

**POSTMODERN ELEMENTS OF  
THEORIES AND PRACTICE  
IN THE COLLABORATIVE WORKS OF  
THE NECESSARY STAGE,  
CARYL CHURCHILL AND THE WOOSTER GROUP**

**by**

**ALVIN TAN CHEONG KHENG**

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**Department of Drama And Theatre Arts  
The University of Birmingham  
Edgbaston  
Birmingham B15 2TT  
United Kingdom**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates collaboration as a creation method that contests the assumptions behind traditional theatre's hierarchical structure. Traditionally, the playwright occupies the primary creation phase, leaving the director, designers and actors to fulfill an interpretative function. However, works primarily reliant on non-literary signifiers require a methodology that involves artists from varied disciplines earlier in the creation process.

Collaborating hierarchically gives way to co-authorship collaboration, revising the natures of artistic roles, relationships and composition. Interdisciplinary practice is adopted by practitioners interested in exploring the interactions between the literary text and the resources of other disciplines, giving rise to hybrid and semiotic-based performance texts.

The aim of this thesis is to appreciate the ways in which issue-orientated '60s and '70s social transformation theatre is contemporised to a theatre of empowerment whose object is to challenge rationalised mindsets and empower imaginations through engaging the audience as co-artist. The collaborative practices of British playwright Caryl Churchill and American's Wooster Group are compared to examine the relationships between their processes and application of artistic strategies in organising their materials. The thesis concludes with an analysis of how a Singaporean theatre company, The Necessary Stage modifies and applies the lessons learned in its collaborative works *Pillars* and *Galileo (I Feel The Earth Move)*.

43,736 words

# **DEDICATION**

For my Father and Mother

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## INTRODUCTION

### COLLABORATION AND THE NECESSARY STAGE (TNS)

This thesis examines why and how collaboration can be a way of creating a “theatre with a politics”; a theatre that draws from its society the essence and means to confront that society penetratingly, without the need to moralise. Collaboration, as a method of working thaws theatre-making’s hierarchical structure so that the playwright and/or the director shares authorial space with the cast, designers and artists from different disciplines. Collaboration makes it possible to employ other performance disciplines or mediums as aesthetic strategies for composing a work. To exploit the wider range of vocabularies as signifiers, evident in interdisciplinary works, the co-authorship nature of collaboration is a necessary mode of working. As a theatre director, I have become increasingly interested in employing different disciplines to create issue-based works that engender the participation of the audience as a *more* active collaborator or co-artist. Co-artist in this thesis refers to the opportunities within the framework of a performance, for the audience to exercise their imagination in order to disrupt prescribed ways of seeing; to create meaning, make conclusions and take a stand with as little reliance on the work’s privileged viewpoint and/or discourse as possible.

The thesis will focus on two practitioners who work collaboratively. As I am interested in interdisciplinary collaboration, the practitioners are Caryl Churchill and The Wooster Group (TWG). Although both employ collaboration to create new works, Churchill is a playwright and Elizabeth LeCompte, a director (TWG). My interest in these two practitioners is simply because Haresh Sharma (resident playwright) and I (director) have been working collaboratively to create new plays for 10 years. I find it necessary to expose myself to other relevant collaborative outfits for professional development.

Secondly, my interest is also to study how their issue-based works are composed so that they are powerful yet unprogrammable. Issue-based plays run the risk of being didactic since an alternative programme or utopia is usually suggested, either directly or by implication. Churchill is clear about her utopian values:

[W]hat kind of society I would like: decentralized, nonauthoritarian, communist, nonsexist - a society in which people can be in touch with their feelings, and in control of their lives.

[Thurman, 1982:54]

However, through innovative devices, her audiences have had to revise their conventional expectations of theatre, and when confronted, perhaps employ different reading strategies to get to the kernel of what she is proposing. TWG appropriates and juxtaposes texts and events, ranging from personal to cultural and political histories, provoking multiple responses without allowing a controlling perspective to guide how the audience thinks. The devices and strategies used by both playwright and director to create open texts or performances and hybrid works aim at empowering the audience's imagination by engaging them as a collaborator.

However, it is necessary to state that hybrid works do not necessarily emerge from a collaborative process. Collaboration can also result in the creation of a naturalistic, well-made play. David Hughes stresses that it is important to distinguish between a collaborative process (i.e. a human and social situation) and hybrid works (i.e. a formal condition). He proposes:

[T]hat works generated by collaborative processes do not necessarily emerge as hybrid art forms, and hybrid works, when they exist, have not necessarily been the products of collaborative processes.

[Hughes, 1996:13]

It is also necessary to state that working collaboratively does not ensure an open work. What matters is that the work confronts the audience. However, this is not to relegate the process behind a work but to remind us that one does not need a politically-correct way of working to produce a work that is politically effective. To further the argument, one does not have to be a morally upright person or have a social conscience to create powerful art. Besides, closure can still happen whilst rehearsing an open text if the artistic team attempts to over-interpret the text for the audience. Whether the team opts to respect the openness of the text or not can determine if the final performance text robs or empowers the audience's imagination. What then matters as much as having a politic is possessing the artistic skills and craftsmanship to innovate.

How conservative or radical a collaborative method is reflects the political stand and risks the team takes. This can determine what and how devices are used and how these engage and challenge the audience. Another factor is the personalities of the collaborators. What distinguishes Churchill and LeCompte from other practitioners who work in the collaborative mode is that they have a clear sense of their politics and how these politics operate in the composition of their works, whether they are working in isolation or collaboratively.

Having said that, I would like to state that this thesis wishes to focus on Churchill and LeCompte working in their collaborative modes; how they work with other artists and the devices and strategies employed by them. Although collaboration does not always result

in hybrid works that are open, it is evident that in the practices of Churchill and TWG, it does. Therefore, this thesis is an attempt to understand how their methods of collaboration are related to the organisation of materials in their works, and how that subsequently defines the role of the audience. The other obvious reason is that, in a broad sense, the theatre that TNS is aspiring towards approximates the works of Churchill and TWG.

## THE NECESSARY STAGE

My interest in collaborative work began with my own practice with TNS which I founded in 1986 in Singapore. It was formally launched in 1987, and became a fully-fledged professional company limited by guarantee by 1992.<sup>1</sup> A Theatre For Youth Branch was established that same year producing work distinct from our Main Season. A Community Service Theatre Branch was formed in December 1994. TNS began its life with the collaborative method. As we hardly had any formal training, we started creating our works, formulating our own working principles along the way. Collaboration became a way of creating opportunities to devise plays in a collective fashion, bringing together creative energies and exploring different synergies with an open spirit. But what started as a casual way of working later became a methodology.<sup>2</sup>

Our first exploratory effort was *Lanterns Never Go Out*. It had a Chinese protagonist whose dialect was Teochew. To capture the rhythm of speech in dialect, especially that of the protagonist's mother who does not speak English, resident playwright Haresh Sharma first wrote in English. He then asked the actor playing the mother to translate her speech into Teochew and later, literally back into English whilst adhering to the Teochew syntax. With a little adjustment, Sharma managed to communicate the meaning in Singlish (the Singaporean vernacular) whilst keeping the essence of the culture.

*Those Who Can't, Teach*, a later work, was a project that involved four teachers who were also actors. Long improvisation exercises were conducted so that we became deeply immersed in the staff room culture before we felt better qualified to represent, manipulate or abstract the material from that world. Working collaboratively made us aware of the importance of being in touch with the essence of the work before looking for the narrative or the form.

We were experiencing the change of rapid development all around us. At the time of the work, several schools in Singapore were uprooting to new sites. During improvisations, we explored the essence of change and transition in the world of the school. Between scenes, the pounding sound of construction work could be heard in the dark. Denoting work-in-progress, it became a sound metaphor for change as a constant in Singapore society. Language was again explored, this time to an even larger extent. A teacher, Mrs Phua, speaks in Singapore Standard English whilst conducting a lesson. When she steps into the teacher's room, she is more relaxed and she interacts with her colleagues in snatches of Singlish. She then answers a phone call and converses in 'Baba' ('Peranakan' Malay or the language used by Straits-Born Chinese) patois with her mother.<sup>3</sup> The pounding sound and the rhythm of different languages make for a more sensual theatrical experience.

