



Performed Promiscuities: Interpreting Interculturalism in the Japan Foundation Asia Centre's *LEAR*

Helena Grehan

I feel we have entered a world of immense communicability, in which artists especially, who are always sensitive to communication systems, wish to be 'promiscuous' with their cultural influences, as indeed they always have been.[\[1\]](#)

R. Schechner

1. The intercultural 'canon' has become the site from which to critique or engage with both the terms and the many diverse artistic practices that Interculturalism encompasses. The first major contemporary[\[2\]](#) intercultural projects were created by Brook, Barba, Mnouchkine, Suzuki and Wilson. Whilst these were initially generally well received, they have come to symbolise, most particularly Brook's *Mahabarata*, much of what is problematic about interculturalism. Theorists such as Chin, Bennett, Bharucha and Pavis use these early works to interrogate the paradigm and question notions of exchange and translation.[\[3\]](#) Issues of control over representation, cultural borrowing and 'fascination and obsession'[\[4\]](#) are pored over in terms of the use of intercultural elements in performance. Definitions are continually proposed and whilst they are often quite divergent in aims and objectives most emphasise the importance of power and responsibility. Julie Stone Peters in her paper entitled 'Intercultural Performance, Theatre Anthropology, and the Imperialist Critique,' talks about the 'loaded political subtext'[\[5\]](#) of certain intercultural performances and goes on to challenge much of the existing intercultural theory. Stone Peters questions the implications of a theory or set of theories that critiques work on the basis of its authenticity or adherence to notions of cultural purity. She asks us to consider whether there can ever be a 'pure' cultural product and challenges the debate by pointing to some of the fraudulent claims to cultural authenticity or lack thereof which Intercultural projects can imply. 'If orientalism (representation of the foreign as a fixed and uniform set of cultural features) means dangerous stereotyping, so does the claim for "authenticity".[\[6\]](#) This critique also raises the question of who defines whether a work is acceptable as an 'authentic' product or not, and urges us to move beyond the authentic/non-authentic binary opposition in terms of engagement with cross-cultural and intra-cultural works.
2. Surely, it must be possible in the wake of the large body of theory on the concept of interculturalism that work can now be considered in terms of the ways in which it fuses

cultural elements through representation rather than whether it adheres to a predetermined notion of authenticity or not? How in fact can a process that necessitates some form of cultural translation or hybridisation be critiqued in terms of its degree of authenticity? I understand that there needs to be a level of respect for certain cultural symbols and that the practitioner who engages in intercultural practice should be cognisant of the reasons for their desire to create a particular cultural fusion. I do believe, however, that the focus should be realigned and should rest on notions of exchange and representation rather than authenticity and purity - a shift Stone Peters begins to evoke toward the end of her paper when she says:

When Chaudhuri questions whether theatrical 'barter' is 'truly egalitarian,' asking whether there is 'something of the "glass-beads-for-land" model of exchange at work here,' her analogy is a false one, for the question is not about objects, but about representations. And cultural representations, unlike either beads or land, can be borrowed without anyone missing them or attempting to retrieve them at gunpoint; they have the grace (like human beings) to be fruitful and multiply without much training, and they have the good sense (also like human beings) to transform themselves in the process.[\[7\]](#)

3. Whilst I admire the ways in which Stone Peters exposes the contradictory elements of much existing Intercultural theory and I agree with her desire to realign the focus of the debate, I am slightly perplexed by her conclusion that 'representations ... can be borrowed without anyone missing them.' I think that representation is a more loaded concept than Stone Peters appears to suggest and I question its ability to be borrowed so easily. Considering the fact that for many marginalised groups achieving an initial space for representation is a complex and ongoing process, the efficacy of borrowing and utilising representation without it being missed is, I would argue, naïve.[\[8\]](#)
4. In terms of analysing Interculturalism within a performance/theatre paradigm the issue of representation is of course key, as theatre and performance play pivotal roles in providing a space for marginalised and often un-represented or invisible groups to present and re-present themselves. Whilst I am not arguing that visibility necessarily results in empowerment it can begin a process of questioning on behalf of both performer and spectator.[\[9\]](#) In fact the reason I believe that much existing intercultural work has been called into account is because of a past tendency to perhaps borrow representations too lightly. I am not suggesting however, that a return to a focus on authenticity be established. I am instead arguing that it is necessary for cultural producers to adopt a certain degree of responsibility with regard to the material being utilised.
5. To extend the discussion regarding authenticity a little further I would like to examine an example presented by James Clifford in his book *Routes: Travel and Translation in the late Twentieth Century*.[\[10\]](#) Clifford argues, through a detailed critical reading of an exhibition that depicted the lives of the Waghi Valley inhabitants in Papua New Guinea, entitled *Paradise*, that the mediation of traditional (read authentic) with contemporary lifestyle elements is complex and deserves close attention (on the part of the spectator) before making any potentially binaristic comments about the relationships between traditional and contemporary cultural influences. What comes across clearly is that making statements, which either condemn or celebrate the impact of contemporary culture on the Waghi Valley is a fraught activity. As Clifford argues: 'the exhibit shows the people of highland New Guinea producing their own fusion of tradition and modernity. The Waghi make their own history, though not in conditions of their choosing.'[\[11\]](#) Clifford's example emphasises the fact that authenticity is a concept which needs to be re-defined as something which is not static and singular but rather is fluid and carries different attendant ideological signals for different groups.

