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Abstract

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NIMA POOVAYA-SMITH

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Born in China, brought up and educated in Singapore as well as England and widely travelled, Shirley Chew lives the concept of moving between worlds with great understatement and a certain stylish panache.

When I first met Shirley I was dazzled as much by the fact that not only did she bring a lively intellect to bear on her chosen discipline of English literature, but also by the fact that she was an accomplished pianist and if she had elected, could have been a professional. Her sister Jennifer, as it so happens, is a leading concert pianist in Singapore. This is perhaps not an unusual combination of skills but both her former smart Leeds flat and her current home reveal a spirit that is aesthetically finely tuned. She collects art with a very discriminating eye and has some of the jolliest china I have ever seen. She also takes a sensuous delight in preparing and serving food, ranging from specialist Chinese to Middle Eastern to Western dishes, accompanied by her grumbly good-natured conversation.

I was also struck by the almost mystical dedication she brought to bear on the process of teaching. To her the communication and sharing of knowledge, the process of meaning making, was a profoundly serious business, almost a sacrament. One day she emerged from a lecture feeling that the dynamics had not quite worked, and I was surprised by the degree to which it had lowered her spirits. She clearly saw it as a privilege squandered. Unsurprisingly she had done no such thing, as confirmed by a student I bumped into later who had been at the lecture. However, Shirley's capacity for being critical of herself, and indeed of others if she feels their work is not quite up to muster, can be quite daunting. (Note: Shirley is also at her brusque when she is at her kindest.)

Our lengthy friendship has been punctuated by years of not being in close contact, but somehow we were always able to pick up from where we had left off. We were never professional colleagues but there were many shared passions centred around the arts, design, people and food. Perhaps it was precisely the lack of a shared profession that allowed a freer and less orthodox flow of ideas between us. Entwined with all this were the minutely detailed narratives of family: since her own family is very important to Shirley, she has a deep interest in the families of her friends. Neither the scaffolding of the everyday, nor the reassuring rhythms of the mundane ever bore her. Yet almost imperceptibly, however casually discussed, the trivial and the humdrum would begin to be reconfigured by her to inform some penetrating and analytical insight about a wider discourse relating, for instance, to diasporas or culture.

One day in the middle of a violent snowstorm, she valiantly brought the late D.J. Enright across from Leeds to Cartwright Hall, Bradford. I had curated an exhibition on death and the afterlife called 'Worlds Beyond', and Dennis, of course, was perfectly qualified to frame the exhibition within the unique perspectives that had produced *The Oxford Book of Death*. Although cold and hungry — the snow-storm had had predictable effects on the traffic and they had crawled from Leeds to Bradford without time for any lunch — Dennis gave one of his delightfully hilarious commentaries on approaches to death, interspersed with readings from his book. We then retreated to a nearby hotel called, totally without irony, 'The Colonial', for afternoon tea followed by a hairy journey back to Leeds, stopping off to sample some Irish malt at my house. Shirley, who had been initially flustered by the atrocious weather and traffic, soon began to mellow as the evening progressed and Dennis's naughty schoolboy giggle increased in frequency. Naturally sociable, she thrives in an atmosphere of conviviality and the cut and thrust of an exchange of quicksilver thought.

There are some people who carry a sense of excitement about them — their world somehow seems richer and more charged with energy than the rest of ours. Shirley is one of those. Association with Shirley and her suite of colourful friends makes others feel part of this stimulating buzz. She is unpossessive of her friends, however exalted some of them may be, and always open to new friendships. It is this capacity for friendship, freely given and embracing not just the individual but friends and family as well that imbues the projects with which she is involved with so much depth and distinctive character. For instance, after Arthur Ravenscroft's premature death, Shirley was the architect of the highly successful annual commemorative lecture series at the University of Leeds. She managed within very modest budgets to attract an impressive panoply of international writers from Nayantara Sahgal, Ben Okri and Amitav Ghosh, to Caryl Phillips and Girish Karnad. Although the lecture series is a collaborative effort that involves other colleagues, Shirley's personality has been central to ensuring a continuing profile and sustained interest in the series for what is now well over ten years. This is testimony not only to an impressive network of contacts but also the respect she commands within her field. Above all, the fact that the lecture is always attended by at least one member of Arthur's family demonstrates how Shirley's knack for personalising all her undertakings keeps people engaged and involved.

This is also reflected in the way in which Shirley processes knowledge, if one can describe so subtle an activity in so pedestrian a manner. Through meticulous research, discovery, reflection and distillation, the process takes into its sweep the social and the personal as well as the more formal academic routes of knowledge acquisition. Each serendipitous discovery or unexpected connection is swooped upon with girlish delight. How can this excitement and enthusiasm be anything but infectious — to her friends, her colleagues and, most importantly, her students? I have lost count of the number of times Shirley has happened

upon on an image in an exhibition I have curated, or struck up a chance conversation with someone (strangers not excluded) and these encounters have suddenly illuminated her own work progress in unexpected and fascinating ways.

