

Asian Theatre and Globalization: Historical Perspectives¹

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In the one hundred and fifty years stretching roughly between 1850 and 1990 the nature of theatre was transformed radically throughout the world as it changed from being a predominantly locally defined, practiced and experienced cultural form to one that had global reach. In the wake of colonialism, imperialism and modernization, processes that provided the political, economic and cultural foundations of contemporary globalization debates, Western concepts, practices and above all institutions of theatre were exported to most territories around the globe.

Today, theatre is a global artistic practice, a crucial cultural institution in many countries and a central part of transnational networks of artistic exchange. Often defying exact definition, its manifestations range from improvised street theatre in backyard slums to multi-million-dollar edifices purveying the latest performances of nineteenth-century opera to 21st-century cultural elites. Despite its bewildering number of forms that include puppet theatre, stand-up comedy and abstract performance art, theatre-makers and audiences are connected across cultures by mutual recognition of commonality in what they do. Yet In the eyes of most theatre historians theatre remains a resolutely local, even parochial phenomenon in which the local perspective enjoys unconditional priority over other research paradigms, as some historians have begun to critically note (see Carlson 2004; Robinson 2007).

But can one really speak of global theatre? Is not theatre by definition restricted to the here and now, the short-lived community of spectators and performers who share a common space for a few hours and then go their separate ways? Is not globalization something we associate with McDonalds, Gucci handbags, commercialization, container shipping, in short the homogenization and not the diversity of culture? Today we certainly associate globalisation with dynamic processes leading to what some sociologists have termed the "shrinking of the world". Despite the obvious trend towards globalisation in commerce and communication, the differences between the Asian and European theatre worlds still seem to be intact. The main division would appear to be still the association with European spoken drama and Asian dance drama combining song and stylised movement. This usually translates to a dichotomy between Asian tradition and European or Western modernity. That this no longer the case in reality, we all know. Spoken drama on the Western model is performed throughout Asia, and Western theatre has absorbed certain aspects of Asian theatre. In this paper I suggest that we reconsider this dichotomy between Western (spoken) theatre and Asian (dance-drama). To do this it is necessary to go back in history. I shall argue that when we look at the main places of encounter between Europe and Asia at the beginnings of

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modernity then the distinction and dichotomy is by no means so clear. I shall proceed in the following steps: I shall begin with some definitions, especially of globalisation and how we can use the term in theatre history. This will lead to a notion of theatrical networks and hubs, where the encounter between Asia and the West took place. I shall then look at some of these hubs, in particular Bombay, Singapore and Shanghai. In these cosmopolitan centres Western theatre and local forms rubbed shoulders and new hybrid genres emerged.

Globalisation

Although globalisation is generally spoken about in negative terms, especially in the arts and humanities, I would like to argue that it is 1) not a new phenomenon and 2) also an enabling and productive process which, among other things, has led to increased cooperation and communication between artists, audiences and scholars. The very existence of organisations such as ATEC and IFTR owes much to globalisation. In the rest of my talk I want to argue that this process in connection with theatre begins much earlier than say 1989 and the end of the Cold War. In fact it can be traced back to the late 19th century when there was a huge expansion of economic and cultural activity. Many historians speak therefore of the first age of globalisation, meaning roughly the years 1870 to 1914.

The fact that we are sitting here today owes a lot to the emergence of a concept and practice of theatre that we can all agree upon. An organisation such as ATEC that joins together artists and scholars dedicated to theatre education presupposes that we all know what theatre and education are, or at least that we agree upon certain fundamental concepts. Both these concepts have been strongly influenced by Western practices that were exported and imported over the past 100 years. I am particularly interested in the historical dimension of this import /export trade, which is based on theatrical networks that were implemented in the early part of the 20th century. Such networks flourished all over the world but I shall concentrate here on a few Asian examples to illustrate how globalisation connected with theatre came about.

Globalisation can mean many things. A recent theorist David Singh Grewal, has argued in his book *Network Power: The Social Dynamics of Globalization* that as a social and cultural process globalisation is dependent on standardisation:

‘In areas as diverse as trade, media, legal procedures, industrial control, and perhaps even forms of thought, we are witnessing the emergence of international standards that enable us to coordinate our actions on a global scale.’²

Grewal claims that the standards that enable such global coordination display what he calls ‘network power’.