The collaborative method became more of an asset as we began exploring issues more removed from our immediate concerns. With *Off Centre*, a play about mental illness, the playwright, director and cast made several trips to half-way houses, after-care centres and mental institutions. We interviewed mental patients at various stages of recovery, psychiatrists and social workers. Informed and moved by the field trips, the actors constructed their roles and improvised with much conviction. Working with three Malay-Muslim (a minority ethnic group) actors with major roles, we were able to draw

from their cultural and working class backgrounds which contributed to more convincing character portrayals.

The collaborative method provided us with the means to take on the next challenge: *Excuse Me While I Kiss The Sky* used non-actors. All of them had some connection with attempted suicide as teenagers. Theresa Tan, a playwright who proposed this concept, worked with myself and a counsellor on this project. We also used collaboration in a double-bill entitled *I Am Old*. We devised two short plays based on students' interactions with the elderly. Another play, *October*, involved a community of elderly non-actors.

TNS' aesthetic aim is intracultural. Intracultural, as how I have come to define it, is the drawing from the inter-relationships of diverse cultures in one geographical space over a period of time. One geographical space means a community evolving under certain historical, cultural, political, social and economical constructs. Over the years, the interactions amongst different ethnic communities have impacted on respective cultural and linguistic systems, giving rise to many unique strands, versions or hybrids of life perceptions and beliefs. As TNS' aim is to explore the complexities and multiple identities that constitute the Singaporean, the important task is to access the belief systems and world views of the different ethnic communities in our society. The challenge is to find ways to transcend the language barriers which is a more difficult task than handling accents. In this phase of educational policy change, language has become one of the divides between the older and younger generation.

Collaborating with actors from different ethnic backgrounds is appropriate to Singapore's multicultural context as it helps overcome the huge handicap that the English-educated playwright faces. Whether we are creating an English or a multi-lingual play, collaboration allows us to tap into the richness of the different cultural systems for resource materials. During rehearsals actors are encouraged to improvise in different

dialects according to the characters' educational and social backgrounds. Taboos, superstitions, religious symbols, customs and rites that are less known to the western-educated practitioner become available.

We find collaboration most beneficial as a way out of the ivory tower syndrome that comes from working in isolation. English has become so important that many Singaporeans cannot speak dialects, missing out on their moral and cultural precepts. Yet as a *lingua franca*, English has also helped us gather actors from different cultural backgrounds, thus avoiding creating communally-based or monocultural theatre.

## **BRIEF HISTORY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE THEATRE IN SINGAPORE**

The predecessor to the Singapore English language theatre was the Stage Club, a British company, which staged mostly established English classics.<sup>4</sup> Professional indigenous English language theatre is young; only about twelve years old. Theatre Studies at tertiary level and a practical acting school only started in the last five years. Without much theatre tradition and formal training, indigenous English language theatre was very much left on its own to develop.

In the '60s and '70s, formal theatre training was available mainly from traditional ethnic-speaking communities such as the Indian Fine Arts school or the Beijing Opera Street theatre troupes. Practitioners, already steeped in Western education, did not value these communally-based programmes. Instead they took very quickly to Western theatre models. Due to language policies favouring English, most of these traditional performance forms and skills were not transferred to practitioners when the indigenous English language theatre blossomed in the late '80s.

The postcolonial period saw some local works penned by Singaporeans such as *One Year Back Home*, *Are you There Singapore?*, *The Moon is Less Bright* and *White Rose At Midnight*. The writers were mostly university graduates and held fulltime jobs. They wrote in their free time and were not playwrights by profession. Most themes were handled amateurishly. The plays failed to capture the nuances and dimensions of the Singaporean essences. Although the indigenous voice was clearly expressed in nationalistic themes, the spectrum and depth of characters from the varied multicultural backgrounds suffered in representation. Speech patterns, rhythms, metaphors, idioms and aspirations either adhered closely to that of the playwright and what s/he was familiar with; or were constructed by his/her anglophile, western-educated mindset.

With no indigenous professional English language theatre company in sight, the '70s saw a hiatus with very few plays written and produced. The only formidable local English language theatre company existing then was the University of Singapore amateur campus-based Experimental Theatre Club. Due to the lack of stagecraft experience, locally written works were often untheatrical and unstageable. Untrained and new actors were not ready to be directed in these plays. Directors and theatre companies were not prepared to produce them.

The early '80s saw the formation of four English language theatre companies; STARS, TheatreWorks, Act 3 and Third Stage. By 1986, several others mushroomed due to the impact of the Singapore International Festival of Arts and the annual Drama Festival. New groups such as TNS, Action Theatre, Arts and Acts, Just Theatre and Aksens were formed. Only the first two have survived until today.

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE THEATRE AND THE AUTHORITARIAN STATE

Singapore's conservative socio-political situation has made it difficult for theatre groups to explore issues without soon coming into conflict with traditional cultural sensibilities. Politically, subversion in Singapore is defined as any alternative culture or values that are contrary to what the status quo of the state upholds. Considering the conservative nature of our society, it is naive to perceive that only the government is conservative. Urbanisation and modernisation have been adopted as the political, economic and social programmes for Singapore's development and progress. A construct promulgated is that westernisation, instead of modernisation, is the scapegoat for social ills and pathologies. Paradoxically, although competition is encouraged, individualism and notions such as human rights are constantly criticised as alien western concepts. Society is valued over individual interests and so social integration is to be preserved at the expense of individual rights.

In 1993, TNS was involved in a debacle with the Ministry of Health. After being commissioned to produce a work on mental health, Sharma was told to rewrite the play. The ministry deemed two scenes controversial and objectionable - a suicide scene and an army scene where the protagonist suffered his first mental breakdown. The board that assessed the script reasoned that one ministry could not sponsor a play with a scene that puts another ministry (i.e. the Ministry of Defence) in a bad light. The company opted to stage *Off Centre* without the changes, forfeiting the S\$30,000 commission. The following year, the National Council of Social Services sponsored a condensed version of the work to open its Mental Health week (refer to *Appendix B* for more details).

In 1993, both Sharma and I attended Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed workshop on Forum Theatre and Theatre Therapy in New York. When we returned, we modified and applied the Forum Theatre technique with two short plays: *Mixed Blessings* and

*MCP* (Male Chauvinist Pig). Forum Theatre, together with Performance Art, prompted state intervention, and through the National Arts Council, both forms were proscribed. The reason given was that there was no control as there was no script that could effectively undergo any form of censorship through the Public Entertainments Licensing Unit (PELU). A Forum Theatre event has the potential to incite riots as it can be hijacked by audiences (as ‘spect-actors’) with political intentions.<sup>5</sup>

An article, constructed as an exposé alleging both Sharma and I as practising Marxism in theatre, appeared in *The Straits Times*, our main English language newspaper. This was not the first time Singaporean artists had been persecuted. Veteran theatre director Kuo Pao Kun and his dancer/choreographer wife, Goh Lay Kuan, were detained in the ‘70s for four years and one year respectively allegedly for subversive works. Two leaders from Third Stage, which staged agit-prop plays, were detained in 1986 for two years allegedly for being part of a national Marxist conspiracy. Labelling and framing artists as subversives and enemies to the country’s stability is not a new strategy to warn artists against pushing boundaries in the arts. Such fabrications create fear and paranoia amongst citizens who then perceive the government as an effective saviour. A memorandum circulated by the National Arts Council advised theatre practitioners to exercise self-censorship over potentially controversial issues pertaining to race, religion and sex (refer to *Appendix G* ).

Although both artists and government share the task of constructing our national identity, the approaches have been different. This is nothing new. If only there were space for ongoing dialectic critique or dialogue between the two strands, then the dominant perception that cultural heterogeneity threatens social cohesion can be debated and explored for alternative views. Tolerance and respect for difference have been used by the government for the political purpose of creating national identity; in the promotion of social integration, stability and harmony. It has been carefully used to construct a sense

of vibrancy to boost cultural tourism thereby preserving a conducive environment for foreign investments and economic excellence. This environment has been cultivated at the expense of developing the critical faculties of Singaporeans as part of the cultural development process. Other than that, respect for difference has always been suspect as it is potentially divisive and must therefore be constantly held in check.

