Crossing Cultures: A Vietnamese Experience

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Crossing Cultures: A Vietnamese Experience

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Abstract

Intercultural theatrical performances, groups and workshops are not unusual events in Ho Chi Minh City despite an artistic environment still highly censored by government intervention. Performance collaborations between international theatre artists and Vietnamese practitioners have been facilitated through policies promoting international ‘educational’ exchange projects. In November 2011, I was invited to Ho Chi Minh City, by Australian-trained theatre director Le Quy Duong to lead a 10-day theatrical workshop, introducing western theatrical training techniques to his students. The LeQuyDuong Company is a festival events company, working across Vietnamese provinces to produce large-scale festival performance works. The nature and extent of my workshops expanded when the planned workshops were placed in Ho Chi Minh City’s Labor Theatre, a 500-seater, in the main District of the city. My work attracted the interest and then participation of theatre students from the Ho Chi Minh Drama Theatre. These were students of Khanh Hoang, specializing in ‘spoken drama’, the scripted forms of Vietnamese theatre that have proliferated since Vietnam’s colonisation, influenced by French, Russian, and more recently western European and American styles of scripted drama. Numbers of these students were actors from Khanh Hoang’s touring company. With a translator, Pham Huang Minh, who himself spoke limited English, and myself who knew no Vietnamese, my program was grounded on physical interactions, theatre games, the use of Augusto Boal’s theatre exercises and with reading bodies, across the gap of our differing cultures. This paper charts an experiential journey in intercultural theatrical communication.
Crossing Cultures: A Vietnamese Experience

In November 2011 I was invited by Le Quy Duong, a well-established Vietnamese festival theatre director to come to Ho Chi Minh City to run a 10-day theatre workshop with his students in his festival events company, the Lequyduong Company. This paper charts the shared transactions involved in this theatrical workshop, where most of the translation between the workshop participants and myself was carried out via one member of the Lequyduong company, Pham Huang Minh. This paper hopes to explore the complexities of translations of embodied interactions in an intercultural theatrical setting.

Before moving to my own experiences I want to open out the unique political circumstances that surround any organized transnational theatrical Vietnamese venture.

Over the past 10 years Vietnam has been among the faster growing economies in the world. It also has 44% of its population under 25 years old. The economic heart of the country lies in Ho Chi Minh City, previously Saigon but renamed in 1976, a year after the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was first formed. The economic ‘open door’ or doi moi reforms of Vietnam in 1986 led not only to a socialist-orientated market economy but also to a radical influx of previously excluded contemporary culture from the west and from China.† The aim of doi moi was to establish an economy where the Communist Party of Vietnam maintained overall control of the economy and key industries, whilst allowing collectives or private ownership of farms and certain factories. The policy also encouraged foreign investment in order to stimulate economic growth. From the early 1990s videos from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and the USA flooded the country, affecting not only the locally growing video, television and film industry but also impacting on the popularity of differing styles of theatre.‡ Young people in particular began to embrace the new types of music, dance and drama entering the country. They also began to abandon Vietnamese theatrical traditions that had been held in place for centuries.

Traditional theatre in Vietnam consists of well recognized and practiced forms. Tuong in the north, evolved in the thirteenth century and is a highly stylized operatic performance, utilising masks, ceremonial costumes, a set repertoire of texts and movements with speech and singing, accompanied by Vietnamese classical instruments.§ Cheo, a more satirical traditional performance form, evolved from the ritual customs, songs and dances of village life, emerging firstly in the villages around Hanoi in the sixteenth century.¶ Colourful and energetic, cheo relies on improvisational skills applied to well-known stories, with a clown figure and off-stage voices, which interact with the on-stage characters. Both tuong and cheo were highly affected by the doi moi policy and by the 1990s had lost much of their status particularly in urban areas, whilst a concomitant growth was noted in cai luong or renovated theatre, a music theatre style tradition that emerged in the early part of the twentieth century and kich noi or spoken drama, where contemporary issues were able to be explored.§ Kich noi, spoken drama, which encompasses the scripted forms of Vietnamese theatre proliferating since Vietnam’s colonisation, and which until doi moi had been influenced by French, Russian and Eastern European theatre, after doi moi became openly influenced by western European and American styles of play scripts.
In 1998, Resolution 5 of the Eighth Party Congress of the Party Central Committee identified a need for the return to traditional values and the maintenance of the traditional performing arts. Titled as ‘Building and Developing a Progressive Vietnamese Culture Rich in National Heritage’ this policy has resulted in the reclaiming, preservation and development of all traditional arts, referring to them as ‘important intangible heritage.’ Whilst the 1998 Resolution along with doi moi appear as supportive of cultural initiatives, both belie the means through which culture is filtered within the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Government based artistic committees review all proposed and produced plays. Television programmes, and films from pre-production through to broadcasting are subject to scrutiny by committees. Even with the move away from the state-run monopoly on film studios that existed until 2002, Communist Party censors still control the final cut of any movie that will be shown in cinemas and performances are controlled through the issuing or non-issuing of permits. Preview performances of all plays before a board of censors is necessary to allow for instigated changes. The extent of government manipulation in all cultural events is a reflection of the centralism that still abides with the Communist Party’s overarching power.