The notion of network power consists in the joining of two ideas: first, that

² David Singh Grewal, *Network Power: The Social Dynamics of Globalization* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 3.

coordinating standards are more valuable when greater numbers of people use them, and second, that this dynamic – which I describe as a form of power – can lead to the progressive elimination of the alternatives over which otherwise free choice can effectively be exercised. ...More precisely, certain versions of local practices, routines, and symbols are being catapulted onto a global stage and offered as a means by which we can gain access to one another.(4)

If we apply this insight to theatre then we can find both agreement and disagreement. As already mentioned, the fact that we use word such as 'Theatre' all over the world suggests that standardisation has taken place. This does not mean however that standardisation results in homogenisation, i.e. that only one form of performance is recognisable under this term. On the contrary. Theatre today is remarkable for the degree of diversity that can be sustained within this concept. Historically speaking however, the export of Western theatre did result in a certain degree of standardisation. To use Grewal's terms, 'the local practices, routines, and symbols' of Western theatre were 'catapulted onto a global stage and offered as a means by which we can gain access to one another'. But how and under what conditions did this come about from? A crucial role, I argue, was played by theatrical networks and hubs that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th-century in the context of early globalisation. If theatre on the generic level is characterized by diversity not standardization, where does the latter come into play? Standardization, I would argue, occurs primarily on an institutional level:

This period of early globalization is an example of institutions in motion

A central concern of transnational studies in general and global history in particular is how institutions relocate(d) across geocultural space. How have they intersected with their new environments? How have they been adapted, resituated, hybridized, and transformed in processes of motion? If, as S.N. Eisenstadt argues, modernization invariably led to a wide range of responses to the way 'societies interpret different symbolic premises of modernity and different modern institutional patterns and dynamics',³ then it is crucial that institutions be seen in terms of their cultural variability and not as monolithic entities. In our context, theatre needs to be investigated as an institution in the sense of a complex of norms regulating social action; institutions invariably operate on the basis of law and impact on collectivities as much as individuals. The special dynamics of institutional normativity in the arts can be best investigated through the introduction of pedagogical institutions for artistic training. Whether privately organized or state-run, such institutions display by definition a degree of normativity and discursivity that permit us to examine precisely how local adaptations of mainly Western cultural practices were effected. By the same token, we need to ask how Western conceptions of training theatre artists institutionally – mainly actors, singers, and dancers but also directors, designers and other professions – was seen as a necessary part of cultural 'modernization'. To use Grewal's concept of standardisation and network power, we could ask if a method such as Stanislavsky and method acting it is an example of theatrical

³ S. N. Eisenstadt, *Patterns of Modernity*. (London: F. Pinter, 1987), 5.

standardization? To do this it would be necessary to trace as precisely as possible the paths of informational exchange, the migration of 'experts', the circulation of ideas, traditions, and aesthetic norms that gradually led to the implementation of globally comparable institutions such as theatre schools. However, I wish to go back even further in theatre history to the end of the 19th century to discover the beginnings of theatrical globalisation. To do this we need to visit theatrical hubs.

3. Theatrical hubs: Bombay, Calcutta, Singapore, Shanghai

Bombay, today Mumbai. Around 1900 Bombay was already a cosmopolitan city with a population of around 1 million. Many languages were spoken, and different religions were practised. Western-style theatre on the Indian subcontinent originated in Bombay. Because of its size it was a popular destination for touring actors and companies, but its real importance lies with the Parsi community, who after 1850 quickly recognised the potential of theatre both for educational, reformist and commercial purposes. The Parsis, of Persian origin, were successful merchants and typical intermediaries or cultural brokers between the English colonial administration and India's multi-religious and multilingual population. Between 1850 and 1900 Parsis adapted the European proscenium stage, the genres of melodrama, tragedy and comedy and mixed them with Indian mythological stories to produce a remarkable and commercially successful theatre that travelled all over the Indian subcontinent. It also travelled into south-east Asia, where it generated local variants (*bangsawan* in Malay, *komedi stambul* and *likay* in the Dutch East Indies). At the same time there was an upsurge in European touring with companies that criss-crossed the Indian subcontinent and resulted in interaction with colonial and local audiences alike.

Some Parsi troupes also performed Shakespeare in highly successful but indigenized versions. I quote from an account of a performance witnessed in Calcutta in 1907:

But the audiences of the Indian theatres seem to revel in the plays of the Bard. It is true that they are presented to them in a somewhat more lively form than was intended by the author, or than English audiences are accustomed to. Shakespeare was apt to introduce song and dance, and often enough he did not disdain to offer his audience buffoonery in the place of comedy. But at least the singers of the songs were as a rule merely minor characters. He would have been somewhat astonished could he have seen Hamlet burst into song after one of his introspective soliloquies and rush off the stage singing and waving his sword, and he would have been still more surprised to see Ophelia invariably accompanied by a chorus of maidens, whose duty it is to say or sing with a lengthened chant and to express with a great deal of pantomime their thoughts and feelings in regard to her position and utterances.⁴

⁴ Anon., 'Indian Theatres: The Alfred Theatrical Company', *The Friend of India*, Jan 24, 1907, 10.