The Singaporean political and social ethos is “prevention is better than cure” and so anything potentially subversive is best nipped in the bud. When taken in a more pragmatic vein, anything that does not contribute to the goal of economic excellence is to be discouraged. A major example is the closure in the ‘70s of Nanyang University, a Chinese tertiary institution. Some of the ‘unwestern’ elements were viewed as incompatible with modernisation - dialects and other non-English languages were phased out to produce a more homogenous identity to keep the ‘machinery’ lean and mean, and to achieve common economic development goals. This has cut Singaporeans off from the moral and cultural forces that could have provided an ‘armour’ against the onslaught of westernisation that came with rapid modernisation. Therefore, we have been partly responsible for our plight, not having enough sense of our ethnic selves to resist the erosion of traditional values when Singapore started to globalise. This is ironic, considering the government’s current concern about changing attitudes amongst some Singaporeans who tend to regard Singapore as ‘Singapore Inc.’ (a corporation, a transit point or a hotel for doing business) rather than a home.

## **REDEFINING POLITICAL THEATRE - PERFORMANCE AND SIGN SYSTEMS**

‘Political theatre’ is set apart as a genre from other types of drama because of the specific relationship between theatre and politics. It is considered more partisan and subjective in its dealings with theme and content as it was once synonymous with the Left-wing. But

the Left has become a more fractured, multi-faceted and pluralised entity in global politics, especially when more marginalised communities and countries emerge from oppressed states seeking recognition, acceptance and a space to co-exist.<sup>6</sup>

In the theatre, Feminist, Black, Asian, Gay and Lesbian theatre companies have introduced new content to the stage. Conventional paradigms such as class divisions now interact with ethnic and sexual orientations, giving voice and representation to hitherto suppressed themes and issues. In terms of form, categorical divisions such as the distinctions between word-based theatre and performance, eastern and western theatrical genres, music and dance, director and playwright and so on are seen as cultural or social constructs that can be broken down. However, instead of one discipline dominating another, each can be appreciated in the vocabulary of the other, resulting in interdisciplinary practices. These new categories enlarge the scope of social realism, working-class naturalism and multidisciplinary practice. The emerging politics of difference combats a purist mindset so that power and presence in established systems are redefined. Cross-genre works politically imply a challenge to the protectionism and traditionalism in the artistic arena.

The *Off Centre* debacle was proof that the well-made play, notwithstanding its strengths, made it too easy for authorities to exercise censorship and control by selecting to read segments of the play out of context. In order to challenge society's priority of excellence in productivity over human compassion, the play had inadvertently challenged the nation's pragmatic values and capitalistic programme. The censors chose to perceive the protagonist's breakdown during his national service as an attack on the Ministry of Defence which was tantamount to jeopardising national security. The protagonist's tragic suicide was seen as an onslaught on Singapore's social system, a direct confrontation with the nation's leadership, rather than an examination of society's shortcomings. The

Chinese patriarchal culture holds the view that the failure of an individual member reflects on the leadership of the society.<sup>7</sup>

In *Off Centre*, the objective of challenging and countering socially accepted perceptions was too transparent, resulting in a propagandistic stance, despite the strength of its narrative and dramatic devices. Some critics recommended a more reflexive, tangential or abstract approach to allow more room for the audience to 'breathe'. They also advocated creating more distance between the creator and the work to avoid attempts at reducing the work to a purely political motive. As much as the State stages a crisis whenever it uses the Marxist label for social control or when it propagates its social agendas through campaigns and National Day parades, theatre has to find an alternative apparatus for its discourse. Alternative apparatus here refers to the content, structure and form, and the artistry and craft involved in using them when composing. Hence, performance and non-literary devices have become increasingly important to TNS as an attempt to circumvent the conservative environment.

According to Holderness, the content and form in all cultural productions are not ideology-free. Whatever is staged - the form, presentation, the use of props, sets, the way the narrative unfolds, how the work is composed, how it signs and how it positions the audience, the kind of a venue it is staged at, the kind of a physical seating arrangement - all can be considered ideological in their construction:

A play by a dramatist like David Hare, clearly definable as a political play [...], may be a conventional drama of high naturalism, performed in the Royal National Theatre, before an audience composed entirely of middle-class Londoners. The 'politics' of the play are confined exclusively to its content, and have no bearing on either its form, or its function within the institutional process of dramatic production.

[Holderness, 1992:7]

Theatre that empowers is political. But politically effective theatre does not necessarily mean having *only* to work within the play's content; that is to reflect or represent the community it is empowering. In the context of Singapore, the above considerations are important. Firstly because living in a contemporary urban culture, the highly modernised Singaporean's mind is susceptible to or deeply entrenched in rationalised patterns of thinking. A symptom of this is a low tolerance for difference. Recent developments in the local mainstream have seen government officials and ministers clearly favouring commercially viable blockbusters such as *Les Misérables* and *Cats*. There is an increasing need to defend the spaces for diversity and difference in the arts lest local theatre collapses and becomes homogeneous. The population is also largely conservative and obedient, aligning itself to the dominant agenda and vision. This predicament is, ironically, largely due to an efficient, stable, corrupt-free and long-standing government (People's Action Party) which has always 'delivered the goods'.

It is also because there are practically no autonomous institutions that have any real power to protect the freedom of expression in the arts. The detention of two Third Stage leaders in 1987 ended agit-prop in Singapore. The proscription of forum theatre and performance art in 1994 was yet another signal that any form that is politically inspired is not tolerated. Presently, although social-issue theatre is acceptable, practitioners are warned to observe the out-of-bound markers. Recently in a TNS' double-bill production ("Moving Home Stories"), the second play, *Sea*, had a scene where a character ate a banana in a suggestive manner. Despite the recommendation from an NAC official to censor the scene, we decided not to as we felt it was artistically justified. The NAC reported the matter to PELU even before there was any complaint from the public, slapping the production with an R(A) rating.<sup>8</sup>

To circumvent censorship, control and prescription, the object of political theatre must move from message-orientated works that employ the naturalistic form to confronting the creative powers of the audience more radically. The naturalistic form sometimes tends to be too caught up with playing out the effects of social conditions on the individual protagonist. This sometimes reduces the issue to a particular case rather than implicating the audience as part of the tragic cause. Although the realist project offers a critical thesis of reality, the audience's role is often reduced to deciphering the moral of the tale. If the route to opening minds becomes problematic at content level, two steps can be taken; working more imaginatively at the content and/or the form.

One proposal is to invent new and different methods of work, to break down traditional categories through interdisciplinary practice, so that new forms are explored. Some of these forms redefine the conventional relationship between the work and the audience. For example, the audience is likely to be challenged to employ a new dramaturgical vocabulary when reviewing an interdisciplinary work, subverting conventional expectations or the officially accepted view of theatre. One is unable to evaluate the devised or improvised script only in terms of the playwright without referring to the acting or directing. Giving credit to individual actors in a cast ceases to be an easy task when the performance is largely reliant on ensemble work or when a video monitor performs as an actor in an intermedia work. One is unable to determine where directing ends and scripting begins; when the choreographer, using the performers to 'script' with movement, has taken over. Such hybrid works allow new forms to challenge the imagination differently. They possess the potential to disturb a fixed mindset that subscribes to what the dominant culture prescribes. They encourage the audience to question the closures that social constructions or labels promote.

But the search for new forms is not only politically motivated. The naturalistic form lacks the necessary structural, linguistic, and ideological flexibility to hold the complexities of

urban life; to voice accurately contemporary society's sense of chaos, uncertainty, and alienation. It is unable to contain the current urge for process, dispersal, deferment, and play.

Political theatre needs to be redefined to uncover how controlling ideologies operate within the theatre institution; how its traditional practices and methods are employed in performance. Since a play's political efficacy is not necessarily determined only by its political content but also by its form and function, exploiting both theatre as a sign system and the resources of performance become relevant to a contemporary definition of political theatre. Since one has access to and can exploit a wider range of vocabularies as one is not primarily literary-dependent, disguising authorial or dispersing hegemonic presences then becomes more challenging - it becomes a more complex communal task.

