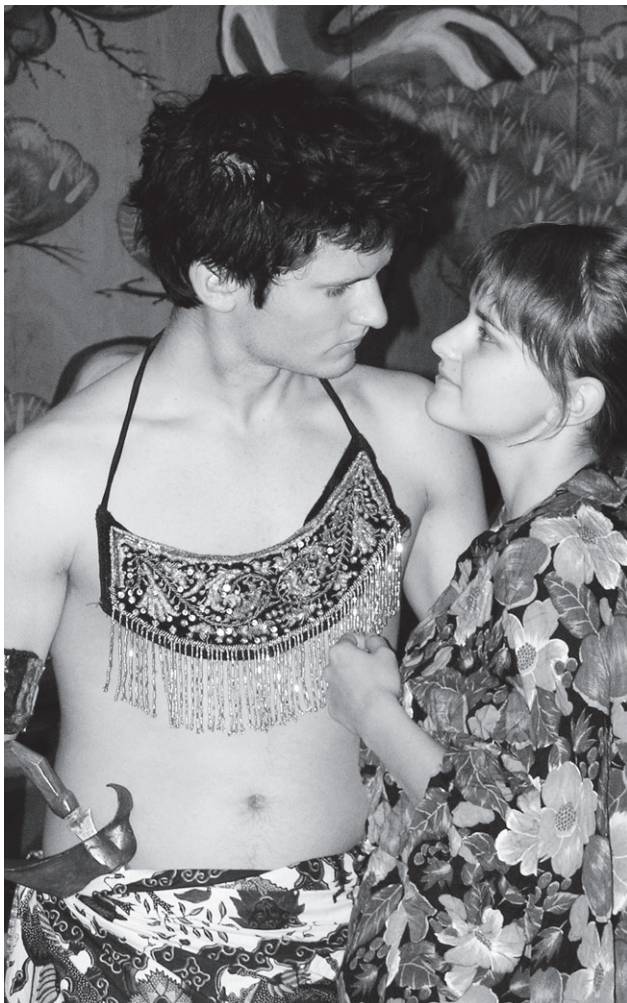


# Asian performing arts in the academy



models for hybrid cultural production to non-Europeans. Much can also be said about the introduction of drama into colonial school curriculum and the rise of scripted drama in Myanmar and India, tourism and its impact on dance in Bali and islands of the Pacific. And so on.

A global approach has a certain appeal in higher education – as it potentially allows students to make connections to Asian performance via the known and familiar. An exclusive emphasis in the curriculum on globalisation runs the risk, however, of reifying dominant stereotypes of the dynamic West and receptive/passive East. Furthermore, it over-values and exaggerates the prominence of cultural production looking to global markets, which is precisely the sort of Asian performance that gets reported in the press, tours internationally and under-values folk and ritual arts embedded in local communities, ecologies and spiritual economies. By overly emphasising global arts, we risk forgetting the particularity of localised expressive forms, and thereby thematise otherness as sameness.

Take the case of *Barikan*, a *wayang kulit* ritual drama. *Barikan* is a shadow play performed annually in a score of villages in the Cirebon area of West Java and addresses local malignant spirits (who become characters in the play) in order to ward off illness and other threats to communities. It is possible to discuss *Barikan* in light of global concerns – a 1994 performance by the puppeteer Basari that I have translated, for example, references AIDS (Basari 1998). There is historical evidence that early 20th century performances addressed global epidemics prevalent at that time as well, including cholera. But such a hermeneutic lens potentially deprives the event of what makes it interesting to local performers and audiences, which is the making present in the here-and-now of the normally intangible and abstract and removed. *Barikan* does not exist 'because of' AIDS or cholera, but it provides one mode for addressing fears and concerns about the unknown and an opportunity for puppeteers to reflect upon relations between the mundane and the supernatural in terms of a local cosmology. Chalking off *Barikan* to folk medicine diminishes its significance to speak across a variety of registers (symbolic and practical) and does not grant it the flexibility to address new, emergent issues that is required if it is to be maintained as a traditional art in a local context of production.

Grouping Asia's performing arts together is what Gayatri Spivak calls a 'strategic essentialism'. Europe's performing arts have historically had more cohesion than their Asian counterparts. The reason why we might want to cluster such different forms as Japanese *nihon buyo* dance, Mongolian throat singing and Malaysian *bangsawan* theatre, Matthew Cohen argues, is not because these heterogeneous genres share essential characteristics commonly imputed to Asian arts such as spirituality, audience participation, stylisation and inter-mediality. Rather, that Asian performing arts taken as a whole can impact on Eurocentrist beliefs and practices.

Matthew Isaac Cohen

Fig. 1 (above)  
*The Law of Java*, an 1822 English-language melodrama, performed by second year Royal Holloway drama students on the *noh* stage of the Handa Noh Theatre in 2006.

Fig. 2 (right)  
Performance of *Cungkring Nyaleg* (Cungkring Runs for Office) by *wayang kulit* puppeteer Anom Purjadi in Cengkoak, Cirebon, 2009. Images courtesy of the author.

## Globalisation and popular theatre

Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei, in an article about Asian theatre studies in American academia, writes that: 'Asian theatre, whatever and wherever it is, remains the ultimate Other, unknowable, unlearnable, unfathomable. The languages are imagined to be indecipherable; [...] cultural values and historical context are totally alien; performers are trained from birth, so why bother to teach an impossible discipline?' (Sorgenfrei 2006: 220).