6. This position, like that of Stone Peters highlights the difficulties of making definitions or claims regarding the representation of cultural products. If, as spectators or critics, we wish to reify either the contemporary or the traditional (a fraught activity to say the least) we run the risk of becoming the verifiers of authenticity. We must raise the question of our own responsibility within the frame. What is authentic and important for me may have no significance for other spectators. So whose point is important: that of the cultural producer, as in the case of the Waghi Valley inhabitants creating their own fusion, or the spectator, the person who views the Waghi Valley *Paradise* exhibition?
7. In terms of the argument of this paper then, if I am to adhere to my own criticism I must scrutinise my position as spectator/participant in terms of my analysis of *LEAR*. As Rustom Bharucha argues, the theorist must outline the parameters of exchange in each intercultural moment. 'No theory or ritual of Interculturalism can begin, to my mind, without confronting the politics of its location.' [12] My point is that to define or categorise something as complex as *LEAR* as an 'inter-cultural' performance work[13] certain parameters in terms of interpretation for me as a theorist/spectator are immediately set up. Therefore it is vital, in this regard, that I continue to acknowledge and interrogate the specificities of my position as a Western spectator so that my responses to *LEAR* and indeed, the discussion about the parameters of Interculturalism addressed here, are seen as solely that - my own - and not as universal or definitive in any sense.
8. What is clear from analysis of Intercultural theory is the difficulty, if not impossibility of arriving at a definition that is viable for more than the particular performer/spectator interaction in question. This argument is reinforced through my use of the Clifford example, in the sense that culture is complex and continuously defined and redefined and to make either/or claims denies the complexity of the terrain. Yet one should not shy away from engagement because of its often transitory or fragile nature. In fact, works like *LEAR* provide valuable opportunities for theorists and critics to question the parameters of interculturalism and to acknowledge that, despite the complexity of the issues involved, some attempt must be made to engage with the issues of representation and exchange that surround interculturalism. However, if defining Interculturalism is always provisional outside of particular works then perhaps the focus should be on the process of definition rather than solely on the term per se. The ideas of exchange and translation are fluid and ever evolving, and, therefore Interculturalism is defined precisely by the fact that its parameters change in each application.[14]
9. *LEAR* is a collaborative project that fuses the ideas of a Japanese feminist playwright and a contemporary Singaporean director - practitioners who wanted to use the play to make both a feminist statement and a comment on the concept of 'new Asia.' Ong Keng Sen states, in his notes for the *LEAR* program, that he wanted to question tradition and to recast it as a progressive concept. '[T]radition is perhaps best seen as a continuum rather than a monolith.'[15] *King Lear* was chosen as a work of 'universal significance' which did not bias any of the six cultures involved in the project. Ong Keng Sen states in the program that it is 'an inter-cultural project' in which he wished the cultures to exist together 'not in an amalgam which would reduce their difference,' but he wanted them to present their differences through the production resulting in a *LEAR* which 'no one culture should be able to understand ... in its entirety.'[16] With its polyfusion of cultural symbols, from the Noh Old Man and Mother to the Chinese Opera-singing older daughter and the Thai younger daughter, each of the performers brought cultural, gender and performative specificities to the work.