Authorial presence refers to the impact of the author's influence on the audience's reading, be it through the playwright, director or performer. A relatively higher authorial presence can be found in propagandistic or even in some issue-based plays. Such plays can limit the scope of interpretation, though not necessarily participation. Conversely, plays that are too open can become so inaccessible that they alienate audiences. Being conscious of authorial presence helps creators determine the level and scope of audience interaction. The author-function does not begin and end with the creators. As the audience has a share in this function, the work is always in the process of being reauthored. As Howard Barker indicates in his proposal for the Catastrophic Theatre in *Arguments for a Theatre* (Barker, 1989:91):

- a. the audience cannot grasp everything; nor [can] the author
- b. the critic must suffer like everyone else

The lack of resolution disturbs, disorients and provokes the audience towards providing their own resolution after some degree of guidance. Such performances encourage the audience to be more alert to signs and respond more associatively in an experiential, visceral and emotional way.

The sign has a purely arbitrary referent in that a signifier has no corresponding signified.<sup>9</sup> Since it is unstable and ambiguous, signs can be used to disturb or destabilise habitual mental schemas and to enhance multiple readings. Performance can also be used to destabilise textual determinacies. When used in *counterpoint* to the text, performance opens a work up to a spectrum of possible meanings. Such modulations of text and performance have inspired strategies in postmodern theatre practice. Playwrights and directors who are more semiotics-conscious exploit the instability of the sign and performance to “desemiotise” text (Heuvel, 1993:35).

A scene from *Pillars*, by TNS, can help illustrate the above discussion.<sup>10</sup> In this scene two housewives (a Malay and a Chinese) hurling racist comments and insults at one another were framed by the fact that the two *male* actors were *cross-dressing* on stage. Furthermore, they nudged and prompted one another for the right lines. The theatrical devices (ie. costume, cross-gender casting and line-prompting) were consciously used to signify that what was being staged was a rehearsal context and not the scene itself. Both actors vacillated in and out of character. When out of character, they laughed at one another, relishing their characters’ racist retorts. The actors were better off than the characters as they had acknowledged and transcended the social construction of prejudice. Friendship and trust between the actors gave them licence to be even more racist - to outdo one another - when in character. Laughter, a possible sign of acceptance, was contextually communicated by exploiting the satiric effect of a frame-within-a-frame device. Here both signs and performance enabled the audience to see beyond the disparaging quality of the racist (spoken/literary) text.

Postmodernist theatre employs “disjunctive, displaced, or indeterminate forms, a discourse of fragments, an ideology of fracture, a will to unmaking, an invocation of silence - [it] veers toward all these and yet implies their very opposites, their antithetical realities” (Hassan, 1980:125). By recognising and using the playful (ambiguous and unstable) potential of signs and performance, it is possible to transgress without offending, and to confront without being didactic so that assumptions can be challenged without earning resentment. Postmodernism can expose and dislocate the assumptions that govern conventions so that traditional ways of reading are dislodged.<sup>11</sup> In other words, conventions can only be effectively challenged if the method in the work (i.e. the form) also changes radically.

The epilogue in *Galileo (I Feel The Earth Move)* showed the ensemble furiously hitting canes against a wooden platform.<sup>12</sup> This image gradually transformed, showing the actors performing, in slow-motion, the impact of the canes on their bodies. As the lights dimmed, the ensemble froze in a tableau as an actress began to dance to the samba version of ‘Brazil’ (the movie soundtrack which was used during scene transitions) against the backdrop of a fireworks display (video footage) at Singapore’s National Day Parade. Here, the celebration of nationhood was appropriated and brought into the *Galileo* context. Preceding episodes had illustrated how the state marginalised some communities through its policies and campaigns. Persecution and the celebration of a nation were sharply juxtaposed in performance. The subversive potential of the sign and performance allowed for more contextual communication through emotionally and politically charged images, where words alone would have failed to get around conservative sensibilities.

Another example is the transvestite scene in *Galileo*. Singapore theatre companies have been warned not to promote alternative lifestyles on stage. We had created a video

footage of our actors performing a transvestite routine to the popular Sister Sledge song *We Are Family*. This footage was projected for a minute whilst the actors, not in drag, assembled on stage to watch themselves. Then the screen went blank and showed a colour test transmission accompanied by a sound, suggesting censorship. A slide image of a monkey undergoing a brain-scan experiment was projected. The Recantation scene followed immediately with each character confessing their 'crimes', one example being:

I, Mohammed Noh 0617893A, hereby apologise for my belief and my action. Please punish me for treasuring my past, for not being supportive of change, for not thinking of progress, for being unproductive.

Members of our very own Board of Directors who watched the opening night performance expressed serious discomfort. One of their suggestions to the artistic team was to exclude the transvestites' recantation. The board members felt the scene was beyond their 'comfort zones' and would not be able to defend the production if there were any major negative ramifications. The artistic team decided to exclude the text but not the tableau of the transvestites' recantation. Since the transvestites were the last to recant, the text did not matter. The four actors standing there in mute silence broke the litany pattern and created a dramatic tension that drove the intended point home more poignantly and penetratingly than the version with the text.

Privileging (i.e. to give something recognition and status) the resources of performance, as illustrated by the above examples, is an advantage to theatre practice in multicultural societies like Singapore. As a theatrical vocabulary, performance is a potential *lingua franca* as it transcends language, class and educational barriers. It can be used to create visual and poetic images that are alternative communication systems thus making word-based theatres less exclusive.

When I started my postgraduate research, I found myself increasingly taken up by the working processes and the works of Churchill and TWG in relation to my practice. I had brought with me the anxieties that had emerged with the 'social conscience' label TNS had earned. Politically, the lack of self-reflexive sophistication in our past works had highlighted and reinforced the us-and-them (artist versus government) divide. Alternative viewpoints had been limited to oppositional rather than contrapuntal or even self-critical positions. TNS had been preoccupied in clarifying our positions but that in turn became an entrapment, inadvertently creating hegemonic presences in our works that propagated reductive rather than complex ways of perceiving reality and the human condition. What TNS was guilty of was its hitherto subconscious intent to hijack the audiences from a mainstream and urban ways of thinking into our way of thinking. This strategy was problematic because instead of freeing the imagination, we had shackled audiences into yet another way of thinking. While researching Churchill and TWG, I managed to dislocate myself from the familiar ground rules, devices, strategies and ideals of both the processes and presentations of our work. Although filled with provocative political and emotive images, there is an absence of a controlling or dominating perspective in their works. My reading of Churchill and TWG is that both were artistically involved in contemporising issue-orientated '60s and '70s social transformation theatre to a theatre of empowerment whose object is to challenge rationalised mindsets, creating opportunities for imaginations to be activated and empowered.

## RATIONALE OF THESIS STRUCTURE

Chapter One of this thesis describes and analyses Churchill's devices, styles and methodology, focusing on her plays developed in collaboration with Joint Stock and Second Stride. As both Sharma and I have been inspired by Churchill's earlier works such as *Top Girls* and *Cloud Nine*, it was a significant exercise to trace her increasing engagement with structural devices and non-literary disciplines. In her later works, such as *Poisoners*, *Hotel* and *The Skriker*, Churchill's ideology vanished in the content, and re-emerged as radicalised theatrical forms. In Chapter Two, I discuss TWG's past productions, expounding on Elizabeth LeCompte's and TWG's working methods. TNS' interest in innovating and inventing new performance vocabularies and forms with actors and artists from different disciplines drew me towards the radical works of TWG. TWG inhabits, deconstructs and exposes hegemonic presences in classical texts or problematises, complexifies and revises social constructs. These methods provide me with strategies to deal with binary oppositions that predominate institutionalised mindsets which I have been guilty of subscribing to.

Chapter Three discusses collaboration and interdisciplinary works and compares the working processes of Churchill and LeCompte. As TNS' past methodology has parallels to that of Churchill's, this comparison exercise has provided me with new working possibilities and inspired a bolder exploration of organising principles. Chapter Four deals with New Realism. Autonomous performance, which in this thesis refers to the intrinsic value of performance as an artistic form that is independent of any extrinsic agendas such as education or social transformation, is problematic for theatres of empowerment. Besides, the literary text is an important feature for a theatre of empowerment as it draws from historical, cultural and social forces. For TNS, it is more meaningful to view and inherit the ways in which experiments with performance and non-literary media have impacted on word-based theatre. New Realism is a broad category of

forms where non-literary vocabularies can contribute to making realism current and relevant without resorting to too much abstraction.

