

## Book Review

*Theatre and Performance in the Asia-Pacific: Regional Modernities in the Global Era*, by Denise Varney, Peter Eckersall, Chris Hudson, and Barbara Hatley  
(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

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Your house shall be not an anchor but a mast.—Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

I have often found myself rephrasing the quote above by the modernist American-Lebanese artist and poet Kahlil Gibran in order to argue that ‘traditions’ should not be an anchor that secures us to a nostalgic or idealised past. This has been especially useful in conversations about theatre or creative practice in the Middle East, where conservative and essentialist sentiments might often valorise the need to stick to ‘our traditions’ or ‘our culture’, in arguments often pitted against progressive practices, ideas, or politics. Given the impact of Western cultural and political imperialism that is generally perceived as an ongoing project in the Middle East, it has often been important to argue that, rather than holding us back, traditions should carry us forward, helping us to engage rather than disengage from others and the world. These sentiments and Gibran’s nautical metaphor also resonate with the main currents underlying the wonderfully engaging publication *Theatre and Performance in the Asia-Pacific*, which charts the impact of globalisation in the region and maps the flow of economies, culture and the arts beyond defined geopolitical borders of the nation state.

This new publication in the series *Studies in International Performance* is an exploration of modernity in the Asia-Pacific region that focuses on theatre and performance as ‘active sites through which new or alternative modernities emerge and become significant in the global era’ (2). The concepts of the ‘Asia-Pacific’ and Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of ‘liquid modernity’ are the two main reference points, or coordinates, that frame the theoretical territory of this study.

In writing this review based in Auckland – a city often described as the largest Polynesian city in the world and one that is being rapidly transformed by Asian immigration (Statistics NZ suggest that one-third, or 34 per cent of Auckland residents will identify as Asian by 2021) – I naturally expected that the book would provide a clearer understanding of what the term ‘Asia-Pacific’ might mean. But direct theorising of this term isn’t really the focus of this book. Discussion of performance from Aotearoa/New Zealand and the other myriad sites or locations that inhabit this geographical and economic region are also absent. Instead, the book offers a series of theatre and performance case studies from Australia, Indonesia, Japan and Singapore, to show ‘how theatre produces transformations at national, regional and global levels’ (1). It should be noted that the book is the outcome of a three-year collaborative research project funded by the Australian Research Council Discovery Project Scheme. As such, the ‘Asia Pacific’ is a useful term under which to synthesise the specialist research areas of the four contributing authors. In mapping common themes in theatre and performance across (and between) these four ‘sites’ of interest, the

book ultimately offers persuasive insights about larger trends, trajectories and flows across the Asia-Pacific region. These insights and analysis are connected to Zygmunt Bauman's notion of 'liquid modernity' which forms the second major reference point or coordinate that frames the theoretical territory of this study.

In attending to the various modernities perceived within the Asia-Pacific, and the understanding that modernity and 'Westernisation' are not identical (5), the authors draw on Bauman to describe post-industrial modernity in the region which is characterised by 'unprecedented acceleration of the time and pace of change accompanied by high levels of mobility and transience' (6). In contrast to the relative solidity of an older phase of 'industrial modernity', Bauman's metaphor refers to 'the fluidity of life in the fast-paced digital present' (6). Within this theoretical focus, Fredric Jameson's modernist thematics of 'alienation, social fragmentation and isolation' are re-examined to emphasise alternative (liquid) modernist themes of 'technology, identity, fluidity and change' (14). What is of immediate interest to the authors is the ways in which 'imitations and variations of the Western theatre tradition', which are discerned across the four 'sites' of interest and by extension the larger Asian-Pacific region, 'sit alongside hybrid forms that participate in global flows of aesthetics, technology, artists and audiences within the economies of finance and cultural production' (2).