10. To what does *LEAR* mean after all of this? Is it a pastiche of cultural elements, which are loosely based on a canonical text? If it is a work that has little relevance to old canons but is of heavy importance for a re-imagining of Asia, a work which careers towards what Ong Keng Sen calls 'new Asia,'[17] then how can this be read by a contemporary Western Australian audience? How can one be an active spectator when so much of the encoded meanings of a play are 'foreign' or outside my frame of reference. How can I engage without resorting to what Susan Bennett calls 'fascination and obsession'? If this play is about a 'new Asia' and the ways in which this new concept needs to embrace difference, is my engagement with the play (due to my inability to access, or my lack of knowledge of this 'new Asia') an act of spectatorial intercultural appropriation in itself? I understand all the theory underpinning the politics of difference, but I wonder about this work which emerged from those theoretical underpinnings; a work which focuses on moving on and embracing a new paradigm - a new paradigm within which the focus is on similarities and points of connection, whilst at the same time the power of differences within an emerging 'new Asia' are begun to be acknowledged - an Asia where there perhaps needs to be an exploration of difference in the face of imposed homogenisation. Yet I continue to question whether my position as critic and spectator is valid. What am I looking at/for? Do I want to engage with the work on the grounds of its intercultural-ness or do I want to be moved, challenged and inspired by a contemporary performance piece? Can these even be separated in this context? I have to admit that whilst my primary focus is on the performance and the techniques used, the question of the intercultural nature of the project cannot be erased from the back of my mind.

11. Whilst I can highlight the problematics of the theoretical frame 'interculturalism' and I can ask the question: where is the KING in the *LEAR* presented? I wonder if this line of questioning is in itself imposing an 'anglo' desire for authenticity on a work that sits outside my frame of reference. Yes, it could be argued that *King Lear* was chosen as a marketing strategy because the use of a universally significant work provided a guarantee of audience. I think, however, that this is a shallow ploy as Rio Kishida and Ong Keng Sen do not need Shakespeare's *King Lear* to be attractive to audiences. Their own reputations as sophisticated and innovative practitioners are enough. I think instead that *LEAR* was chosen because of the ways in which it could be used to interrogate feminist themes as well as the concept of 'new Asia.' As Theatre Critic, Ken Murrai suggests, 'Ong's and Kishida's invention of this role [the mother] represents a proposal to create a culture that allows differences to coexist while preserving their difference.'[18] In terms of the often-criticised choice of a universal text Stone Peters argues:

The critique of productions with universalist overtones fails to acknowledge that communication across distances relies on recognition not only of differences, but also of sameness. Indeed, what is marked as the same is inevitably also different, or the marking of sameness would have no meaning. When the critique of 'universalism' extends itself to the critique of all identification of samenesses across distance, the notion of difference itself becomes meaningless.[19]

12. This brings me to another important point which is, that within a theatrical or performative frame it is redundant to yearn for or attempt to categorise cultural production within the narrow confines of a presupposed notion of authenticity. For the role of theatre, and particularly contemporary performance, the form which I would argue *LEAR* is most closely aligned with, is particularly concerned with exploding boundaries, moving beyond the confines of prescribed parameters, questioning norms and most importantly challenging the very concept of representation. Performance provides an unstable, fluid and shifting site within which to challenge static concepts like authenticity and cultural boundedness. It is a

site for the constant negotiation and renegotiation of positions. Performance moves away from characterisation and mimetic form and focuses instead on 'dismantling textual authority, illusionism, and the canonical actor in favour of the polymorphous body of the performer.'[\[20\]](#) It is a space in which the spectator becomes, as Diana Taylor suggests, 'a witness' but not a silent witness. Witnessing, according to Taylor, 'presupposes that looking across borders is always performative: it works within an economy of looks and in a scenario where positions-subject/object, see-er/seen are constantly in flux, responding to each other.'[\[21\]](#)