In Chapter Five I refer to two collaborative works I have recently directed, *Pillars* and *Galileo (I Feel The Earth Move)*, to discuss the collaborative experiences of creating interdisciplinary works and the pitfalls of collaborative practice. The concluding chapter reflects on what TNS' version of a theatre of empowerment is; what empowerment means to me as a Singaporean director practising in English language theatre in a multicultural setting.

*Pillars* and *Galileo* were both created and produced after I had researched and written on Churchill and TWG. Writing the first four chapters was crucial to the composition of *Pillars* and *Galileo*. It provided me the opportunity to study, analyse and appreciate the ways in which historical, social and cultural factors shaped Churchill's and TWG's aesthetic politics which in turn determined the devices and strategies they invented and employed in their works. I found the research especially helpful when I opted to make intricate modifications and adaptations to the Singaporean context. For example, in *Pillars*, I decided to deconstruct indigenous legends and myths (refer to *Appendix E*). The Marxist article on TNS was used in both *Pillars* and *Galileo* to revise our history. We employed a modified form of forum theatre in *Pillars*; characters in preceding scenes became 'spect-actors' in the final episode and changed the course of events. I would not have been able to apply devices that engendered new performance forms and texts (i.e. to invent new and alternative apparatus) if not for the work done in the first four chapters.

Chapter Five and the conclusion were written after *Pillars* and *Galileo* were staged. Since the ideological position behind the whole premise of collaboration in this thesis is democracy, I felt a need to address the complexities involved. I also evaluated TNS' new collaborative methodology in the light of my post-colonial anxieties. Before I started on

my research, I felt that Singapore English Language theatre practice was at a cultural disadvantage - bankrupt; that unless we returned to or researched into our ethnic roots, we were 'cultural orphans' (a term given by veteran practitioner Kuo Pao Kun) and were hopelessly creating neocolonialist theatre. That anxiety was recently put to rest as I began to question the assumptions that upheld such a pronouncement.

When I was in England, I realised that despite speaking English and being exposed to western thinking, my daily life choices were sometimes different from those made by my English friends. I did soak in the baptismal waters of Asian upbringing. I became aware of my own hybridity as a Straits-Born Chinese and how my sensibilities were a composite of derivations. Fractured and fragmented, with an interaction of eastern and western sensibilities; there is an emergent "Singaporean" in the making. We need not define our identity by holding tightly the umbilical cords to our respective motherlands. Nor do we need to subject ourselves to western sensibilities for approval, or resist it with the vehemence that the generations before us did. This liminal and transient phase heralds no arrival for me. There is no stable, authoritative or comprehensive definition of who this Singaporean is and there should never be. I became aware that our position was one of strength rather than weakness; that we were able to use the English Language as a *lingua franca*, a vehicle, a cultural confluence where each discrete indigenous cultural system was able to access the other. In turning the dominant English Language on its head and managing it to serve our ends, I saw a space opening up for TNS in the world of contemporary post-colonial theatre. The temper of the times is a respect for difference. The 'cultural orphan' has a voice deserving of artistic expression on stage.

*Appendix A* is a case study of one of TNS' past work, *Those Who Can't, Teach*, that briefly provides a historical context of TNS' early collaborative method. Comparisons can be made if the above is read against TNS' more recent works, *Pillars* and *Galileo (I Feel The Earth Move)*, which can be found in *Appendices E* and *F*. For more information

on the debacles that TNS underwent with *Off Centre*, *Forum Theatre* and *Moving Home Stories*, please refer to *Appendices B, C and D* respectively. *Appendix G* is the NAC letter to theatre companies renewing the exemption from submission of scripts and the guidelines to be complied. *Appendix H* provides information on TWG's use of source texts, using *St. Antony* as a case study. Using *Brace Up!* as a case study, *Appendix I* provides a brief description of how TWG defines stage space in relation to props and performance styles that gives rise to its characteristic highly semiotised, house-styled performance text.

## CHAPTER ONE

### CARYL CHURCHILL: THE ICONOCLASTIC PLAYWRIGHT

#### CHURCHILL IN CONTEXT

This chapter discusses Caryl Churchill's reliance on and break from realism as a playwright. There is an interesting link between her socialist-feminist impulse and her tension with realism: taking the Brechtian as opposed to the Beckettian route in overcoming some of the limitations inherent in realism. Interestingly, when one compares Joint Stock with Second Stride collaborative models, one is able to appreciate the difference between attempting to pluralise the realist text from within the literary and theatrical tradition on the one hand, and the use of non-literary elements to deconstruct the text on the other. Churchill's bold and radical manipulations of the "givens" in realism show her to be a 'reconstructor' of the form, taking risks to engage her audience as collaborators in a radical way.

In the '70s, British fringe theatre saw the rise of non-traditional, anti-naturalistic, and anti-psychological plays. Protests against the 1970 Miss World Contest catalysed the development of the Women's Street Theatre Group which produced feminist agitprop plays (Randall, 1989:15). Churchill's rise as a playwright coincided with the upsurge of such special interest fringe groups; "most of which were innovative in purpose and in techniques of production, and encouraged plays on non-traditional topics with non-traditional language, structure, and stagecraft. Since Churchill had been experimenting on all levels ever since college days, an alliance seemed natural" (Randall, 1989:15).

Churchill started very much in the realist tradition but has always been known for her innovative stage ideas. Although her pre-Joint Stock plays, *Owners* and *Traps*, are realist plays, they are unconventional.

*Owners*, a play in two acts, deals with several political themes manifested in personal relationships. Churchill wanted to explore various notions of ownership. She was also dealing with two trains of thought; Western individualism, capitalism and aggressive acquisition, and the Eastern (Tao) idea of simply “being”. Churchill had hoped that these two systems would interact and dialogue with one another. In addition, she also touched on social themes such as the Protestant work ethic, the use of sex for social revenge and euthanasia. These multiple major issues are played out in many short scenes which make up this parable.

B.A. Young, the *Financial Times* critic, commented that in *Owners*, Churchill created too many short scenes; some only having single facts that could very well have been incorporated into other existing scenes. Churchill admitted: “I desperately wanted to see if I could make things happen...Next time I don’t think I’d need to have so many scenes because now I’ve got the confidence to realise that I can make things happen” (O’Malley, 1973:50). Young felt that Churchill should have written longer scenes so that development could take place. Michael Billington said: “[Churchill] had to manipulate character to prove her social points: you don’t really believe in the property tycoon’s physical lust for her tenant, in her bookish butcher-husband who is a caricature of male chauvinist piggery or in the suicidal tendencies of her industrious legman” (*The Guardian*, Dec. 13, 1972).

However, I feel that the problem could be more fundamental. Young’s recommendation and Billington’s critique revealed symptoms of a playwright who wanted to express her idiosyncratic (reassembled) vision of reality, but was more dependent on established

dramatic conventions than new forms. At best, she struggled with the destruction of form as seen in scenes like Worsely and Clegg's opening encounter which "systematically violate[s] conventions of conversational logic and etiquette" (Selmon, 1989:57) and using "funny angles" to make events "absurd". In an interview on *Owners*, Churchill said: "One of the things that happens in the play is the juxtaposing of things that one accepts the existence of perfectly well if they're in their own context, but taken out of context, set up against each other, they make each other absurd or unpleasant. And this in itself throws up a style which isn't naturalistic. That's why the playing has to be kept sharp, or parts of the play could seem like clichéd naturalistic scenes, whereas things which might be naturalistic should really be thrown up at funny angles..." (Gooch, 1973:41). But in order to avoid being misunderstood, Churchill should have broken the form more radically so that there would have been no basis for comparison.<sup>1</sup>

*Traps* (1977) is about a group of people and their relationships to one another, set in a room. Syl, Jack and Albert are three characters later joined by Reg (Jack's brother-in-law), Christie (Albert's wife) and Del (a former member of the group). Although the play has strong unities of time, place and characterisation, the linear time logic of the characters' relationships to one another is disrupted. For example, at the end of Act One Del breaks a bowl and a plant is partially destroyed. But Act Two begins with both the bowl and the plant exactly as they were in the beginning of Act One. The characters live out various possibilities and permutations of relationships all at once on stage. However, this was achieved without employing devices such as flashback, hallucination, dream or fantasy. Transitions and transformations take place without justification, excuse or explanation.

