

The East West binary and the burden of representation.

The problem with Jérôme Bel's controversial 2004 piece *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* is that nothing in it indicates any awareness of the ways in which it reinforces an orientalist world view. Jérôme Bel is a French choreographer whose work lies in the ambiguous space between experimental dance and Live Art while Pichet Klunchun, from Thailand, has trained in the Thai court ballet style 'Khon'. Their piece stages an encounter between the two of them in which they answer each other's questions and demonstrate some of their dances to one another. A central tenet of postcolonial theory is that orientalism constructs an East West binary, a division between European and North American art and culture and that of the Arab countries, India and the Asian Pacific region. There is no acknowledgment in *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* of the privileged position that Bel, as a famous Western artist, enjoys in relation to the less well known Thai choreographer, Klunchun. They are unable to escape appearing to be on opposite sides of an ideologically constructed binary with its accompanying unequal power relations. As Susan Foster (2009) points out, Curt Sachs's distinction, in his 1937 book *World History of the Dance*, between modern theatre dance and traditional non-western dances is still widely accepted. Sachs argued, in a problematic, Social-Darwinian way, that non-Western peoples perform traditional dances which represent their customs and values while only Western dance artists are capable of creating progressive and innovative work relevant to the challenges of modern society. The dances of African, Indian, Asian, and indigenous South American peoples are therefore seen to represent the past while only dance artists in the developed Westernised countries are supposedly capable of developing the dance of the future. It is very easy to read *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* in this way. Although it tries to present Bel and Klunchun as equals, the concept of the piece ignores the power of the East West binary

that allows Bel to appear the creator of radically new and innovative work but restricts Klunchun to the role of representing the exotic, timeless, Asian other.

In a 1990 article, 'Black art and the burden of representation', Kobena Mercer discusses general expectations about the work of artists of colour. Critics and spectators in Europe and North America, he argues, invariably assume that the work of black artists always 'represents' Black identities or addresses the concerns of the Black communities. From a European point of view, Klunchun, along with many dancers of Asian origin, carry this burden of representing the issues and concerns of the ethnic or national communities to which they belong. As the British Asian choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh has complained, British arts funding bodies have appeared reluctant to allow her to be 'a common or garden British choreographer' but expect her to 'give voice to non-Western cultures or to oppressed minorities or Indian Women or Third World issues'. They expect her to be 'a social ambassador but not just a choreographer'. She observes ironically that it is as if they are instructing her to make 'a colourful dance about arranged marriages, told entirely through hand gestures, but before you actually perform it, you have to explain each one' (1997: p. 47). Jeyasingh's position here is a postcolonial one which echoes Edward Said's well known proposal that the Western Orientalist 'makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for the West' (Said 1978: 20). In *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*, Bel puts Klunchun into a position where he has to explain the mysteries of Thai court ballet to Western spectators. White European and North American dance artists generally remain unmarked and are allowed to concern themselves purely with aesthetic questions. This is often not the case for dancers from the Asian region or European dance artists of Asian origin. This paper examines the conditions that determine when, in choreography and performance, Asian dance artists are required to carry the 'burden of representation', and under what circumstances they can sometimes appear to escape it.

These, I shall argue, sometimes depend on the kinds of on-stage relations that they appear to have with their fellow performers.

