

Imagining Tradition

With the telegraph Western man began a process of putting his nerves outside his body. Previous technologies had been extensions of physical organs: the wheel is a putting-outside-ourselves of the feet; the city wall is a collective *outering* of the skin. But electronic media are, instead, extensions of the central nervous system, an inclusive and simultaneous field. Since the telegraph we have extended the brains and nerves of man around the globe. As a result, the electronic age endures a total uneasiness, as of a man wearing his skull inside and his brain outside. *We have become peculiarly vulnerable.*

Marshall McLuhan
The Aeneid of Outwit

The world of contemporary theatre is a world of shifting sands and changing shadows; the lay of the land transforms every few years as new ideas, new politics and new visions by new artists attempt to re-frame and re-present “the real”, yet again since time immemorial, to a new generation of audiences.

Theatre, perhaps more so than other art forms, is inextricably connected with the living forms of life; the one feeds off and into the other, like the great river systems of the world, channeling mountain waters downwards, traversing the flatness of land and finally merging with the depths of the sea. There is a flow, constant and continuous, which is as old as the seas. If this connection between life and theatre is severed, if they are put asunder, as indeed they are in some parts of the world, then both begin to suffer and eventually wither away; to await a renewal.

The Theatre Training and Research Programme (TTRP) is an attempt at such a renewal. A three-year, full-time, professional actor training programme, it was

founded, under the aegis of the Practice Performing Arts School in Singapore, three years ago by the late dramatist Kuo Pao Kun and actor and critic T. Sasitharan.

The primary aim of the TTRP is to research, develop and run a comprehensive, systematic contemporary actor training programme that combines classical theatre traditions with contemporary theatre practice and which emphasises the active, practical modalities of studio work and training without neglecting the relevant theoretical concerns of the classroom.

A fundamental premise of the TTRP is that any serious attempt at training contemporary actors here should draw from the rich resources of the various heritages and cultures that influence the peoples of Singapore. Our goal is to research all our cultures and heritages, to experiment with styles and themes that are coherent with our multiracial and multicultural society, and to allow for the natural growth of a truly Singaporean theatre that reflects our contemporary, multicultural, global society.

Therefore the TTRP is a highly specialized and selective programme intended for small groups of serious, highly motivated professional actors interested to expanding their skills and expertise.

At the heart of the vision that informs the TTRP is an article of faith. It is the belief that the established and inherited systems of performance-making which continue to serve as standards of excellence in world theatre, like *Noh*, *Xiqu* (*Beijing or Kun Opera*), *BharathaNatyam* (*or Kutiyattam*) and *Wayangwong*, are relevant and invaluable resources in the training and the making of the contemporary actor.

To put it another way, we at the TTRP believe that the programmatic disciplines and the intricate aesthetics of these traditional forms still speak volumes to actors today; and that by way of their rigour and precision, system and spirituality, technique and commitment and humility and grace hold out the

promise of raising the art of contemporary theatre to new and hitherto unattained heights.

The key though lies in unlocking and unpacking these monolithic theatre systems so as to select and draw only those elements – precepts or aspects, perhaps, of gesture, voice, movement, rhythm, breath control, presentation and form – which may be recombined, taken in and situated within the specific demands of a more conventional, contemporary actor training method e.g. that of Constantin Stanislavski (1863-1938) .

The student actor at the TTRP will never at end of his three years in Singapore be a Noh performer, a Beijing Opera artist, a Bharata Natyam dancer or a Wayangwong actor. This is not the objective or the intention of the programme. What he will able to do is re-combine, for himself and himself alone, the deep-learning experience he has had of these traditional systems with the methodology and techniques of contemporary acting, as they have been developed within the Western canon of theatre.

Each and every student actor at the TTRP is required to engage, equally over three years, two distinct modes of contemporary actor training.

One is based broadly on the acting techniques of Stanislavski; it assumes that the actor's stage actions are determined, defined and ultimately shaped by the character's "internal need" - motivation, desire, psychology, biography, context, situation and given circumstances as set out in a script - in a word, it is concerned with the actor understanding, uncovering and finally identifying with the "truth" of the character, and then sustaining, nurturing and keeping vital the "through line" of this discovered truth throughout the play's duration.