Even though there are moments of defamiliarisation in *Owners* and *Traps* which provoke critical evaluation, the plays were still caught up with representations of private/personal pain; *Owners* was considered "not yet a feminist play" and *Traps* was dismissed as

“dramatically not very significant” (Thomsen, 1981:166,168). It was not until later that Churchill began bolder structural explorations, playing more with temporal frames, narrative disruptions and performer and role fractures.

Britain 60’s socialist drama was dominated by the working-class naturalism of the ‘angry young man’ where, according to socialist-feminists, the male’s “point of view must not be confused with absolute truth” (Beauvoir, 1974:174). At best, the plays, such as Osborne’s *Look Back In Anger*, Bond’s *Saved* and Wesker’s *Roots*, appropriated feminism as content. According to Frances Gray:

While these plays recognise the oppression of women and redress the weak and insignificant image they present in earlier drama, they are reformist rather than feminist. The women enter into socialist discourse on male terms. It changes them; they do not change it. There is no attempt to find theatrical forms which deconstruct the idea of gender; the assumption seems to be that sexual relations will sort themselves out while male and female comrades struggle side by side - never face to face.

[Gray, 1993:50]

However, Sheila Stowell argues that realism “may be inhabited from within a variety of ideologies” (Stowell, 1992: 101). Realism’s ‘recognisable worlds’ can be effectively used by feminist writers to question and confront social perceptions. Realist plays such as Winsome Pinnock’s *Leave Taking*, Claire MacIntyre’s *Low Level Panic* and Wendy Wasserstein’s *The Heidi Chronicles* among others, critique the oppressed dilemmas of womanhood within male-constructed social structures. Cultural empowerment is achieved in the ways female characters reject and/or transcend their given circumstances within such structures.

Holderness disagrees, arguing that “[a] politics of content cannot guarantee political efficacy, if both form and function are simultaneously collaborating with a dominant ideology” (Holderness, 1992:9). For example, realism, which obeys the rules of mimesis and its determinacies, lacks the currency to critique the historical and cultural assumptions behind gender construction. Its focus on characterisation and character journey can change the representation of women, but one has to depart from or modify realism’s tenets in order to interrogate gender as a social category; its roles and constructions. For example, Wasserstein’s *The Heidi Chronicles* uses feminism as content. Jill Dolan expounds in her essay, “Personal, Political, Polemical: Feminist Approaches to Politics and Theatre” that in the play, “white feminist anger is suppressed by the realist text and erupts inappropriately to thrash the history of the movement” (Holderness, 1992:55). Dolan posits:

In feminist criticism and theory, materialist feminists influenced by the Marxist equation of form and content [...] have been at the forefront of the movement to examine not simply images of women in theatre, but the whole meaning-producing apparatus under which theatre operates.

[Holderness, 1992:48]

According to Marxist materialist feminists, theatrical conventions such as structure, character, action and the use of space also have assumptions that “maintain male hegemony” (Kritzer, 1991:7) which should be transformed. Churchill modifies realism’s tenets by employing a series of unconventional theatrical devices such as structural frames, intertextual juxtaposition, quoting historical figures and texts, cross-gender casting, the use of visual stage images, overlapping dialogue and intercutting texts. Churchill also resists using the expressive language and its rhetorical components in a “mimetic relationship” (Brewer, 1985:15) to expound on the moral of the tale. She appropriates language for its common currency to reach out to a larger public. The

creative use of context and modified Brechtian devices hold equal importance to literary language. These fracturing devices break down the “authorially established hierarchy of discourses that generate the “truth” of the story” (Heuvel, 1993: 34-35).

Churchill reinvents Brecht’s dramaturgy to express her own socialist-feminist visions. In her critique of society, she offers an alternative: “[We] have to be sure of a vague utopia in the background, an idea of not only what we want to be liberated *from* but also liberated *to*” (Ecker, 1985:19). There is a significant need to renovate the use of theatrical conventions to stage the imagined utopias in socialist-feminist terms where form is concerned.

Socialism and feminism are compatible in their respective relationships to the dominant culture. However, in terms of aesthetic method, inherent contradictions exist. Unlike socialism as a meta-narrative, feminism posits the respect for difference and the utopia of co-existence. This impulse accounts for a resistance to hegemony. Whilst Brecht would resolve the antithetical elements of Azdak and Grusha in *Caucasian Chalk Circle* during the final moments of the play, Churchill would resist asserting an authorial moral vision in most of her plays. Feminism, then, is more accepting of contradictions prompting a collapse of a hierarchy of discourses and resisting the suppression of difference.

*Vinegar Tom* was close to classic Brecht in that Churchill “sometimes aggressively point[s] up the present day relevance of the play”. The actors perform songs out of character in contemporary costume, extending “the frame of reference of the play, and link[ing] past oppression and exploitation with their present day manifestations” (Cousin, 1989:36). Coupled by forcefully sung songs, it was no wonder that the result was too confrontational and didactic; it upset men who felt “outside the experiences of the female characters” and “accused by the songs” (Monstrous Regiment:41).

Churchill later parted company with Brecht for a less didactic theatre. Kritzer remarks that the “hostile criticism may have influenced Churchill to move away from the confrontational, and towards the more subversive comic style she has employed in later plays” (Kritzer, 1991:95). *Top Girls*, for example, has a clear feminist and socialist agenda. Yet Churchill was able to pursue her agenda without having to resort to accusations. Furthermore, she could present the fractures between women seen in the two ideological views of the sisters, Marlene and Joyce. Hence she saw the need to modify, invent new devices or use theatrical conventions in a new relationship:

While Brecht has remained a clear reference point for most of Churchill’s plays, she alters epic techniques, integrates epic with other forms, and constantly seeks new modes of expression.

[Kritzer, 1991:3]

Acting style needed revision as well. Gillian Hanna spoke of the importance of synthesising Stanislavskian and Brechtian techniques. Regarding performances of *Vinegar Tom*, she said, “[t]he nights that seem to work best are when there is [...] a meshing of those two” (Hanna, 1978:6-7). Feminist theatre constantly appropriates and modifies Brechtian dramaturgy whilst seeking new devices:

Current feminist theatre practice thus contains rigorous interaction with progressive aspects of theatrical traditions such as Brecht’s, while simultaneously engaging in the process of discovering appropriate and effective contemporary methods.

[Reinelt, 1986:154-63]

Diamond sees the need for an intertextual reading of Brechtian and Feminist theories (Diamond, 1988:82). Socialist aesthetics aim to deconstruct or expose the social construction of reality. Feminist aesthetics aim to deconstruct the reality as defined by a male hegemony and then '*redefine*' or '*reconstruct*' a new reality for the expression of identity against the dominant culture. Sheila Rowbotham describes "the role of art in this empowerment as that of oppressed people creating 'their own ways of seeing' and beginning to integrate a new reality" (Rowbotham, 1973:27-8).

The twin impulses of socialism and feminism have proven to be a site of Churchill's healthy tension with realism. The dialectical dialogue between the two ideologies has prompted Churchill's innovation of theatrical devices. These more imagistic devices, such as the use of visual tableaux and costume, and the use of history, are potent alternative vocabularies from which she has fashioned most of her 'not ordinary, not safe' works (Churchill, 1960:443-51).

## **DEVICES AND STRATEGIES**

Churchill's plays comprise both realist and non-realist elements. She breaks from realism when she explores the boundaries of time and space; to create openness and a more tangential communication of her themes. She also departs from realism if it hinders her innovation in involving the audience as collaborator. Her main impulse is transformation and her sense of utopia is informed by notions of plurality, respect for difference and collective action.

The crux of “historicisation” is change: through A-effects spectators observe the potential movement in class relations, discover the limitations and strengths of their perceptions, and begin to change their lives...When Brecht says that spectators should become historians, he refers both to the spectator’s detachment, her “critical” position, *and* to the fact that she is writing her own history even as she absorbs messages from the stage. Historicisation is, then, *a way of seeing*.