Pichet Klunchun and Myself is a piece created and performed by two dancers of the same gender who, because they come from opposite sides of the world, are significantly different both in appearance and cultural values but appear to enjoy, on stage, an easy companionship or friendship. This theatrical device of exploring a close relationship between two collaborators of the same sex but different backgrounds is one that other pairs of dancers have recently been exploring. Thus dancer Jonathan Burrows and composer Matteo Fargion have, to date, made and performed together in six works, of which the latest is *Counting to 100*. Matthilde Monnier, who is a leading French contemporary choreographer, and Maria La Ribot, whose work, like Bel's, lies somewhere between live art and and conceptual dance, collaborated in 2008 to make and perform a critically acclaimed piece *Gustavia*, which takes Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre of Death as a central reference point. In 2005, Akram Khan and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui premiered *Zero Degrees*. Khan is a British Asian dancer and choreographer while Cherkaoui is Belgian, from a Moroccan family, and is a long term dancer and choreographer in the Belgian dance theatre company Ballets C de la B. Part of the appeal of all these pieces is the way that each performer seems to allow the other a space in which to be different while at the same time revealing a closeness that seems to go far beyond the need to trust one another as co-performers. Although one likes to think that the performers themselves do indeed enjoy a close friendship, they are of course, in effect, performing friendship on stage.

Recent discussions about the nature of friendship are helpful for understanding what is taking place in these pieces. Writer and theorist Maurice Blanchot observes: 'I think one knows when friendship ends with a disagreement ... but does one know when it begins? Friendship does not begin with a bolt from the blue, but rather, little by little,

the slow work of time. We were friends and we didn't know it' (cited Critchley 1999: 256). In this view, friendship is about trust, and about taking responsibility for one's relation with an other. One of the disturbing things about *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* is that the piece ends in a disagreement that makes one question the kinds of egalitarian sharing that, until then, it had seemed to promote. What Bel and Klunchun seem to have, instead, is what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls a 'pure relationship'. Developing this idea from Antony Giddens's discussion of working relations within the global communications systems of C21st industries, Bauman characterises these as expedient, short-term relationships in which partners have little long term commitment to one another, only maintaining their relation as long as he or she is deriving satisfaction or benefit from it. He argues that 'pure relationships' are symptomatic of the destabilising effects on society of capitalism in its current, globalised form. The context of *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* is that of C21st globalisation. Bel's initial visit to Bangkok to meet and work with Klunchun and their subsequent international tours together performing the piece exemplify the global circulation of immaterial goods within the so-called knowledge economy. Because what is at issue here is both personal and political, this paper uses postcolonial theory and recent discussions about the ethics of friendship to investigate why some Asian dance artists are required to carry the 'burden of representation' while others seem to evade it.

Pichet Klunchun and Myself was commissioned by the Singaporean artistic director Tang Fu Kuen for the Bangkok Arts Festival in 2004. In it, Bel and Klunchun, dressed in casual clothes, sit opposite one another on stage and have a conversation in which they exchange information about their work. It begins with Bel asking Klunchun questions about himself and his art form and develops into demonstrations by Klunchun and a short on-stage lesson for Bel. During the performance that I saw in November 2007, I thought I detected a little impatience coming from Klunchun at some of Bel's

questions, not least the fact that all Bel had done to research Khon before their meeting was to read about it in a popular tourist guidebook. When Klunchun demonstrates dance material for Bel, he reluctantly accompanies himself in an English translation of what a singer would ordinarily recite for him in Thai during a Khon performance. They then swap roles and Klunchun, in turn, asks Bel about his work, starting with the same questions that Bel had previously asked him. Despite the efforts Klunchun had made to accommodate Bel's requests, when Klunchun asks him to show something in return, Bel doesn't want to. He says that he himself doesn't dance much now and his recent works are all performed by others. After Klunchun shames him into showing something, Bel reverts to his familiar 'bad boy' role, revelling in his ability to wittily subvert expectations. At one moment, when Bel shows him part of *The Show Must Go On*, Klunchun expresses his amazement that all Bel does is to dance along to David Bowie's song 'Let's Dance' as if he were in a discotheque. Anybody could do that, Klunchun complains; why should people pay money to see it? Bel proudly replies that people sometimes walk out and demand their money back. He explains how he understands the positioning of the avant-garde artist in the European subsidised art world. In his view, making experimental work is a kind of research that aims to produce something new and unprecedented.