It is with a view to these complexities that I offer my own experience. In Vietnam, theatre endeavors involving international artists must be endorsed by the government before they can occur. However, collaborations between international artists and Vietnamese practitioners have been facilitated through policies promoting international educational exchange projects. By categorizing the interaction as educational, occurring with students, rather than as professional, the censorship is less rigorous. The Ho Chi Minh College of Theatre and Film, the principal tertiary theatre training institution in the city has been one of the main forces in enabling international theatre artists possibilities of intercultural collaborations.

My own Vietnamese intercultural projects have been facilitated through the University of Wollongong. In 1998 I enabled the staging of Le Quy Duong’s first Australian performance of his play *Market of Lives* (*Cho Doi*), through an Australia Council grant at Belvoir St Theatre, Sydney. I contributed to the translation of his text as a dramaturg and with a cast of Theatre students produced it through the University of Wollongong’s Faculty of Creative Arts. In 1999 I travelled to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in an Australian theatre delegation viewing a wide range of Vietnamese traditional and contemporary theatre productions and theatre schools, organized through VACEP (Vietnamese Australian Cultural Exchange Program). In 2005 and 2010 my Theatre students, from the Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, travelled with their student productions to firstly The Hanoi Experimental Theatre Festival and then to the Hue International Arts Festival.

The intercultural theory wars of the 1990s have left their mark on all intercultural performance initiatives. In 2006 Rustom Bharucha in his keynote address at the ADSA conference at the University of Sydney, entitled, ‘Exit the theatre: An inventory of what begins’, advocated getting out of the ‘institutionalized, discursive norms of the theatre.’ He urged delegates to be more concerned with the materiality of theatrical events than with aesthetics and to observe the ‘network of intentionalities’ in time that disrupt the status quo and create new positions of subjectivity. His comments proceeded from the lively academic debates around concepts of interculturalism. Whilst Pavis (1992) had posited an
'hourglass model' of intercultural interaction with a flow of knowledge moving between a perceived binary of one dominant culture and another, Bharucha had previously prioritized the interactivity of diverse cultures. Bharucha’s keynote address at ADSA expressed his frustrations with the separation of theatrical events from the real life politics of the participants. He was asking in what ways the participants of any cross-cultural performative event were newly positioned through their involvement in the event, the circumstances that led to the participants’ involvement and the actions that would proceed from the involvement. It is from this perspective that this analysis is situated.

When I arrived in Ho Chi Minh City to begin the workshops it was without preconceptions of achieving a particular theatrical aesthetic. I was unsure of what exactly I would meet. Vietnamese theatre is so distinct in its forms and I was unaware of the performance trainings of my participants. I had also witnessed the work of the Lequyduong company, which as site-based festival theatre is different again to any theatre seen in Vietnamese theatre buildings. I had little idea of what kind of students of theatre I would be working with, how many there would be, where the workshops would take place, whether my materials would hold their interests, what adaptations I would need to make to enable a dynamic and enjoyable 10 days. There was definitely no model in my mind of a one-way flow of knowledge in some kind of binary between ‘me’ and the Vietnamese students. My interest in Vietnam stems from a long involvement with the country from my early years of using theatre to campaign against the Vietnam war. However more pervasive is my ongoing desire to work with actors of all kinds, to understand how actors’ bodies and minds work and differentiate action under the inexorable pressures of being observed and compared. I knew I would be seeking to understand the motivations of the students and what exactly they would want to learn. In fact I was searching for the reasons for my invitation and why Vietnamese theatre students would wish to attend my workshops.