[Diamond, 1988:87]

Churchill employs temporal frames to historicise a performance so that relations between the past and present become visible, enabling one to imagine change. She “does dangerous history” as her plays are “rigorously contextualized in particular historical moments” (Keyssar , 1989:146).

In *Cloud Nine*, two periods are juxtaposed with the same characters, deconstructing the logic of the linear narrative. There is a disruption of the audience’s expectations of time in the way Act One is set in Victorian England and Act Two in England in the 1980s whilst the characters age only twenty-five years. This is not possible in life but only in the theatre. In deconstructing real time and by holding the characters constant so that they exist in two different eras, Churchill empowers the audience to scrutinise the social construction of gender roles.<sup>2</sup>

If the characters were caught in realism’s real linear time, we would not have been able to witness the possibility of change so dramatically. The characters’ transformations between the two Acts enables us to appreciate the past in our present selves the potential of our present selves always already existing in our historicised selves. Hence, we can appreciate the potential selves that can emerge from our present selves.

The introduction to *Serious Money* is a brief scene from the 1692 play by Thomas Shadwell, *The Volunteers* or *The Stockjobbers*, in which characters discuss the

possibility of acquiring shares in a variety of Patents (Cousin, 1989:100). This historical perspective provides the audience with a satiric frame allowing us a glimpse of how things have changed in today's Stock Market where greed is no longer just a characteristic of the elite.

According to Brecht, historicisation means "preserving the distinguishing marks" of the past and acknowledging, even foregrounding, the audience's present perspective (Brecht, 1964:190). Historicisation is achieved in *Vinegar Tom* by quoting "questions contemporary women ask about their own lives" against the historical background of witch-hunting. This is similar to Brecht's deconstruction of the famous adage - 'blood is thicker than water' - in *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. This dialectical creation is described by Janelle Reinelt as "the relationship between history and consciousness" (Reinelt, 1986:162).

Churchill's use of episodic structure is found in *Light Shining*, *Fen*, *Vinegar Tom*, *Serious Money* and *Mad Forest*. *Light Shining* comprises quotations of historical documents from the seventeenth-century Digger and Leveller pamphlets, the Putney Debates, the Bible (Isaiah and Ecclesiastes) and Walt Whitman. These texts lend political resonance to the play. *Light Shining's* episodic structure "politicise[s] transformations, [with] performance sequences where the established realities or 'given circumstances' [...] change several times during the course of the action" (Schechner, 1967:9).

*Fen*, a play about Fens women who are politically and economically deprived, opens with a Japanese businessman's monologue but his narrative is discontinued, displaced by episodic narratives of the Fenswomen's struggle against patriarchy and capitalism. The opening image is 'emasculated' further when it is contrasted in the end with the "halting final speech of Val's ghost" (Selmon, 1988: 55) and May's singing.

*Vinegar Tom* is about the persecution of an alternative female lifestyle in the 17th Century Britain. Twenty-one scenes with 7 songs intercut the text. They were sung directly at the audience which, in performance, “swung [them] constantly between past and present” (Acheson, 1993:51). Narrative disruption was used to demonstrate the possibility of intervention and change. Although the play was unapologetically didactic, Churchill had begun exploring Brechtian historicisation. With modification in later works such as *Top Girls* and *Cloud Nine*, historical accounts were more discriminately used to provoke intertextual reading.

*Serious Money*'s episodic structure jumps both time and space, “provid[ing] a rapid overview of London's financial centre, as well as offering glimpses of the wider world of global finance. The breakneck pace, with episodes continually overlapping as the action accelerates, gives audiences a taste of the competition-fired velocity of traders” (Kritzer, 1991:165). *Mad Forest*, a play about the Romanian Uprising, has many short scenes, evoking a sense of a society in chaos, undergoing transformation.

Narrative disruption also means a more flexible and versatile structure to explore scenes that would otherwise demand logical justification. In *Fen*, it functions to show up irony. Val's ghost can 'resurrect' to express that she “should have wanted something different” (Kritzer, 1991:98). This irony serves to frustrate any romantic notion about the death that she had wished for and attained for herself. In Act Two of *Cloud Nine*, the images of Clive's and Betty's old selves (played by Act One actors) recur on stage; one shows that Clive has no hold over the newly emancipated Betty (actress) and the second shows the possible reconciliation between the old and the new selves of Betty for future growth.

Churchill also uses intercutting texts or over-lapping speech/dialogue for different purposes to communicate ideas in a sensual way. When one text is not ranked over the

other, simultaneity offers multiple perspectives at any one time. This is experienced in Act One of *Top Girls* during the assertive projections of the powerful women's stories. It is also used during the sisters' quarrel in Act Two where different viewpoints and positions are conveyed as equally valid. This provokes or invites the audience to try to imagine possibilities that might resolve otherwise irreconcilable differences. In *Serious Money*, the cacophony communicates the sense of competitive and acquisitive greed in the world of the Stock Market.

Overlapping speech negates opposition, precludes exclusive identification with one speaker, and thus demands that audience members situate themselves in relation to what is presented. By using these techniques to set up an interchange, [...] audiences [are prompted to] contribute imaginative energy to the dramatic process, rather than merely receiving the imaginative product of the playwright.

[Kritzer, 1991:196]

## **SELF-REFLEXIVITY : PRESENCE AND ABSENCE**

"I meant the thing that is absent to have a presence in the play," Churchill has said (Stone, 1983: 81). This is most characteristic of Churchill who is described as a playwright who "has a message, [but] does not fully enunciate it" (Selmon, 1988:49). The 'absence' of authorial judgement encourages subjective participation from the audience. Open endings "challenge the convention of audience passivity and engage the audience in a relationship of imaginative reciprocity" (Kritzer, 1991:9).

In *Top Girls*, Marlene's character is approached with ambivalence; she is seen as a 'success', the revelation of Marlene's biological links with Angie is defended, her vulnerability is exposed in the midst of the quarrel with Joyce and her gratitude is highlighted in her warmth towards Angie and her offering of financial help to Joyce.

However, while Marlene's bourgeois feminism empowers her to afford what she wants, it denies some of her human needs. She is alienated from the other women in the play including her mother, sister and daughter. She does not visit her mother and only occasionally visits Joyce and her daughter. She cannot afford to have her own children or family and prefers casual relationships. She must not be tied down and must always be mobile.

On the one hand, in denouncing the traditional social constructs, Marlene is caught in a predicament that dehumanises her. Joyce, on the other hand, misses out in her love life and cannot get what she wants. Despite her economic position, she refuses any charity from Marlene. She is disempowered because of her low social status. Marlene's 'top girl' position is only seen to be attained at great expense when compared to Joyce's life choices. At the same time, Joyce's position does not afford certain joys in life that a 'top girl' can easily acquire. Both miss out in terms of their womanhood. If Marlene is discredited by the end of the play, a comprehensive solution is not personified in any other character in the play.

Both competing ideologies are brought into question, pitted against each other and argued. Both strands are presented in their respective strengths and weaknesses. Without the presence of a privileged standpoint, views contrary to the playwright's own personal beliefs are represented, thus producing multiple perspectives or a plurality of viewpoints in the play.

However, 'absence' does not mean 'non-existence'. The work is not without its feminist stand. It is still politically committed. The 'absence' is to suggest the exclusion of women (Stone, 1983:81). But to reduce 'didacticism', Churchill relies on the stories

(texts) by the women figures in Act One, and in how they resonate with one another and the rest of the play.<sup>3</sup>

Embedded in Act One are the multiple texts of 'top girls' cited from various historical and fictional sources. These texts are juxtaposed against each other along with Marlene's narrative. As one is treated to a 'buffet' of adventures of how these women have struggled, survived and succeeded, so that one is constantly comparing them. The emergent text is installed for a later use.

The multiple narrative text of the women figures ends with the close of Act One. But since they are all 'top girls' in their own respects, and share both similarities and differences with Marlene, their 'absent' stories continue (like a 'ghost') dialectically with Marlene's narrative in Act Two.