As I have already mentioned, the piece ends abruptly. Bel's early, breakthrough piece *Jérôme Bel* is performed by four naked dancers. When Bel begins to take off his trousers to show something from this, Klunchun stops him. He doesn't wish to see nakedness, he explains, because it is against his cultural values. Bel says he has seen semi naked girls in Bangkok bars. Klunchun observes that they are working for Western customers, not for Thai ones. Klunchun says he has no more questions. With this unresolved, confrontational atmosphere still lingering, they both walk off stage and the

piece comes to an end. It is as if the friendship that they had seemed to enjoy during the performance was much less grounded than it had appeared.

One would not know from the performance that Klunchun had previously spent seven months visiting the US to investigate Western modern dance including a stay at UCLA and performances at the American Dance Festival at Duke University. Even before his encounter with Bel, Klunchun had already begun developing a pioneering contemporary approach to Thai dance. None of this is mentioned in the piece. Instead, in a significant early exchange, Klunchun explains that he began dancing to honour a God to whom his mother had prayed to ask to become pregnant with a boy, and that Khon dancers historically are servants of the King of Thailand. Bel retorts that in his country, France, they cut off the head of their King. Thailand appears from this exchange to be a country rooted in ancient traditions and superstitions, while France has for over two hundred years been a secular democracy. There is currently, in the summer of 2012, a world-wide shortage of computer hard drives because these are made in Thailand and many of the factories in which they are manufactured were badly affected by disastrous floods in October and November 2011. This is far from the idea of Thailand as a land of traditional values that is conveyed by *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*. Instead the East West binary is reinforced at several points in the piece.

Susan Foster notes that 'the dialogue between [Bel and Klunchun] makes over the inequalities between their histories as dancers. It suggests that each artist and art form has had equal access to the world stage, whereas the vast majority of funding and visibility for concert dance are generated from within Europe and the US' (Foster 2011: 203). It is as if Bel believes that by deciding to place them both side by side and giving them equal time and space, this will make them equal. This conception of equality has its roots in the Enlightenment. The French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* from 1789 states that men are born free and remain free and equal of rights. Since then

complex problems concerning human rights have often emerged which suggest that declaring equality is not always sufficient. There are factors at work in *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* that operate at levels which are not affected by such enlightened decisions. I am not just referring here to the often unconscious affects of Orientalist ideologies that seem to make the East West binary seem natural. The performance of friendship, which I have suggested plays an important role in the piece, also functions outside the scope of conscious decision-making. Maurice Blanchot, whose discussions about friendship I have already mentioned, suggests that making friends takes time and is generally the consequence of a passive or unconscious decision. It is as if something in a person that one has known for a while calls one to respond to them and acknowledge that a friendship has developed. In his essay on friendship, Blanchot draws on the ideas of his friend the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas who argues that it is a fundamental human response to acknowledge the needs of another and put these before one's own needs without the other even needing to ask for anything. This call from the other is one that precedes any decision. Blanchot argues that friendship 'is not a gift, it is not a form of generosity. Rather it is an incommensurate relation of one to the other as the outside, drawing near in its separateness and inaccessibility' (ref). It is the performance of this kind of friendship, I suggest, that can be found in pieces like *Counting to 100*, *Gustavia*, and *Zero Degrees*. In *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*, Bel's responsibilities towards Klunchun as his friend should have made him recognise the need to deconstruct the East West binary and to help Klunchun escape the burden of representation. The failure to do this reveals the expedient, short-term nature of their relationship which they appear to abandon when it becomes clear that they are no longer deriving satisfaction or benefit from it.