In part to counteract this dominant stereotype, the trend has been to think about Asian performing arts in terms of global systems of production and consumption. We have seen studies that theorise relations between *kabuki* and Shakespeare and analyse modern systems of performer training that emerged in late colonial Asia. Much work still needs to be done on international touring circuits that brought opera, music hall and circus to cities and towns around the world. These circuits provided an economic prop for European culture, integrated novel acts and performers from around the world and offered

The other danger in stressing global frames of reference is that an emphasis on commonality and shared experience potentially drains the interest of students in non-Western arts. European students are commonly drawn to our courses and workshops on non-European performance because we offer alternatives from realist theatre and film. Asian performance in the student imagination means flashy costumes and bright makeup, stylised iconography, exacting psychophysical discipline, evocations of unseen worlds and spirits and performance structures promoting group process over individual psychology. Students seem, in general, not to like studying non-European theatres too similar to their own popular theatre.

## Ritual theatre and social contexts

Ritualised Asian performance, in contrast to popular theatre, has an exotic cachet in academic culture. One of the icons of my department is the *noh* stage of the Handa Noh Studio Theatre, which was originally constructed for a visiting *noh* theatre troupe that played the 1991 Japan Festival, advertised as 'the biggest festival devoted to the arts and history of a foreign country ever to be presented in the UK'. Undergraduate student admission forms often cite the existence of the *noh* theatre as one of the reasons why students desire to study drama at Royal Holloway. This interest, however, does not translate directly into student numbers in the *noh* theatre course and while the stage is regularly used for student performances, it is rare that independent student productions are based in a *noh* performance style. In other words, students like the idea of having proximity to *noh* theatre, but don't feel compelled to enter into it. For most students of my department, the *noh* stage is more fetish object than enabler of performance.

If I then resist the tendency to globalise Asian theatre in academic contexts, and am even more wary of exoticising or fetishising Asia, what do I identify as viable modes for handling Asian theatre and other performing arts in the classroom?

One possibility is to take a cue from ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood's concept of 'bi-musicality.' Hood advocated a deep cultural immersion in the practical study of the performing arts of the Other and the development of performance competency to the point where one can perform and even creatively think and teach in an art form that becomes one's passion as well as one's subject of scholarship. The primary goal is not to become a professional performer, but to develop the 'chops' to understand and critique performance from within. Bi-musicality in ethnomusicology has become so dominant that it is now the common expectation that ethnomusicologists will not only write about and teach about non-Western music, they will also run ethnic ensembles in universities and community settings.

Theatre studies in Britain operates according to a different logic. Most academic drama departments encourage the development of students as 'thinking practitioners,' who can take received structures and forms and analyse these critically to create their own performances. Unmediated repetition is strongly discouraged, subversion is celebrated. This approach works to a

degree when dealing with European performance but has real problems at every level in relation to Asian theatre. Students have genuine difficulty discerning the structure and constraints on forms of work they encounter, do not know the relevant critical matrices with which to evaluate work they see and generally lack the skills to formulate a performative response. The theatre studies model is thus prone to produce pastiche, (sometimes unintentional) parody and a lack of engagement with the specificities of technique, history and culture.

We see there are real structural problems in accommodating Asian theatre in theatre study's dominant educational model of learning-through-practice. More important than learning about Asian theatre might be to experience styles of teaching and learning that characterise how Asian theatre is transmitted in situ. Educators since Plato have known that the true goal of the educator is not to 'put knowledge into souls where none was before' but rather to direct attention from the obvious and trivial to areas of genuine importance. Plato, in Book 7 of *The Republic*, allegorically uses shadow puppet theatre, a theatrical genre readily familiar to all Asianists, to explain this. The masses are chained and conditioned to watch flickering shadows projected by puppets passed before a flame, and it is the job of the educator to drag his students to look beyond the shadow images on screen and see not only the puppets that produce theatrical illusion but also the real objects (or forms) upon which they are based.

Educating students in Asian theatre means going beyond shared rapture in sumptuous displays of art, but experiencing the modes of production that go into the making of art, and the social reasons why these ways of working exist. One should, I suggest, engage with ways of instruction that correlate with how Asians learn to perform. Towards this end, for example, when I teach Indonesian theatre I sit with my students cross-legged on the floor for hours at a stretch. I encourage students to eat food and make comments when watching performance videos. I use foreign terminology and do not feel obliged to translate everything, but make students come up with their own explanations. I require them to practice skills at home, and encourage them to imitate things they see on video. I try as much as possible to bring in Indonesian practitioners, and encourage students to play in gamelan groups, for it is common for actors, dancers and puppeteers to be musicians as well.



Sometimes it is possible to accommodate the British academic model to Asia but sometimes it is patently not. I recall the case of a British puppeteer colleague who based his mode of instruction on Japanese master-disciple relations, favouring a young man who he saw had great potential as a puppet maker and performer and ignoring others. Student complaints lead to his dismissal from the teaching job – but the young man remains his faithful apprentice to the present.

Sorgenfrei writes that 'despite the apparent interest in world theatre [among non-Asianists in academic theatre departments], what they really wanted was someone able to incorporate something non-Western or non-canonical into existing Eurocentric courses. They needed to look global but wanted to remain local!' (Sorgenfrei 2006: 221).

Simply 'looking global' is not enough. I suggest that for Asian theatre to find a happy home in British academia we must strive to institute accommodations in academic culture to allow for Asian theatres to be taught and learned in a way that is true to both its social contexts and aesthetic forms. That is to say, I wish Asian theatre to be situated in an academy that is permeated by the spirit of what Japanese historian Akira Iriye calls cultural internationalism – allowing for both the expression of national sentiment and a dialogue across cultures for the sake of world peace. This is a utopian task that falls on Asian theatre academics to accomplish together.

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