Noteworthy is the extensive use of song, dance and pantomimic movement in this version of *Hamlet*. For this reason, it is clear why Parsi theatre is usually regarded as the precursor to Bollywood cinema. In Parsi theatre *Hamlet* is not purely spoken drama. This is usually explained as an example of hybridisation: Western spoken drama is mixed with traditional Indian dance-drama. I propose an alternative explanation. In Bombay, Calcutta, and as we shall see, in Singapore and Shanghai, Western theatre was not associated primarily with spoken drama but by the much more popular forms of musical comedy, variety and minstrel shows that toured continuously along theatrical networks in this period.⁵

The most important figure between 1900 and 1920 in this context was the Anglo-American theatre manager Maurice Bandmann, (1872-1922), who developed theatrical touring on a hitherto unimagined scale. Bandmann managed numerous companies as well as a chain of up to fifty theatres that stretched from Gibraltar to Japan. Although he drew most of his productions from London, the centre of his operations was not the British capital, however, but India, where he had his headquarters in Calcutta and later in Cairo. This geographical positioning alters the way we need think of colonial theatrical network structures. Instead of a web emanating from a metropolitan centre – London or Paris – we can observe a rearrangement of nodal power to place Calcutta in the centre, midway between Gibraltar and Yokohama.

From his headquarters in Calcutta he sent his many companies throughout Asia on an itinerary which extended from Cairo to Tokyo. I will argue that his companies had a significant influence on the introduction of European style theatre in many Asian cities, particularly Shanghai and Japan. Audiences were exposed to the full range of European theatrical genres: musical comedy, drama, opera, variety shows and reviews.

Singapore

An important port of call for Bandmann companies was the port city of Singapore, which had become an important theatrical hub on account of its cosmopolitan population comprising Europeans, Chinese, Indian, and Malays, which by 1900 amounted to approximately 250,000 inhabitants, 165,000 of whom were of Chinese descent. The European and Eurasian population comprised little more than 8000.⁶ It was an important port of call not just for European theatre troupes but also for Chinese, Parsi and Malay companies. The latter had created their own version of Parsi theatre known as *bangsawan*. There was also a Chinese theatre, the Opera House Yap Chow Thong, which had performed among other things *Hamlet* before

⁵ Calcutta is the other important theatrical hub in India. As the capital of the British Raj until 1911 and as a key trading city (it was the centre of the British opium trade to China), it too had a large cosmopolitan population. Bengalis, Parsis, Jews, Muslims, Armenians, and not to forget the British colonial administration, rubbed shoulders. By the mid-19th-century there had emerged a Bengali Theatre modelled on the European one and engaged in constant exchange with it.

⁶ Cf. Saw Swee-Hock, *The Population of Peninsular Malaysia*, Singapore : ISEAS Publishing 2007, p. 319-20.

the Governor of Singapore. The most important *bangsawan* troupe was Wayang Kassim, which played in Malay for indigenous and European audiences at the Indira Zanihar Theatre a repertoire that included Malay, Javanese and European material. A description of their version of *Cinderella* should suffice to underline the importance of music for this form:

It may be called a pantomime, a burlesque, a musical comedy or a melodrama. As a matter of fact it is a *pot-pourri* of all, with a terrible amount of singing added. Hardly a single person can approach the stage without breaking into song. They come on singing; if they move off, they sing; if they have a spare moment they sing singly or together. They sing and sing, from start to finish; they sing standing, sitting and laying; working, eating and sleeping; they sing in their dreams.⁷

The songs, which were performed in Malay, English, Singhalese and Tamil, comprised the dominant mode of expression.

By 1914, there had developed in Singapore a small entertainment industry, with travelling and local groups competing with each other and the new cinematic medium. For example, in the week beginning 6 March 1912, newspapers in Singapore advertised the following programs:

Alhambra: Thuness Kovarick and His Violin in conjunction with the pick of the production of: Pathé, American Kinema etc.