13. As a critical spectator or perhaps 'witness' to this performance of *LEAR* there is much to marvel at, to stimulate, or perhaps to use to concretise my position as one of constant fluctuation. For example, the beautiful use of sound and music, the breathtaking use of cloth backdrops, the eerie lighting which shone up through the set floor like laser beams. The sparse set design with a focus on the essential elements of performance, costume and lighting. The fantastic range of sounds from the high pitched sounds of the Chinese Opera singer to the low base tones of the Noh Old Man. All a veritable feast of spectacle, but what of the play you might ask? Where does *King Lear* fit within this process? Is spectacle enough? And is there evidence of cultural exchange? With each performer using his/her own language, there could have easily been no points of connection. Just a cacophony of cultural difference. However, for a western spectator there were the English surtitles, sparse yet beautiful, to guide the narrative and emotional flows.[\[22\]](#)
14. The first scene sets the tenor for a production that resonates with cultural difference yet at the same time tentatively presents this spectator with an invitation to participate. The lights are down in the theatre, shadows are cast, shadows of an Old Man, searching, wandering. As he walks around, inhabiting the performance space his long shadow creeps across the bodies and faces of the spectators seated in the balconies of the theatre. 'Who am I?' he asks as his presence is inscribed upon us. 'I was sleeping in the terror of a nightmare I cannot recall,' we are immediately implicated in the story, drawn in, powerfully summoned to come to the assistance of this character. This performance style, merging minimalism in terms of both set and characterisation draws on the techniques of contemporary performance, stripping *King Lear* back so that what emerges is a performance work that has resonances for a contemporary audience. A performance that highlights universal themes - death, life and power and most particularly a work that imbricates the spectator into its process. For example, in scene sixteen the Old Man calls upon his dead wife. His voice is heard, 'I can hear memories deep within me, my wife is resurrected I will go on living.' The narrative is hauntingly sparse yet effective, and continues in this vein. For me the powerful, and at times overwhelming, emotion of the piece comes through the combination of this sparsity and the often-dissonant use of vocal sounds. The performance ends with the older daughter lonely and alone searching for an escape from the 'uninhabited kingdom.' The ghost of her mother appears and 'dances like a bird,' the bird of freedom that continually evades the older daughter. The older daughter, defeated, murmurs 'Who is behind me? Who is behind me?' and the performance is over. I am left feeling sad yet the power of the work resonates with me long after the final scene.[\[23\]](#)
15. As a critical spectator/witness, however, scepticism is always a factor in engagement. Whilst on one level, I was almost totally absorbed in the work, on another I want to know, to be assured that this project is different from the *Mahabarata*, despite my problematising of notions of authenticity earlier in this paper. Questions about the nature of the exchange linger, for example; could the performers understand one another? Was this project an exchange? After the performance I read the background material scouring for proof and I

found out that whilst translators were used to facilitate exchange and the project did involve frustrations (in this regard) for the director and performers, the participants felt moved by the work after its Tokyo season. Yet there is no cleansing sentence or statement to act as a panacea for my concerns and I wonder why, if authenticity is problematic, I still need to feel the performers understood, or had access to some kind of singular theme or essence within the performance. Even if they did, given the huge cultural differences would I have noticed?

16. I have learned from discussions with Abdul Gani Karim, who performed the role of the Retainer, that the production required some degree of translation or mediation of many of the traditional practices involved. With this information in mind then, to return to Schechner, whose comment on 'promiscuity' inspired the title of this paper, there appears to have been some 'promiscuity' with cultural influences, although it also appears that this promiscuity may have pivoted around a central icon of NOH which did not/was not altered. But saying this seems dangerous as it pushes me back to contradict my argument about authenticity on the one hand but on the other it could smack of an Orwellian trope and ultimately I must ask what this speculation achieves? Does it make a comment about agendas or does it urge me to point out that even if there was a degree of Orwellian control would it have made any difference in terms of my reception of the work?
17. Perhaps, then, what *LEAR* asks is not about the validity or authenticity of cultural exchange, but the need to reframe the role of the spectator in response - so that attention is not removed from the beauty of the fusions and spectacle of representation to potentially outmoded questions about essentialism and authenticity. Rather that the focus remains on the dynamics that result or may result from new kinds of cultural fusions.

Endnotes

[1] R. Schechner, cited in P. Pavis, *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 49.

[2] Intercultural exchanges have occurred and been documented in both Western and non-Western theatre since the beginning of this century. It is not, however, the focus of this paper to provide an historical record of the process, rather, my aim is to question what the term might mean in a contemporary performative context, particularly with reference to the Japan Asia Foundation Asia Centre's *LEAR* project.

