

Editorial

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How do we account for a sense of centre and periphery when we think about and study theatre and performance from an international perspective? Is an ‘international’ perspective at all possible? Or is every performance irrevocably determined by its tangible ‘here’ and ‘now’, making everything else peripheral? And to what extent are questions of centrality determined by the dominant cultural or economic paradigms? Or is a multifocal international perspective consciously created in opposition to such hegemonic models?

The 2008 IFTR/FIRT conference in Seoul held under the theme ‘Re-constructing Asian-ness(es) in the Global Age’ not only focused on Asia within a broader international context but also raised important issues concerned with Asia itself as a complex system of cultural and economic hubs. Trying to locate cultural, spiritual and economic centres is, however, not a new phenomenon. *Omphalos* – the Greek word for navel – refers to the stones that were erected in Delphi (where the oracle concerning the fate of Laius’ as yet unborn son, later called Oedipus, was pronounced) and in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (which most Christian churches believe is the site where Jesus was crucified), signifying that these places are the centre (the ‘navel’) of the world. These are, of course, not the only locations where such stones have been erected to mark their centrality, making everything else peripheral. But they have had a special significance, at least from a Western perspective, for the conceptualizations of theatre and religion.

This issue of *TRI* opens with an article by two Chinese scholars, Zhu Xuefeng and Liu Haiping, who have examined two adaptations of Eugene O’Neill’s *Desire under the Elms* in traditional forms of Chinese theatre. It is impossible for me to say exactly how flexible the term ‘adaptation’ is in this context. Are the productions examined here ‘O’Neill’ or ‘traditional’ Chinese theatre? And is it possible for them to be both? I am, of course, not taking the authors to task for not providing a definite answer to these questions. But their claim that ‘Chinese theatre has seldom, if ever, posed metaphysical questions concerning the existential situation of free-willed human beings in a universe with or without God’ – something which O’Neill’s theatre and much of the so-called Western theatre obviously does – provides an implicit answer. The Chinese adaptations of O’Neill have clearly shifted the centre from a Western to a Chinese perspective.

Megan Evans’s article ‘Chinese *Xiqu* Performance and Moving Image Media’ can also be read with these issues in mind. What have the ‘Western’ methods of reproduction, what Evans terms the ‘moving image media’, done to the traditional Chinese forms of theatre? Has the technological reproductive apparatus ‘westernized’ the ways these performances

are perceived, making them more universally available? Or 'foreign' to Chinese audiences? Chinese spectators are obviously attracted to the speed of the technological media, while one inherent feature of many traditional forms of theatre is their slowness and sense of extended duration. The two articles on Chinese performance cultures also present quite different interpretations and perspectives on recent Chinese history, in particular the Cultural Revolution.

Yael Zarhy-Levo's article on British writer Dennis Potter expands the discussion of the role of the media within a broader performative context, in particular through the creation of a complex image of an individual and of what we are supposed to perceive as being 'Potter' himself. Instead of relying on traditional genres of storytelling (or perhaps that is what it is all about?), Potter is one of the central figures in creating a highly mediatized image of his own personality as a composite: 'I am projected therefore I am/exist.' This amalgamated projection of subjectivity is no doubt a markedly Western notion of performance and in particular of more recent theorizations of performativity.

The article by Gabriella Calchi Novati on the Italian theatre company Societas Raffaello Sanzio (SRS) examines performativity/theatricality within the framework of Western metaphysics, which Zhu and Liu argue is not a part of traditional Chinese theatre. Or maybe metaphysics means something very different when examining O'Neill on Chinese soil or the work of SRS? In order to critique a Christian metaphysics iconoclastically, SRS obviously had to adopt some of its assumptions about language and representation. Or, as Claudia Castelluchi, one of the members of SRS, claims, 'The world is seen as if it were empty; nonetheless it has not been destroyed, but it operates in the midst of the void.' And, adds Calchi Novati, 'It is only by acknowledging the existence of the void and by being comfortable in it that SRS can present its original theatrical vision: a prophetic vision expressed through parables.'

Finally this issue of *TRI* inaugurates the first of its three new features¹ with an extensive review article by Willmar Sauter on theatre and performance research in the Nordic countries since the year 2000. It is remarkable and even astonishing how little is generally published in English-language journals about research that is published in languages other than English. True, some 'local'/national journals published in English have started to appear introducing their own research to a broader readership. This almost total blindness to research in languages other than English, except for an occasional review of a French study, but hardly of any research in German, not to speak of almost any other language, is true for this journal as well, and I hope this situation will change, not only in these pages.

I end my deliberations with the question with which I opened this editorial: "How do we account for a sense of centre and periphery when we think about and study theatre and performance from an international perspective?"

NOTE

- 1 In a previous editorial (*TRI* 33, 1) it was announced that in each of the three issues in a volume such a new feature would be included. The next issue will be devoted to a research project and in the last issue of each volume will be a block presenting and examining a specific production. Suggestions for articles or blocs on these new features are welcome.