The book is co-authored but opts for 'specialist' rather than an 'integrated focus' for each chapter in order to develop the detailed analysis of each of the national sites under consideration (9). While the writing employs a 'site-specific rather than an intercultural methodology' (ibid), the occasional comparisons across the chapters deepen the analysis of 'liquid modernity' and also function like glue to bind the disparate elements of the study together. The methodology employed also means that, while each of the case studies are individually authored, the pronoun 'we' is used sparingly across the book (10). Some of these chapters with their detailed case studies will be useful inclusions as secondary reading in undergraduate and postgraduate courses. But without the connective tissue and the deeper explications that result from a reading between the chapters, I wonder whether the discrete references to Bauman's 'liquid modernity' will make much sense. The methodology also presents some minor difficulties in locating the 'voice' of each chapter or section. I wasn't sure when writing this review whether to reference the collective 'authors' or the individual contributors of each chapter. In other words, there is an abiding ambiguity in the voice/s of the writing that is a little tricky to negotiate.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I 'Changing Forms of Theatre and Drama' maps out the process of liquefaction that post-industrial modernity can engender by exploring examples of text-based drama across the four national sites under examination to consider how conventions of modern drama begin to 'melt' (Bauman's notion cited on page 7). This section includes a chapter exploring the work of Australian playwright Andrew Bovell, whose plays *Holy Day* (2001) and *When the Rain Stops Falling* (2009) consider the melting of historical time and place and reveal how the legacy of Australia's modernity and colonial past might 'haunt' the present and the future (30). The shared sense of despair and emptiness that pervades Bovell's plays resonates in a subsequent discussion in chapter 4 of Japanese playwright Hirata Oriza's 1994 drama *Tôkyô Noto* (Tokyo Notes). In providing a reading of the play, the chapter explores Hirata's theory of 'colloquial theatre' (*gendai kôgo engeki*) that is situated within wider debates about Japan's modern theatre (*shingeki*). The play is set in Tokyo sometime in the near future and depicts members of an extended family meeting in a foyer of an art gallery to view masterpieces by the Dutch painter Jan Vermeer. According to Eckersall, Hirata's work stages an 'induced capacity for social forgetting, a profound cultural amnesia and [a] form of advanced alienation that is foregrounded in his depiction of everyday social relations' (71). In appearing as strangers to each

other, the play depicts the breakdown of the cohesive family unit which in turn asserts a kind of 'hopeless unity' (73).

The breakdown of social relations of family and community is also explored in a chapter that provides a study of Singaporean playwright Stella Kon's 1985 monodrama *Emily of Emerald Hill*. Like Singapore itself, Emily possesses a hybrid identity, a fusion of Malay and Chinese cultures. Reflecting the modernising forces that accompanied the transition of Singapore from colony to nationhood, Emily also reflects the decline of her (Babas) community, the breakdown of her family unit, and the disintegration of her world under the liquidizing powers identified by Bauman. As Hudson eloquently explains, 'the solids that Emily was counting on, and on which she has constructed herself, have melted' (40). Part I also includes a very compelling chapter that explores two case studies from Indonesia. The first is *Kisah Perjuangan Suku Naga* (The Struggle of the Naga Tribe) by Rendra that was first performed in 1975, the second is *Biographi Yanti* (Yanti's Biography) staged in 1992 by the group Teater Sae. The description of the work of poet, actor, playwright and director Rendra was particularly absorbing. Perhaps I am betraying my own ignorance here, but I don't know why I haven't come across descriptions of Rendra's work before. According to Hatley, influenced by his time in the avant-garde theatre movement of New York in the mid-1960s, Rendra set up Bengkel Teater (Workshop Theatre) in Yogyakarta in 1967 and introduced a 'radical new approach to contemporary theatre' (53). Although his plays were banned for a time, his work presents an 'alternate vision of modernity that combines international discourses of environmentalism and anti-development critique with local cultural forms' (58). Of particular interest is the description of *The Struggle of the Naga Tribe*, which presented explicit divergences from the traditional *wayang* model. In offering opportunities to renovate traditional approaches to *wayang*, the performance also implied the 'necessity in contemporary times for a more critical evaluation of inherited tradition and a more active, individualized, participatory approach to social and political life' (57). It is here that Gibran's sentiments, with which I began this review, can be felt. It also reflects the role theatre and performance can play in helping to situate tradition as a mast that can carry us forward and foster engagement rather than functioning simply as an anchor to secure us to the past.

