

DRAMATURGY IN ASIA: OF ROOTS & TRADITIONS

FEB 17, 10.30AM-12.30PM

Chairing the Roundtable session, Peter Eckersall began by addressing the theme “Asian Dramaturgy”, where neither word has a precise definition. 'Dramaturgy', as discussed over the previous sessions, has multiple meanings. At the same time, the frame 'Asian' is also subject to serious critique. By wanting to dislocate the term dramaturgy from its Western/contemporary theatre history, Eckersall warns that we risk assuming that there is a comfortable relationship with the West. Moving away from such inherent historical baggage and provocation to the term “dramaturgy” in the normative Western theatrical history, through ADN, Eckersall hopes to heighten not a traditional practice (from GE Lessings onwards) but new dramaturgy that functions as a new disciplinary term. Eckersall goes on to argue that “Asian” is perhaps more problematic even though it has lots of currency from socio-historical and economic standpoints. Asian dramaturgy hence raises cultural politics, ownership of terms and locations of productions etc. With the dissemination of this term (from Singapore to Japan), there is a potential to deconstruct Asian. As such, he suggests that Asia serves as a method within the context of the ADN.

The range of material from the four speakers shed light on the different contexts and practices. In discussing “Of Roots and Traditions”, there was a narratological understanding of history that was interjected by the subjective personal. Anuradha Kapur shared that there is dramaturgical thinking in treatises like the *Natyasastra* that focus on the relationship between performer and audience. She further highlights that post-1980s, a wave of female directors possibly led to ruptures, interruptions and disalignments regarding roles in theatre-making. Quoting Vidya Rao who discusses the fate of the courtesan *churi* (singers from matrilineal heritage) during post-colonial India and their non-inclusion in All India Radio Stations, Kapur further argues that there is a field of knowledge that the spectator must navigate through. Pulling it back, she questions what dramaturgy could possibly make the audience do in this situation. The 1980s works were of mixes and hybridities, figuration of women, production of gender, identity, India, Indian-ness and nation. Such multi-authorship is not without interruptions and the audience must mediate it. With the destabilised relationships about pedagogy, i.e. *guru-sishya* pedagogy that gives way to a different reproduction of transmission, Kapur seeks to reimagine the role of the pedagogue without burden of the knowledge. She concludes with the cautious note that in re-composing the past, certain pasts are more important and “efficient” and such polydimensionality given to the artwork is very much part of what is contemporary and modern.

Foundational figures and foundational histories, such as the likes of Kuo Pao Kun and Krishen Jit in the 1980s became a useful point of entry for speakers including Charlene Rajendran and Marion D’Cruz. Rajendran shared how both figures sought to rethink and reconfigure fixed ideas about multiplicity and negotiating differences while navigating ways to understand new dramaturgies

in their writings about performances. While Jit “excavates” multiculturalism within the body (through the specifics of Chinese, Englishes, etc.), Kuo’s take on “open culture” is rooted in one specific culture (not racially defined by something). From that groundedness of “being”, one then begins to have the capacity to negotiate them. Hinging off the works of Five Arts Centre, Marion D’Cruz succinctly shared two strategies of “invisible dramaturgy” (due to the lack of a designated person as dramaturg): through co-direction of works like *Three Children*, *Family* and *Skin Trilogy*, and the creative producer who works with you and offers creative inputs as well. Drawing on these ideas, Eckersall questioned if we are indeed overwhelmingly controlled by the circulation of these memories from the past much like the guru figure.

Kentaro Matsui contextualised how various Asian and Western influences has shaped “traditional” forms. For example the Shankusen instrument used in Kabuki arrived from China through Okinawa. Before the strict codification, stories from the Korean peninsular and China were incorporated into Noh and Kyogen. Influences from the West during the Meiji period were evident in the use of 20th-century Shakespeare and Ibsen plays. This period also saw the birth of the concept of 'actress'. The idea of collaborations with people from overseas then tended towards revolutionising existing theatre models.

Remaking history, and its possibilities creates a new point of ruptures as well. Hence, this creates a new kind of relationship to the traditional. What is the potentiality of the term “Asian Dramaturgy”? Different pedagogies emerge as Rajendran shared, and D’Cruz further elaborated on how there are younger lecturers who teach mak yong while the guru is still in the space. Such a new relationship (between student, young lecturer and guru) is one that allows for a different kind of embodied transmission to take place. Kapur suggests relooking at the term “authentic” in relation to the invented-ness of tradition that arises from India. Dramaturgy then theoretically opens one to think about pluralities, mutiplicities ruptures and differences.

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