

## CONFERENCE REVIEW

### **Inter-Asia Cultural Studies (IACS) Conference 2015 Undercurrents: Unearthing Hidden Social and Discursive Practices**

**Airlangga University, Surabaya, Indonesia, 7-9 August 2015**

I was propelled to review the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies (IACS) Conference 2015 partly because of my trainings in both cultural studies and drama education, and partly because of the few amazing drama and theatre works presented in the conference.

This fifth IACS Conference was organized by Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Society in collaboration with University of Indonesia and Airlangga University. The three-day conference drew together more than 350 scholars and practitioners from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, the Philippines, South Korea and Japan to share their practices and to discuss and analyze urgent issues emerging in Asia.

The conference attracted diverse topics in political movements, popular culture, urban studies, spirituality, journalism, ethnicity and multiculturalism, gender and queer studies. I was pleasantly surprised to have learnt research from a couple of concerned drama and theatre activists, academics and practitioners from Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, South Korea and, of course, Hong Kong. These research works pivoted around performance and performative acts that ranged from labour movement, heritage and history, community-based arts/performing practices to diaspora and transnationality.

### **Performance as Critical Pedagogical Projects**

Though situated in differing geographical and institutional contexts, some of these performance and drama artists or scholars share similar concerns about the social and pedagogical processes of theatrical

performances or drama works. Herlin Putri (University of Indonesia) studies how an Indonesian theatre director facilitates the theatre process with a group of return migrant workers for a documentary theatre. Orienting and developing the documentary theatre collectively and socially has given the theatre artists, labour activists, academicians and the migrant workers new roles as teacher-learners and learner-teachers, Putri argues. The social and pedagogical processes of theatre making, Putri further argues, has offered opportunities to fill in a gap in the discourse of performance as mere protest and propaganda. May Yu (Lingnan University, Hong Kong) presents her ongoing action research study that aims to establish a basic methodology for a semi-scripted community engaged theatre project using adaptations of Caryl Churchill's plays. The research initiative is propelled by concerns for the disjunction between tertiary students' knowledge acquisition and their community engagement. Being polemical is what makes Churchill's plays socially-engaging and, hence, appealing to Yu's intellectual pedagogical experiment. My research is the case study of a site-specific theatre-in-education programme in relations to the performative schooling practice. It examines how theatre scenography and the interactive drama workshops offered embodied learning experiences which could negotiate the subject disciplinary knowledge that students were trained to take up at school. Sarena Abdullah (Universiti Sains Malaysia) pictures a Malaysian art scene proliferated since the late 1990s in the Malaysian art world. The emerging art scene comes mainly from individual artists' initiatives in the forms of 'artist residences'. Some of these initiatives are community-based, non-formal arts programmes that local and regional arts educators, artists and local residents work together to provide arts and culture education for young people to map, document and understand their local history and culture.

These projects engage their target participants – community residents, young people from schools or tertiary institutions – in collaborative skill and knowledge co-production. They run in parallel to the existing reductive and simplistic (language) arts or theatre practices with the attempt to diversify and reclaim the complexity and richness of those practices.

## **Narrative Performance and Social-Political Movements**

Miseong Woo (Yonsei University), Hyunjung Lee (Nanyang Technological University) and Holly Hou (Chinese University of Hong Kong) present their cases of how performance and the theatre could open up space for the performers and the potential audiences to engage with the political. Woo examines a solo performance by a Korean adoptee growing up in the US as a case of how theatre serves as a site of narrative performance. She argues that while the actress is performing herself and her diaspora, she is defining and redefining transnationality and diasporas for herself and her audiences. Lee studies a 1979 theatre performance together with its contemporary rendition that is based on a real labour movement in a Korean textile factory where female workers protested to claim their rights to labour union. The 1979 piece was ensemble theatre using music and rituals. The first performance and the instrumental music was cassette-taped and distributed underground to union labour activists so as to allow performance anywhere. Lee explores, with this case, the history and the performative aspect of labour struggles, and how the struggles are mediated and facilitated by theatre aesthetics and the liminal theatre space. Hou brings into view a current wave of performance arts by grassroots female activists, college girls and university academicians in mainland China. These female activists write on their bodies to protest against sexual harassments, and literally occupy male toilets to campaign against gender biased policies, for instance. The performance arts have captured attentions of the mass media and the public, and raised some discussion of the long-neglected but important gender issues.