If this goes some way towards explaining why Klunchun has to carry the burden of representation in his piece with Bel, it doesn't explain the circumstances in which it is

possible to evade it. To explore this question I will briefly look at the way the East West binary operates in Akram Khan's *Zero Degrees*, conscious of the fact that Royona Mitra will be saying more about Khan's work in her paper later this morning. *Zero Degrees* consists of a series of danced interactions between Akram Khan and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui that are interspersed with sections in which Khan narrates a story about a recent visit to Bangladesh – the country from which his grandparents had emigrated to Britain. Khan is a charismatic, virtuoso dancer who trained as a child in the Classical Indian dance style Kathak, and in his early teens performed the role of the Child in Peter Brook's famous production of the Mahabaratha. He then went to University to study contemporary dance. Cherkaoui is also a highly acclaimed dancer and choreographer whose artistic development was initially fostered by Alain Platel, a Belgian choreographer and founder of the Ballets C de l B. Platel's approach to dance theatre was strongly influenced by that of Pina Bausch. Both Cherkaoui and Khan were born in Europe to immigrant families with an Islamic background, and both share a fascination with Sufi poetry and music.

Khan has said he found the experience of learning contemporary dance while already having a deep knowledge of Kathak left him with feelings of bodily confusion. When working with contemporary-trained dancers in his company, he says he has sometimes used this sense of confusion as a methodology for generating a new movement vocabulary, although he insists his intention is not to create an intercultural fusion. There is no fusion of dance styles in *Zero Degrees*. Khan performs some Kathak solos, Cherkaoui dances in an extremely fragmented, sometimes violent way, and there are some fast, often tense duets. There are also sections in which they interact with, or manipulate two white, life-sized, articulated casts of their bodies made for them by the British sculptor Anthony Gormley. Whereas in *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* the East West split is figured in the difference between Bel and Klunchun, in *Zero Degrees* it is

presented through Khan himself who narrates his experiences, as a western-born and educated young man, of a train journey between Bangladesh and India. During this, he finds himself witnessing a man dying in his railway carriage. As Lorna Saunders explains: 'Against Khan's will, his cousin and travel companion advises him not to get involved as his is a 'foreign' witness, in order to avoid bureaucratic hassle' (S website etc.). In the story, Khan's trauma was caused by his inability to help the companion of the dead man. In Levinas's terms, he was unable to respond to the call of the other's needs. Khan's cousin, however, fulfils the responsibilities of friendship in a situation whose implications he knew that Khan didn't fully understand. On stage, Cherkaoui also fulfils the role of friendship through being a witness to Khan's need to retell his story. Because Cherkaoui has also grown up in the West in an immigrant family, he is in a position to appreciate nuances that white, Western spectators might not completely grasp. Both the cousin and Cherkaoui, however, relate to Khan from positions of difference – the cousin as a Bangladeshi, Cherkaoui as a Belgian. Blanchot proposes that, in friendship, the outside draws near from a position of separateness and inaccessibility. In *Zero Degrees*, the difference between East and West is this incommensurable relation, with Cherkaoui performing the role of drawing near. This complicates the ideologically created gap so that East and West can no longer be comprehended in the simplistic, binary terms dictated by Orientalist discourse. This is why Khan is not required to carry the burden of representation. Because the piece stages an acceptance of responsibilities that precede any conscious act of decision-making, it begins to resonate with questions about the ethics of human relations. In *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*, however, Klunchun is confined by the piece's conceptual structure so that he only appears to be dealing with issues and concerns of a particular national community. The assumption here is that these could not be of interest to outsiders whereas, because of globalisation, events in Thailand like the recent floods actually have consequences for the rest of the world.

In conclusion, the popularity of pieces like *Counting to 100*, *Gustavia*, and *Zero Degrees* is partly because the way they present friendship resonates with the kinds of concerns that Zygmunt Bauman and others are raising about the social effects of globalisation. Jérôme Bel is an important choreographer who has made some of the most influential dance works of the last two decades. Much of the popularity of *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*, I suggest, lies in the fact that he himself performs in it; but, for reasons I have discussed, it remains a troubling work. At a time when economic and political power is shifting from Europe to China and the Pacific Asian region, it is important that people from Europe and Asia find new and better ways of drawing closer with one another while respecting their differences. While dance collaborations have a potential to help develop new understandings, *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* shows us how not to go about doing this.