It was Duong’s festival events team who initially attended my workshops and our working space was Duong’s office for the first few days. These were participants who on the whole were not performers. Pham Huang Minh as the assigned translator knew the team intimately, as they were his co-workers, with whom over the last few years he had organised, devised, and marketed a range of highly spectacular festival events. The team, as I came to know them, were content with stepping aside from their office duties to be involved, although at various times Duong would enter to call one or other of them back to solve some difficulty in the company’s present work, which at that stage was the organization of the main events and publicity for the 2012 Hue International Arts Festival. Concomitantly I was called on to be involved in that function just as my participants appeared to have been requested to be involved in my offerings. For these first few days the workshops moved slowly. I had prepared a range of theatre games, exercises and improvisations, a combination of Augusto Boal based physical interactions as well as exercises from Bert Van Dijk’s text, ‘Devised Theatre: A practical guide to the devising process’, and also some realistic acting exercises harking back to Sonia Moore’s acting improvisations.

The nature and extent of my work expanded suddenly when the workshops were relocated to the Labor Theatre in the main District of the city. Without warning my participant numbers swelled, the students of Khanh Hoang, one of Ho Chi Minh’s renowned ‘spoken
drama’ trainers, who directs from the Labor Theatre, had heard of my presence in the city and opted to join the process. From originally working with around 8 students in an office, I was now on the stage of a 500 seater theatre with 20 students each day. It was very apparent that the motivations of these new comers were completely different than those of the Lequyduong company. In my attempts to ascertain how they had heard of the workshops I discovered that a number of the students were actors with a touring company of Khang Hoang’s, the Ho Chi Minh Drama Theatre. Their stage skills and acting skills were disproportionately more advanced than the initial students with whom I was working.

Theatre of course has its own embodied language. As Zarilli (1995, 2001, 2004) has noted in a range of his writings but particularly in his 2004 publication, ‘Toward a phenomenological model of the actor’s embodied modes of experience’, actors encounter differing layers of their own experience, from the sensate and the kinaesthetic encounter of their bodies in action to a more subliminal bodily encounter based on breath and internal visceral movements. The students that had arrived to work with me on the fifth day of my 10 day workshop, not only had highly developed movement skills but were also operating in modes that indicated to me their skills in what Zarilli has called, the ‘Outer Aesthetic Bodymind’, a state of being conscious of both being watched whilst also being in action. These were students who were used to performing for audiences. Some were trained dancers and they were pointed out to me as such, one already was a professional singer producing CDs of popular music, several were University Drama students. Any theatrical offering from games to improvisations that provided them with opportunities to take the lead or to express their individuality was immediately seized upon.

This difference between my beginning students and my newly arrived students was so marked that I had to ponder the differing material circumstances and motivations of each group. In Vietnam concepts of the ‘individual’ are still altering under the influence of western media. As David Marr, one of Australia’s Vietnam history scholars observes of the use of the word ‘individual’ since its appearance in Vietnam in the first decades of the twentieth century, the first thing we note is its fragile, contested status.

‘Individualism’ was used as a pejorative in the early twentieth century, both by those holding on to traditions, where individuals only act to serve the family, state or nation and also by communists who also adhered to there being no place for the individual’s desires. This position in my experience of my workshops was probably most clearly illustrated by Pham Huang Minh, my translator. A devoted staff member of Le Quy Duong’s, he told me how he had left a more lucrative job to work with Duong because he believed in Duong’s mission. Duong’s mission can be loosely understood as creating a hybridised and highly popular form of festival theatre, where Vietnamese traditional performance is maintained through intermingling it with globalised technology for provincial festivals. He told me he wanted to eventually run a company like Duong’s. As translator for the workshop, Minh was in a powerful position yet he saw his role as serving the interests of his theatre company. Although he joined in the workshops it was clear from his semi-involved physical engagement that he was not participating as an individual, but rather as a representative of his company. Slowly I realised that this was the case with each of the Lequyduong company members, even the ones who wanted to increase their skills as actors, all were curtailed in their physical commitment to the workshop by their primary desire to be exceptional company members. The new comers were by contrast, unusually aware of their need to
work individualistically, whether this was from their ‘spoken drama’ training, university backgrounds, or personal ambitions I could only surmise.