Identity is not only personal, but social and political. These projects recognize the social, political and cultural processes of theatre, live performance and performative acts and their varying aesthetics in redefining and negotiating identity in the social and the political realms. They have called forth the politics of theatre spectacle and the body as a site of practice. Hou's paper in particular has problematized the notion and the nature of performance, and raised questions of what defines theatre and audience.

## Performing the Everyday Life, Historicizing Performance Practices

Performance could be conceived beyond the theatrics to the everyday sites and practices. Listya Sarawati (Universitas Islam 45 Bekasi) conducts an ethnographic study of Hijabers Community, a group of metropolitan Muslim women who fashionably wear their hijab as a way of negotiating their metropolitan lifestyle and Islamic modesty. These metropolitan women perform their identity as they re-fashion their hijab. Cuiyan Wen (Lingnan University, Hong Kong) studies *Muyu* song, a once popular entertainment in a local Cantonese-speaking community in eastern China. Wen examines how the government-initiative of listing *Muyu* in Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) has changed the cultural form, detaching, formalizing and displacing the practice from its community by putting them on the stage.

Performances in the everyday contexts become essentially contested as it can both sustain and contest social and cultural practices. What, then, could and would applied theatre and drama practitioners, scholars and researcher who work in the performance paradigm offer to the cultural practices that tend to formalize and stabilize – a question I have raised in my own paper. Where do the critical edges of theatre and performance works lie? In the “performative society” (Kershaw 2001), what happen to the forms and the aesthetics of performance and theatre?

Glecy Atienza (University of the Philippines) and Roberto Mendoza (Manila Tytana Colleges) track the history of political theatre in the Philippines. Atienza studies a collection of political theatre texts between years 1970 and 1986 in key cities in the Philippines under martial law. Her research examines the notion and the impacts of improvisation on the current local theatre situations. The study witnesses a wide variety of aesthetics and forms from staged street play to promenade, using religious materials to everyday objects. Mendoza examines the changing positioning of political theatre and its survivals after the EDSA revolution. Under forces of globalization, Mendoza observes that history is being trivialized, and

theatre production is prompted into culture of business, festival and tourism. Together, Atienza's and Mendoza's papers historicise political theatre in the Philippines and their works bear witness to a flowering of aesthetics and forms in the post-martial law era that has gone in opposite directions from that under the martial law.

To historicize practices is to place them within the larger social and political world among other social and discursive practices, and at the same time to trace their trajectory along past practices so as to tease out their specificity and development. Works from Wen, Atienza and Mendoza, in particular, historicize the theatrical or performance forms and practices in the wider institutional contexts – ICH, academy and tourism. Their research work reveal forces of globalization, professionalism, institutionalization, normalization at work, and how those forces contest or sustain the practices of drama and theatre.

## **Reflections and Actions**

These drama and theatre research work presented in the IACS Conference 2015 offer a glimpse of how the presenters (re)define and theorize performance both in and beyond the theatrical in the Asian cities they work or reside in. The scholarly works reviewed here situate the study of performance and performative acts in relations to wider social and discursive practices as in formal and non-formal education, labour movements and everyday gender politics.

The analysis and the analytical approaches adopted in these work have significance for and relevance to applied drama and theatre practices in Hong Kong. Perhaps we could ask: What forces are operating in the larger context that situate applied theatre and drama practices in Hong Kong? Do they interfere with or facilitate transformative theatre and drama practices? How do those forces manifest themselves and operate in and through wider social and discursive practices? Can we identify performance and performative acts that sustain and/or contest ideological, discursive and social practices that

tend to subsume and decontextualize?

## Reference

Kershaw, B. (2001). Dramas of the performative society: Theatre at the end of its tether. *New Theatre Quarterly* 17(3), 203-211.

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