After finishing the first section of the book, I did feel a little unsettled by the constant references to fragmentation, dissolution, and hopelessness that accompany the form of modernity that Bauman describes. I began to wonder whether subsequent sections of the book might offer more optimistic accounts of theatre case studies in which theatre interventions into liquid modernity might find expressions of agency. I wanted more accounts of the 'active, individualised, participatory approach to social and political life' that was reflected in Rendra's work and which was described briefly in Chapter 3.

It is not all doom and gloom. Subsequent sections of the book provide more celebratory and agential examples of theatre interventions into modernity. These sections are also concerned with the book's focus on the 'points of resistance' to the process of liquefaction that is being discussed, and the 'blocks of solidity' across and within the region such as '[l]ocal custom[s], traditional ceremonial performances and other cultural practices that allow for a distinctive local resonance for participants and audiences' (8). For example, Chapter 5, 'Solid and Liquid Modernities in Regional Australia', provides an interesting discussion of 'mobile and fluid identities' in the widely touring production *Ngurrumilmarrmiriyu* (Wrong Skin) which features the Chooky Dancers of Elcho Island. The performance stages a powerful encounter between what is described as opposing modernities: 'liquid modernity with its fluid, mobile, individualized rather than communal bonds and Yolngu modernity that incorporates modern popular culture but reaffirms traditional Law' (85). The chapter suggests that *Wrong Skin* 'positions communal bonds and

solidarities as an alternative to the modernizing forces that would break the nexus of community, language and Law in which Yolngu identity is vested' (86). But the production also represents a renovation of tradition and a way to rearticulate the significance of Yolngu tribal law to both younger Yolngu generations and wider communities in Australia. Here again we see an example of how performance is being used to situate tradition as a mast. This is not performance that is retreating from the contemporary world, but rather a performance intervention into modernity that is celebratory and agential.

The contradictions of contemporary liquid modernity are also explored in Chapter 6, 'Staging Indonesian Modernity After Suharto', which discusses the work of the Garasi theatre group based in Yogyakarta. In a discussion of the production *Je.ja.l.an* (The Streets), the chapter provides an account of how theatre can illustrate the celebration of multiple, porous identities flourishing in the freedom of the post-Suharto era, as well as the friction that this celebration can produce (100-103).

Chapter 7 considers the work of Japanese theatre company Chelfitsch (disarticulation of the English word 'selfish'), and includes a riveting discussion of the play *Zougame no Sonikku Raifu* (The Sonic Life of a Giant Tortoise, 2011) by writer and director Okada Toshiki. In Okada's plays, characters 'inhabit theatrical space uncertainly and mark time by telling childlike stories filled with disconnected conversations' (113). A sense of unease is represented corporeally through 'distorted body movements' where banal conversations are accompanied by 'strange movements and stammers in the body' (ibid). The 'inertia' that seems to overshadow performances is theorized in terms of an 'ambient' or 'slow dramaturgy' (115). In an illuminating discussion that considers Brian Eno's *Music for Airports* (1978) as one of the first ambient sound compositions, the chapter suggests that *Sonic Life's* empty theatrical form constitutes a meditation on 'the dissipated "mental state" of people's own lives in Tokyo' (119). What is also interesting here is that the chapter explores the sense of emptiness and 'passivity' that can be traced in Okada's ambient dramaturgy as a form of 'liquid power' where passiveness is not apolitical, but rather a form of 'marking time' that can enable 'reflections on cultural critique and intervention' (124).