Harima Hall cinematograph offering 'Gaumont's Greatest Graphic'

Victoria Theatre: Bandmann Opera Company; Chinese New Year entertainment: Part I 'After the Battle'; Part II 'Mustapha'

Theatre Royal: the Dutch and Malay variety entertainers. PRINCE KOBAT SHARIL: Come and see: charming actresses, clever actors, competent orchestra, comfortable theatre

Teutonia Club: Kilkare Koncert Kompany.⁸

Significant here is the mixture of cultural offerings, professional and amateur, catering for Singapore's cosmopolitan population. The performance of the Chinese New Year play in two parts in aid of the Chinese Red Cross Society, written by two local authors, and presented in the high temple of colonial representation, the Victoria Theatre, (which had been converted from the town hall into a functional theatrical performance space), documents a growing interpenetration of performance cultures. While the local Chinese opera continued to flourish in its own venues, the

⁷ Cited in: Holger Warnk, 'Faust Does Nusantara', in *Lost Times and Untold Tales from the Malay World*, ed. by Jan van der Putten and Mary Kilcline Cody (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), pp. 227-40, here 230-31.

⁸ *Singapore Free Press*, 6 March, 1912: 1.

special performance was clearly designed by its venue as the demonstration of cultural occupation and perhaps even of a certain degree of social mobility in an otherwise highly stratified colonial settlement.

Shanghai

Like Singapore, the port city of Shanghai can be considered a quintessential theatrical hub. In the second half of the 19th century with the establishment of the Shanghai International Settlement there emerged a Western expatriate zone with British, Russian, American, German, Japanese and French concessions. The “Settlement” (Concession) had institutional autonomy with its own police force, fire-brigade, driver’s licenses, schools, and soon its own theatre. In 1874 the first Lyceum Theatre was built for the Amateur Dramatic Club of Shanghai (A.D.C), which was established in 1866. Although primarily a venue for Europeans, the Lyceum came to have an important role as a broker and intermediary for introducing European-style theatre to China.⁹ At the Lyceum a few Chinese spectators had their first encounter with European musical theatre: In 1876, one Chinese spectator saw a Gilbert and Sullivan light opera, *Trial by Jury*:

Westerners told me this was a story about a lawsuit over a broken marriage promise. At first, the male plaintiff appeared to make a speech... After a long time, four women appeared with the accused. They sang and talked, which again lasted a long time. The judge tore up the file, threw it to the ground, and talked and sang with the jury... While I could not understand the language, judging from the Westerners' applause, foot thumping, and laughter it must have been quite entertaining.¹⁰

Entertaining indeed. Admittedly, even for non-English-speaking spectators, an encounter with Gilbert and Sullivan can be a highly exotic and bewildering experience. In Gilbert and Sullivan, everybody sings and dances almost all of the time; not a lot different to Wayang Kassim’s version of *Cinderella* in Singapore really.

Although the beginnings of *huaju*, spoken drama in China, are usually seen to lie in Japan with the famous performances by Chinese students of *Camille* and *The Black Slave’s Cry to Heaven* put on by the Spring Willow Dramatic Society, I would like to argue that the Lyceum Theatre had perhaps an even more important role to play *institutionally* in introducing not just *huaju* but all of the many genres of Western theatre to China. Bandmann’s companies and other Western troupes performed here on a regular basis. The Bandmann productions which included variety shows, musical comedy, operetta and occasionally spoken drama, were renowned for their high professional quality. Most of these performances were, however, predominantly musical with spoken drama playing only a subordinate role.

Institutionally speaking, the Lyceum was different to Chinese theatre in terms of its social and cultural function. The theatre was occasionally frequented by Chinese

⁹ I am following here Siyuan Liu, *Performing Hybridity in Colonial-Modern China, Palgrave Studies in Theatre and Performance History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). My thanks also to Wang Kun, a doctoral candidate affiliated to the Global Theatre Histories research group.

¹⁰ *Shenbao* (*Shanghai News*), 24 Feb 1876, cited in Liu (2013), 34.

elites who found it totally different from Beijing style *jungju* and *kunqu* theatre performed in traditional teahouses. The Chinese theatre here was characterized by noise, cigarette sellers, melon seeds and peanuts, the candy peddlers shuttling back and forth between the spectators. A visit to the Lyceum theatre was a more formal occasion. People dressed smartly and the usher bowed spectators into the theatre.

The Lyceum played a key role in establishing the transitional hybrid form known as *wenming xi* (so-called 'civilized' drama), the precursor to *huaju*. Its role in the modernization of Chinese theatre needs to be reconsidered as Siyuan Liu argues in his recent book *Performing Hybridity in Colonial-Modern China* (2013).

The first professional dramatic theatre, Chunyang She (the Spring Sun troupe), was established in 1907 in Shanghai. They rented the Lyceum Theatre and performed a new version of *The Black Slave's Cry for Freedom* there. Being in Chinese many local people now went to the Lyceum Theatre for the first time to see a Chinese performance.

