Emperor Shôwa. Katherine Mezur, on the other hand, discusses the contemporary image of Japan, focusing on young girls' (mediated) bodies in performance by Yubiwa Hotel, an all-woman Japanese performance group, in order to discuss the politics of cuteness (*kawaii*) in contemporary Japan. These texts present complex and varied viewpoints that seek to displace the stereotypical image of Japan, contributing to the project's objective of 'con-fusion.'

Alternatives: Debating Theatre Culture in the Age of Con-Fusion extends the horizon of theatre/performance studies, offering an opportunity to rethink assumptions about cross-cultural (art) exchanges between Australia and Japan.

Notes

[1] Ultra right-wing politician Pauline Hanson provoked controversy in Australia in the 1990s because of her views on immigration policy.

[2] These works have been well documented and examined in a number of academic publications. For discussions on Australian postcolonial theatre/performance, see Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996. See also Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo, 'Performing Hybridity in Post-Colonial Monodrama', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 32.1 (1997): p5-19; Helen Gilbert (ed.), *Post Colonial Stages: Critical & Creative Views on Drama, Theatre & Performance*, Hebden Bridge, England: Dangaroo Press 1999; Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins, *Women's Intercultural Performance*, London and New York: Routledge 2000; Helena Grehan, *Mapping Cultural Identity in Contemporary Australian Performance*, No. 2 in the series *Dramaturgies: Texts, Cultures and Performances*, (Brussels: P.I.E.-Peter Lang 2001).

[3] Miyauchi Katsu's photo essay in the anthology captures moments of struggle and exploration, featuring the performers of both groups in the workshops.

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Editorial Note

Performance Paradigm issues 1 to 9 were reformatted and repaginated as part of the journal's upgrade in 2018. Earlier versions are viewable via Wayback Machine:
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