Chapter 8 continues the meditation on dramaturgy and liquid modernity in a discussion of the Swiss-German theatre collective Rimini Protokoll's *Cargo Kuala Lumpur-Singapore* (2010). Using a specially converted truck, the performance takes spectators on a simulated journey that explores the reality of life for migrant workers in Singapore. The performance explores issues of border control, re-territorialisation, the temporary and precarious nature of Singapore's migrant workforce, and the very permanent evidence of their labor as evidenced in the built urban environment of the city-state. However, the truck is driven by two Malaysian trucker-drivers nicknamed Ganes and Ravi, who provide commentary during the journey, sharing personal anecdotes, pictures of their families, citing their favorite Malay and Indian music and foods, and allowing a narrative of their everyday lives to unfold. As Hudson eloquently explains, 'the discourse of the everyday is generated by these connoisseurs of the commonplace, specialists of the mundane and poets of the prosaic' (132). What the performance ultimately reveals is that despite liquid modernity's ability to dislocate labor and the workplace, and its ability to fragment family and social relations, and despite Ganes and Ravi's mobile employment, the truck-drivers articulate strong attachments to place and strong familial and community bonds. Here again is a sense of hope that counteracts the previous associations of liquid modernity with despondency and futility. There is a sense that in being cast adrift in the currents of post-industrial modernity it may still be possible to navigate the tumultuous waters with 'traditional' familial and community commitments intact.

The final two sections of the book are equally engaging in the discussion of theatre case studies that are presented. Part III explores 'adaptation theatre' (143) and the modernisation of classical European-style drama and Asian performance by paying particular attention to the impact of touring, intercultural collaborations and the rise of transnational arts festivals. Included here are discussions of Barrie Kosky and Tom Wright's adaptation of *The Women of Troy* performed in Sydney and Melbourne in 2008, and Singapore playwright Chay Yew's *Visible Cities* that premiered in 2009 at the Singapore Arts Festival. The section also includes a very insightful comparative analysis of the Australian-Indonesian adaptation of the Ramayana legend *The Theft of Sita* which was directed by Nigel Jamieson for the Adelaide Festival in 2000, and Robert Wilson's intercultural project *I La Galigo* which premiered in Singapore in 2004 (incidentally, readers of *Performance Paradigm* might be interested in a detailed review of *I La Galigo* staged as part of the Melbourne International Arts Festival in October 2006 by Margaret Hamilton. See *Performance Paradigm* 3 May (2007): 1–6.). Part III offers a very compelling argument that 'adaptations performed by the major theatre companies in Australian theatre are overwhelmingly of European drama' (148). In highlighting how major Australian theatre producers 'bypass locations in the Asia-Pacific and head straight to Euro-American cities such as London and New York' (143), the section also highlights how the cultural sector 'lags behind the economic sector in terms of its engagement in the Asia-Pacific' (157). In some ways this analysis troubles the extent of Australia's imbrication in the region and might also highlight the limitations of the usefulness of the term 'Asia-Pacific'.

Part IV, 'Regional Flows', serves as a coda to the book and is followed by a conclusion. Here the authors ultimately present the Asia-Pacific as a 'performative construct – tenuously assembled, diverse and contingent' (220). This understanding of the Asia-Pacific as performative does not ignore its simultaneous existence as 'a diplomatic, geopolitical or trading block' (220–221). They argue that it does however highlight 'self-referential entities that repeat, recycle and remix inherited and new repertoires of sound, movement and image' (221). I think perhaps given the scholarly scope of the study and its academic assiduity and perspicuity of analysis, these final concluding remarks could have been unpacked a little further. Perhaps what the final comments are pointing to is that theatre and performance in the Asia-Pacific region is articulating diverse responses to ongoing processes of post-industrial modernity, in which the old and the new are being remediated in configurations that call to mind the nautical metaphors of the anchor and the mast. The optimism expressed in the conclusion suggests that theatre and performance in the region might play an important role in steering a course through the currents of liquid modernity to facilitate open relations and pluralist engagements with the world.

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