By any reckoning, the Stanislavski system is a highly reliable and adaptable acting method and, from a purely pedagogical perspective, it is also probably the most effective actor training method available to us today.

But another of the principal aims of the TTRP is that our students, in learning and understanding the craft of acting, should get beyond the bounds and break free of the essentially cognate, cognitive and discursive limits that are privileged within the Stanislavski system. This why TTRP students are concurrently taught an alternative approach to acting - one that seeks to unlock the truth of a character by working from the “external” to the “internal”, *pace* Stanislavski, and which draws as much upon the actor’s kinaesthetic and physical impulses as his intellectual or mental capacities.

In this alternative approach - and to be sure it is just an approach; nothing quite like a system - the actor is constantly enjoined to be “holistic” on stage; to be a whole being, a complete psycho-physical entity; rather than be alive only from the shoulders up.

The TTRP has found that this approach is excellent not only in preparing the actor to work in improvisation situations and in devising dramatic contexts for performance, but also in unlocking new possibilities to make meaning particularly during the initial stages of the rehearsal process when a script is first encountered.

But, to every thing there must be a balance, and the spontaneity and spark that the alternative approach engenders in the rehearsal process has to be tempered by the rigorous, empirical grounding that the Stanislavski system brings to bear in the creation of characters.

There is thus the constant ebb and flow of movement, sensitivity and consciousness between these modalities that the student actor in the TTRP is expected to master and deploy in both rehearsal and performance.

This process of selection, excavation and combination and recombination would have to be played out again and again many times in the mind and body of the student actor until a new aesthetic equilibrium is achieved, a new *discordia concors*; some unheard of, unseen harmony, gained by the combination of

disparate or even conflicting elements. The result, of course, would be a renewal of theatre itself.

It is worth noting that these traditional theatre systems are not taught in isolation at the TTRP, as they normally would be in their places and cultures of origin – in isolation and to the exclusion of all other traditional systems.

In the TTRP the traditional theatre systems are contextualized, elaborated and reconnected with other systems. Nothing can live and grow in isolation; life is possible only because of the connections we make, and are willing to make, as human beings; to each other, to things and to life itself. Art is possible because, ideologically, we believe in the connectedness, or at the very least in the connectivity, of all ideas, of all things and of all beings through the human imagination. This sensibility is epitomised in Kuo Pao Kun's notion of the "open culture":

[Open Culture] contemplates a transcendence of the individual from race and tradition-bound communities to embrace a diverse global community. [It] provides resources for and provokes dynamic interaction. Open Culture begets open futures.ⁱ

Open culture is only possible as an act of the imagination and the urgency to re-imagine tradition has never been greater. As far as theatre and the performing arts are concerned, this revolution has started happening in many parts of Asia (India, Indonesia, Taiwan, Japan and Singapore) over the last decade. As one writer put it:

At the core of the ferment is the deep-seated desire of the community of artists and thinkers in this part of the globe to re-negotiate their artistic identities from within their own rich resource of a plural form-language, and yet remain free of the constraints and limitations that such conventions imply. Tradition is what enables a set of defining ideas and concepts to renew themselves and stay relevant over time - not something meant to be pickled and bottled with built-in artificial shelf-life. As Chandralekha, the Indian dancer and choreographer has repeated on many occasions: "Preserving tradition is fine. But we need to pause periodically to pull it off the shelf, dust it vigorously, and hold it against the sun to see if it still reflects light".ⁱⁱ

Therefore this indeed is the critical question: Are the traditional theatre systems of Asia, particularly the ones that are studied and deployed in the TTRP, capable still of standing in the sunlight of ordinary life and are they still able to reflect some this light? If they still are capable of doing so, if they are still relevant, significant and vital, they will able to connect with and revitalise the contemporary theatre practice of actors. Not just that of the Asian actor, but of all actors.

ⁱ Kuo, Pao Kun. (1998). Contemplating an Open Culture: Transcending Multiracialism. in Arun, Mahizhnan & Lee, Tsao Yuan (Eds.). Singapore: Re-engineering Success. Singapore: Oxford University Press.

ⁱⁱ Menon, Sadanand, 'Tradition' As A Limiting Notion Within Indian Performing Arts; A talk at the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore, September 21 2002.