This production, Siyuan Liu argues, 'literally introduced Western theatrical technology and architecture to the Chinese theatre world, with profound results' (59)...it was the choice of the Lyceum Theatre, which had remained largely unknown to the Chinese community, and the production's realistic scenery and lighting that would become its lasting impact.' (60) He argues furthermore that even more significant was the encounter with proscenium stage and Western theatre architecture, which were significantly different from the teahouse style theatres. This encounter prompted Chinese theatre entrepreneurs to build theatres in the Western-style in Shanghai, the first being opened only one year later. We should also not forget the important mediating role of Japan in this process. Not only was Japan the country where students from Asia encountered Western modernisation including theatre. Technical assistance in building these new theatres also came from Japan, not Europe. (61)

I have no more time to follow Chinese Theatre history here and the many tensions between tradition and modernity, between *huaju* and *jungju*. For most of the people sitting here, I am telling you nothing new. My aim is not give an introduction to theatre history. The question is rather: how do such developments fit into early globalization? Suffice it to say, now theatre had both standardized and diversified, it was both Western and Chinese.

With the emergence of hybrid forms such as *shinpa* in Japan, *wenming xi* in Shanghai, and hybridised genres such as Parsi theatre and its Malay variations, we see that the initial response to Western theatre was a mixture of local and imported forms, all of which had however a degree of music and dance. This is not surprising since much of the Western theatre that was presented in the cities that became theatrical hubs was also a mixture of dance, song and spoken word. Technologically speaking, there is no doubt that Western theatre was imported as part of the overall modernisation imperatives of the early 20th century. Before the First World War, the most

technologically advanced theatre in Asia was the privately operated Imperial Theatre in Tokyo, itself a product of the most up-to-date theatre technology from Europe.

This period of early globalisation produced, I would argue, a highly complex blend of cultural traditions where spoken drama was only one variant. Its most important legacy is however the mutual recognition of theatre beyond exotic bewilderment. The fact that we can gather here and talk about theatre and education is, I argue, proof that we as theatre scholars and pedagogues have overcome the transitional phase of exotic bewilderment. Thanks to the theatrical hubs of Bombay, Singapore and Shanghai, the itinerant troupes of Bandmann, Parsi theatre, and Chinese students in Japan, the dichotomy between East and West began to be bridged: this is one of the beneficial results of globalization: theatre today, especially Asian theatre, is a result of standardization through diversity.

Theatre and education today

Finally, the question you have all been asking yourselves. What relevance does this period of theatre history and intercultural exchange have for us today and particularly for questions of Asian theatre education in the 21st century. You may have noticed that there is a common thread running through all the examples of performances I have cited. One performative, the other technological. Whether Hamlet, Cinderella or Gilbert and Sullivan, in each case music, spoken dialogue and singing were always combined. Western theatre that travelled around Asia in this period was almost always musical theatre and not just spoken drama. Today we tend to equate the word theatre, even in Europe, with spoken drama. We seldom associate it with music or singing, these being specialised genres such as opera, operetta or the musical. We tend to forget however that this exclusive focus on the spoken word is a very recent development, not much older than 100 years. Until the early 20th century, even spoken drama was almost always accompanied by music. This was however abolished during modernism and the movement towards art theatre. This narrow focus on one aspect or dimension of theatre has led to a standardisation of an unproductive kind. If we are to think about theatre and globalisation in terms of standardisation through diversity, then we must in both education and practice, re-establish the organic connection between music, dance and the spoken word. Within Asia, there exists a huge number of performance traditions, the challenge will be to create new forms of training and practice that can speak both to the local and global. I suspect that the globalised theatre of the future will emanate from Asia because of the tremendous diversity that exists here. From this diversity will emerge, I predict, new syncretic forms they can also speak to a globalised audience.

The second question: technology. The encounter with Western stage technology in Asia in the early 20th century created a revolution: new theatre-buildings were erected, lighting was technology introduced and the stage-audience configuration significantly changed.

Two weeks ago I saw a performance of *King Lear* from the National Theatre in London in a Munich cinema. It was broadcast live. It was one of five hundred similar locations around the world. The Metropolitan Opera in New York now broadcasts to over two thousand cinemas – in sixty-six countries. Live streaming is also gaining in popularity. We are standing on the threshold of new possibilities to distribute and receive theatre. This challenges many of our assumptions about theatre, I know, but theatre has always been dependent on technology and has always adapted to it. The challenge for the future will be how we engage with this next technology in our training, our research and our practice. The satellite technology used for cinematic livecasts is still Western-focused: London and New York broadcast to the rest of the world. The next stage will be internet streaming where any producer can make their theatre accessible to anyone anywhere – with an internet connection. The global theatre of Maurice Bandmann was dependent on steamships and telegraphic communication. The global theatre of tomorrow will probably require digital technology