Martin Gainsborough a scholar of development politics from the University of Bristol, has claimed that the Vietnamese mindset that places a strong emphasis on parental or family loyalty also places a belief in the morality of those in authority.\(^{18}\) So Gainsborough claims that whilst marketization has advanced in Vietnam the overriding power of the single Communist Party has not been challenged through civil activism as in other Asian countries, such as South Korea. The mindset of complying with authority in the belief of its moral correctness has dampened the desire for individual action. However my own experience contrasted the compliance that belonged to a well-established corporate entity compared with the performed actions of students of ‘kich noi’, spoken drama. Interestingly as I moved around the city I became aware of the throngs of ambitious young citizens, practicing their dance moves in the park, filming for television programs, interviewing me for newspaper articles. This was a different mindset, and the spoken drama students were intent on creating a name for themselves, having an individualistic future.

The improvisations translated through Minh, were particularly revealing in this light. Many of the improvisations were not so different than the kinds of improvisations I encounter in Sydney, Melbourne or Wollongong, romantic in nature, boy meets girl, or stories of lack of fidelity and then resolutions or arguments. Some of the improvisations were classical in their structures, interconnecting themes from traditional Vietnamese drama, stories of servants, or workers who were suspected of robbery and then found to be loyal, or of ailing parents and the loyalty or jealousies of children. Some of the improvisations leapt straight from movie-style action dramas, heroes and thieves, bombs and bank robbers. Minh was often far ahead of me, dialoguing with the performers before translating back to me, the students laughing long before I had fully comprehended the content of their work. The workshops became less about my leadership and more about the students’ unity. Given my initial corroboration of their right to create action, translation in these terms became the impetus for their individualistic desires to flourish. My feedback was about how to increase dramatic tension, how to create dialogue, how to justify dramatic choices, rather than leading any of them to content that was not already their own.

The 10 days were in Bharucha’s words, ‘an opening and reopening’ in time for my own intentions of sharing across cultures.\(^{19}\) In my ‘autobiographical reflections’ as he calls it, lies my impetus for further action, that could be termed intervention. In these translated experiences, something other than words often lead the practices. The magic of the interaction between performing bodies that sits at the heart of the audience-actor relationship is once again asserted when bodies need to rely on translations and bodily readings to negotiate the interstices in their connections. The experiential once more brings the minutiae of the interpersonal interactions to a heightened awareness and leaves ‘decisive moments’ that become the new beginnings of further action and practices.
6 See Khai Thu Nguyen, ‘Another Midsummer Night’s Dream in Ho Chi Minh City,’ Asian Theatre Journal, 38.1 (Spring 2011): 199-221, where the effects of the 1998 Resolution 5 on Hat Boi theatre are examined.
7 Greg Lockhart charts the modes by which a national network of mass organisations in post 1990s Vietnam has enabled a centralist government to resist the development of political and cultural pluralism despite the opening of the economy to market forces. Greg Lockhart, ‘Mass mobilisation in contemporary Vietnam,’ Asian Studies Review, 21 (November, 1997): 174-179.
10 Le Quy Duong, First Play Collection: Market of Lives, Meat Party, Graveyard for the Living (Sydney: Currency Press, 2002). Market of Lives was rewritten and produced for performance by the Faculty of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong and was staged at both Theatre South in Wollongong and Belvoir St. Theatre in Sydney in 1998. From 1-15 December 1999 the author travelled to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City with Le Quy’s VACEP (Vietnamese Australian Cultural Exchange Program). At an official theatre forum on Dec. 7, at the Hanoi Opera House, chaired by Professor Dinh Quan, with staff from the Vietnamese Ministry of Culture and representatives from major theatre companies, the issue of the need for the preservation of traditional theatre practices formed the principal topic of discussion.
13 Patrice Pavis, Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Rustom Bharucha, ‘Somebody’s Other: Disorientations in the cultural politics of our

14 The author travelled with the Lequyduong company from 31 Oct. 2011-1 Dec. 2011, in Ho Chi Minh City, Soc Trang and Hanoi and previously in 2010 at the 2010 Hue Festival.


19 Rustom Bharucha, Exit the theatre.