[3] D. Chin, 'Interculturalism, Postmodernism, Pluralism,' in *Interculturalism and Performance: Writings from PAJ*, ed. B. Marranca and G. Dasgupta, New York: PAJ, 1991, pp.83-95; Rustom Bharucha, 'A View from India,' in *Peter Brook and the Mahabharata: Critical Perspectives*, ed. D. Williams, London: Routledge, 1991, pp.228-52; Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences* London: Routledge, 1997; P. Pavis (ed.), *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, London: Routledge, 1996; Bharucha, *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1993; E. Fischer-Lichte, et al. (eds), *The Dramatic Touch of Difference: Theatre, Own and Foreign*, Tübingen: Günter Narr Verlag, 1990.

[4] Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, 2nd edition, London: Routledge, 1997.

[5] Julie Stone Peters, 'Intercultural Performance, Theatre Anthropology, and the Imperialist Critique: Identities, Inheritances, and Neo-Orthodoxies,' in *Imperialism and Theatre*, ed. J. Ellen Gainor, London: Routledge, 1995, pp.199-213.

[6] Stone Peters, 'Intercultural Performance,' p. 205.

[7] Stone Peters, 'Intercultural Performance,' p. 211.

[8] This area has been thoroughly theorised in terms of both feminist and postcolonial theory. See for example: R. Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994; bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from*

Margin to Center, Boston: South End Press, 1990; Gloria Anzaldua, *Making Face, Making Soul Hacienda Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990; Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson, *De-Scribing Empire*, London: Routledge, 1994.

[9] The issue of representation in performance is a complex one. For an interesting assessment of the assumptions implicit in much theorisation of the relationships between representation, visibility and empowerment see Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, New York: Routledge, 1993.

[10] James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997.

[11] Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, p. 161.

[12] Bharucha, *Theatre and the World*, p. 240.

[13] In the program notes the play's Director, Ong Keng Sen defines the project as 'inter-cultural.'

[14] For me, one area that is intensely interesting is the intersection of postmodernity and interculturalism, or questioning how they infuse one another. Can interculturalism be seen as an element of postmodern theatre? If interculturalism is about some form of cultural exchange, in which, due to the existing canon, the exchangers must be careful to acknowledge their positions and aims in order to avoid the label cultural tourists or appropriators, then how does this exchange differ from an act of postmodern pastiche, for example? Surely postmodernism is about the fusion of cultural forms or elements - is this not also what interculturalism is about? In fact could postmodernism's deconstruction of theories of authenticity not be employed to the enhancement of interculturalism? As Schechner argues (in discussing the work of Native Canadian visual artists) the use of 'bricolage' is an important tool in terms of cultural representation as it signifies not 'slavish imitation' but 'transmutation, transformation.' See R. Schechner, cited in P. Pavis, *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, p. 49. However, whilst intercultural theatre and postmodern theatre certainly overlap and share many of the same techniques, including bricolage, pastiche and deconstruction, not all intercultural theatre or performance can be described as postmodern. The question is an interesting one that continues to perplex me; however, it is one I cannot adequately address here.

[15] Ong Keng Sen, *LEAR Program*, Perth: Festival of Perth Publication, 1999, p. 6.

[16] Ong Keng Sen, *LEAR Program*, p. 6.

[17] Ong Keng Sen, *LEAR Program*, p. 6.

[18] Ken Murrai, *Asia Centre News*, vol. 7, no. 3, (Winter 1997).

[19] Stone Peters, 'Intercultural Performance,' p. 207.

[20] E. Diamond, *Performance and Cultural Politics*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 3.

[21] Diana Taylor, 'Border Watching,' in *The Ends of Performance*, ed. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane, New York: New York University Press, 1998, p. 183.

[22] I am not suggesting that as a spectator I was reliant on the surtitles to understand the work. The process was not literal in that sense. I was able to move between the set, the action and the surtitles to gain an understanding of what was happening.

[23] For a feminist reading of the role of the Older Daughter (and the female characters in general) within the performance see Jenny de Reuck's article in this issue of *Intersections*, "[The mirror shattered into tiny pieces": Reading Gender and Culture in the Japan Foundation Asia Centre's LEAR.](#)"

This paper was originally published in *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, with the assistance of Murdoch University.

This page has been optimised for 800x600 and is best viewed in either Netscape 2 or above, or Explorer 2 or above.

From February 2008, this paper has been republished in *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* from the following URL:

intersections.anu.edu.au/issue3/grehan.html.

HTML last modified: 17 March 2008 1325 by [Carolyn Brewer](#).

© [Copyright](#)