Although our friendship goes back to the early '80s, it was only in 2001 that we actually collaborated professionally. I was organising a conference on 'Creative Cultures' on behalf of Yorkshire Arts as part of the Year of the Artist programme in partnership with the University of Leeds. Shirley was in the midst of putting together a journal she had founded, *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings*, and we both agreed that the conference would be a wonderfully appropriate platform from which to launch the very first edition. Indeed, the conference enjoyed a life after the event as it were by the fact that a number of the keynote papers presented were included in the journal.

It was a complex conference both in organisational and intellectual terms. It was a forum for critical debate as well as for the celebration of an impressive array of artistic and academic talent. It set out to explore what sort of impact an increasingly-difficult-to-define concept of cultural identity has had on artists and the manner in which they interpret contemporary issues. It was also an unusual conference because it combined examples of live practice (many based on field work and primary research in order to stretch the boundaries of artistic practice, funded through bursaries by Yorkshire Arts) with opportunities for artists and academics alike to reflect on the nature of cross-cultural influences on creativity world-wide.

As I deliberated with Shirley on the structure of the conference, suggesting what were possibly over-complicated models, she said with her usual incisiveness, 'Let's keep it simple. Start with the plenary paper followed by an equally strong second paper with a question and answer session. Let's have a themed lunch followed by workshop presentations by artists in the afternoon based on the research and development work they have been doing culminating in a gala dinner based around an evening event'. The structure worked like a dream and the conference was a great success. For instance we had Jean 'Binta' Breeze give an electrifying demonstration of her thesis 'that Jamaican is the only language validated through oral contemporary culture' followed by Wole Soyinka in dialogue with Martin Banham and Jude Kelly about Soyinka's then new play *King Baabu*, a fierce critique of tyranny and the milieu that allows it to be perpetuated. Lunch was followed by dancer and choreographer David Hamilton and arts administrator Marcia Hutchinson expanding on the fieldwork they had undertaken in Jamaica on Jamaican dance forms and idiosyncratic pantomime traditions. In the evening, extracts of *King Baabu* were workshopped at the West Yorkshire Playhouse for the very first time.

There is a poetic symmetry to the fact that Shirley should seamlessly move from being Professor of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Leeds to an even closer engagement with *Moving Worlds* which already promises to be a pioneering journal. Her introduction to the very first

issue in 2001 made it clear that new ground was being broken:

Moving Worlds is a forum for creative work as well as criticism, literary as well as visual texts, writing in scholarly as well as more personal modes, in English and translations into English. It is open to experimentation, and represents work of different kinds and from different cultural traditions. It reappraises acknowledged achievements and promotes fresh talent. Its central concern — the transcultural — is the movement of cultures across national boundaries, and the productive transformations resulting from these crisscrossings. Its outreach is regional, national and international, that is, towards the diversity and richness of global/local communities. (1)

The two issues of *Moving Worlds* brought out in the last two years have already attracted contributions from renowned writers like Wole Soyinka, Randolph Stow and Caryl Phillips as well as a clutch of seminal essays to mark V.S. Naipaul's seventieth birthday. Yet Shirley has no hesitation, in the same volumes, in taking risks and including the work of unknown but promising talent. Always imaginatively commissioned and meticulously edited, the journal issues are of an exceptional standard. However, it is her willingness to mix known with lesser-known voices that give these publications their edge and freshness.

The fact that *Moving Worlds* is not confined to literature means there is not only a mix of voices but also a range of art forms explored with verve and intelligence. The covers are always beautifully illustrated and while the images considerably add to the production costs, they make them distinctive and visually and intellectually intriguing. It is a source of considerable pleasure that the three most recent journals she has edited (as guest editor of *Kunapipi* and the two issues of *Moving Worlds*) have been illustrated with images from projects with which I have been closely involved. The cover of the most recent issue of *Moving Worlds* for instance has Shahzia Sikander's 'Riding the Written'. Shirley first saw this image nearly nine years ago at an exhibition at Cartwright Hall called *An Intelligent Rebellion: Women Artists of Pakistan*. She had been struck by the haunting power of the miniature and had actually tried to acquire the work for herself but Bradford Art Galleries and Museums had beaten her to it. Clearly, the image had been filed away in some register of the imagination and when she was putting the journal together, she knew precisely what she wanted to see on the cover.

It is important to point out that Shirley has always been extremely receptive to creative local and regional encounters, as reflected in the contributions to *Moving Worlds*, long before universities recognised the importance of such an engagement. In the final analysis, Shirley pulls off both risk and experiment with such flair, because of the clarity of thinking and the intellectual rigour she brings to any project.

WORKS CITED

Chew, Shirley 2001, Editorial, *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings*, 1.1., p. 1.