

## SOUTHEAST ASIAN DRAMATURGIES: ARCO RENZ & CONTEMPORARY DANCE IN CAMBODIA, INDONESIA & VIETNAM

FEB 18, 10.30AM-11.30AM

Arco Renz started his lecture by taking the audience through a short experience: to imagine screwing a screw into a wall with a screwdriver. Slowly opening up the clenched fists, this then developed into a breathing momentum. He then explained that in his works, he has a suspicion of the form. To him, the form (of the body) is important for communication but it is also a code that stands for something else. Especially in collaborative work, it is crucial to look at something beyond the forms. He then took the audience through four postures.

Using the simple motion of opening and closing created a spiral movement inside the limbs. He explained how it is possible to interfere with the form. These, in principle, are the elements he uses in his choreographic works, what he coined *abstract dramaturgy*. It refers to the use of basic parameters of dance, such as time, space and physical energy, to create a dialogue, a drama between these abstract (compared to not narrative) parameters.

*Heroine*, performed by Taiwanese dance artist Su Wenchi, best exemplifies the four postures and the dancer's dialogue with them. Space involves that which is outside of body and the shape the body is making being confined to a single point. The parameter of time is a codified pulse with sections of 4x8. Almost like heat and frequencies, these abstract parameters of time and shape force the body to evolve. The light designed for *Heroine* also placed a different limitation for the eye of the audience. Due to the hallucinatory effects that the low lighting created, one may see movements that didn't exist. As the performance continued with the acceleration of time cycles, the dancer turns as a way of negotiating the three abstract parameters of time, space and light. It was a confrontation between the individual and her environment. Renz reiterated that the choreography is the by-product and not the focus of the approach. Again, it is not an attempt to produce or reproduce the body form but to generate a real situation that changes constantly. As such, negotiation and dialogue is important.

With *Crack*, a 2011 collaboration with Cambodian dance company Amrita Performing Arts commissioned by the Singapore Arts Festival, Renz also incorporated his experiences with abstract dramaturgy. Over a two-year process, he and the dancers had to negotiate and dialogue with the desire for freedom and a constricting environment (of time and space, including the socio-historical context one is embedded in). Renz decided not to write in any movements, not to interfere with the dancers' style and not to create any choreography. Instead, his aim was to be a designer of the processes. He designed a "third space" — a space that is empty from great ideas and instead

focuses on physical experiences that integrate the people who are there (in terms of movements but not style). The image of liquid gold that was adapted from Belle's (Amrita dancer) classical teacher, was used as the time parameter. As the theme slowly formed, dramaturg Tang Fu Kuen suggests how the piece foregrounds a unique change for the dancers (who at best have had memories of the Pol Pot regime) that allows them to author their own personalities and individuality. Radicalising tradition by the means of revealing the personal signature is always somewhat an unstable, unfinished and magnetic process. At the same time, there is a refreshed vitality (stems from breathing) through the presence of the body that transmits somatic affect.

The third piece *Coke* was a Philippines-based performance that again used the body as the starting point to explore a more complex abstract dramaturgy (compared to the more primal *Heroine*). Drawing on the pieces by a popular TV dance group Sexbomb Dancers, Renz and the dancers attempted to layer sexually-charged body language with different complex movements. Renz also responded to the question on the role of music in his process and shared that the music pieces curated for each performance primarily functions as the parameter of time: to represent a friction (structural friction). Working with Fu Kuen, to Renz was an organic process, and the main insight was to formulate sharing sufficient information with the audience who may not be privy or be a part of the process.

Renz then concluded the session by flagging that dramaturgy (and his abstract dramaturgy) is about decoding as much as encoding. It is through the decoding (of beliefs, from movement to ideas, habits and convictions), that allows him to design the encoding that needs to take place.

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