Act Two, is almost a different play. Except for Marlene, all the other characters are different from those in Act One. Located in the contemporary period, Act Two plays in sharp contrast to Act One's 'magic reality'. As Marlene's text comes into sharper focus, her story is juxtaposed with the texts of the other women characters. This includes Marlene's colleagues at the employment agency, girls seeking employment, the wife of her colleague whose job she has taken, her sister (Joyce) and her biological daughter (Angie).

Act Two also articulates the texts of two competing political inclinations, metonymically that of the nation's: Marlene's bourgeois feminism and Joyce's socialism. In not being didactic, Churchill allows these narratives to be self-contained and in dialectical tension with each other within Act Two as well as with Act One.

Act One serves as an installation of apparently politically correct values; that of powerful and famous women figures who were invariably caught up in the male world of power; whether they suffered and survived it or if they aspired towards and successfully aped the ideals of their oppressor. What is set up in Act One is brought into question when juxtaposed with Act Two and vice-versa. Each act is simultaneously complete and interdependent on each other.

The final scene of *Top Girls* is a flashback to a time before the beginning of Act Two. It shows Marlene visiting Joyce with a present for Angie. The scene ends with Angie waking up from a nightmare and exclaiming “Frightening, frightening” to Marlene. The epilogue-flashback, when read against the Act Two text, accentuates the horror of the exclamation. “Frightening” also begs the question, for which the answer is embedded in the text preceeding the epilogue.

Self-reflexivity and the absence of authorial judgement in a Churchill play invite audience intervention in forging utopia. This means getting involved in the processes of decoding. In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1976 [1973]), Barthes expounds on the difference between the *plaisir* of the ‘closed’, comfortable, ‘classic’ text and the *jouissance* of the ‘open’, unsettling, ‘radical’ text.<sup>4</sup>

Most social realist plays expose reality’s construction to advance, whether outrightly or implicitly, a message rooted in some kind of socialist manifesto. Plays inspired by the nihilistic Beckettian tradition often carry the notion that the human condition cannot attain utopia. Although Churchill challenges existing ways of thinking, she refrains from proposing any easy, clear-cut solution. Neither does she attempt conclusive pronouncements about the human condition. In other words, Churchill avoids both nihilism and rhetorics in her works.

Churchill's visions of utopia come in *traces*; these *traces* reside within the texts, the performed and staged visual images and the tableaux employed. Her utopia is not a forced projection or a loud manifesto, but rather a kind of implied presence, almost always absent in literary language or conventional structures. It is instead contextual and implied. It is communicated through the texts produced "only in an activity of production" (Rice, 1992:167).

In *Cloud Nine* for example, Victorian sexual repression and colonial imperialism in Act One gives way to a more liberal and truthful reality in Act Two. However, the opposite is not necessarily always the solution. The two situations show the problems of liberal society; the emergence of the gay lifestyle which exists outside the traditional social institution of marriage and the breakdown of the traditional heterosexual family structure. Edward, who aspires towards a monogamous relationship (which is ironically a traditional, heterosexual trait), cannot find happiness with his promiscuous boyfriend in the modern environment where overt homosexuality finds relatively more acceptance. Victoria leaves her husband and son to discover herself in a lesbian relationship with single-parent Lin.

The two situations are celebrated: the emancipation of Betty and the construction of an alternative family structure comprising Victoria, Lin, Lin's daughter and Edward. Even then, these images are fragile proposals. Betty wants to be herself but dislikes work. She has not fully rid herself of the insecurities of her gender and is only beginning to find pleasure in solitary sex without guilt. Neither does the audience receive affirmation that the new alternative family is going to succeed.

The implied utopia (assumptions) that inevitably develops in Act One and finds expression in Act Two is questioned by Churchill to show that liberalism and individual

freedom produce its own joys and problems. However, self-reflexivity is not used to render the characters' progress futile. In fact, transformation is highlighted more convincingly and received without resentment precisely because a utopia is not promised. Utopia is deconstructed as "[t]oday's solution is likely to be tomorrow's problem" (Brater, 1989:39). Thus, utopia will always only remain a goal to strive towards as a criticism of disaffection with the present state; it is provisional and unstable. The utopian moment is one when an individual is conscious that s/he is always in a potential position for change.

## **POLITICAL IDEOLOGY INSCRIBED IN THE STAGE SEMIOTICS**

In the preceding sections I have described Churchill's use of devices to achieve defamiliarisation, plurality and audience participation as co-author. However, Churchill's theatrical dramaturgy is also heavily semiotic-based rather than merely literary-dependent.

According to Barthes, theatre involves "a density of signs built up on stage starting from the written argument" (Barthes, 1972:26). These signs, that make up theatricality, according to Kritzer, comprise "gesture, posture, and vocal tones of the actors, and the staging, as well as costume, lighting, set and the environment in which the performance takes place" (Kritzer, 1991:8). How are theatrical conventions distributed? How is presence ranked in terms of stage time and/or visibility?

An ensemble of characters inhabit most of Churchill's plays; often more characters than actors in a single play. First, many characters are important to visibly communicate a sense of society thus linking the play outside its context to the social.

Churchill does not insist on clearly and deeply defined characters because she does not want us to assume that these are isolated, exceptional examples

of oppression under a capitalistic system. As in *Light Shining*, the characterisation must enlarge the scope of the drama, not limit it.

[Randall, 1989:45]

Secondly, the use of multiple-roles, as in *Light Shining*, *Cloud Nine*, *Fen*, *Top Girls*, *Mad Forest* and *Serious Money* destabilises the determinacy of character. Furthermore, separating/distancing the performer from the character challenges the audience out of any “orgy of illusion” to question their own arbitrary ascription of roles to people in their own daily lives. In Act One of *Cloud Nine*, we see Betty played by a male actor. She is submissive, communicating the notion that she is a product of male construction. In Act Two she is played by an actress (the true gender) as the character realises the potential of her true being. In an environment friendlier to her gender, Betty begins to appreciate her independence and for the first time enjoys her orgasms. In having different actors play Betty, the audience is sensitised to the possibility of transformation. The *actor* is given equal emphasis as the *character*, signifying construction, thus prompting the notion that it is possible to transcend social factors that mould our lives. Plays with multiple transformations “call attention to the human potential for empowerment” (Kritzer, 1991:159).

In *Top Girls*, the cross referencing of characters in Act Two to the respective story-teller roles by the Act One actors generates multiple texts as seen in the double-casting of Dull Gret and Angie. Linda Fitzsimmons argues that “Dull Gret represents the answer to oppression - collective resistance. Her virtually uninterrupted story shows her achievement as active and real; the others, including Marlene, achieve without changing the social order at all” (Fitzsimmons, 1987:19-30). Women must bind together to defend their rights and fight against a common oppression - capitalism as portrayed by Marlene. Equality does not mean women have to be the same as men as bourgeoisie feminist

theorists posit. For example, the roles of motherhood and/or housewife should be given social, economic and political recognition. This is significant as the utopian solution to the skirmish between Marlene and Joyce.

The history play *Vinegar Tom* was originally performed in contemporary costume, making character and performer exist in an antithetical relation. This anachronistic visual gesture links “past persecutions to present-day oppression” (Kritzer, 1991:87). Furthermore, to challenge stereotyping, actors were cast against their “expected physical type” thus “disrupt[ing] the subject/object opposition that reifies patriarchy’s masculine/feminine opposition” (Kritzer, 1991:94).

For the New York production of *Cloud Nine*, the director wanted the play to end with Betty’s monologue on the orgasm she experienced while masturbating. Churchill agreed only if it were placed before the Betty/Betty embrace. She felt that the suggested ending highlighted “Betty as an individual” and not a “development of a group of people” (Betsko and Koenig, 1987:83). Churchill’s socialist-feminist impulse is revealed when she refuses to “perpetuate a romantised female who transcends all constraints” (Diamond, 1985:285). This is inscribed in the stage semiotics of most of her plays.

Churchill breaks conventions to create the new. After exposing the ‘constructedness’ of gender, usually through satire or farce, she uses non-literary devices, such as the visually staged image, to convey her sense of utopia. “It is a two-step process, a ritual where first the repudiated image is “stigmatized” and then a new image is introduced, “honoured by the titles of nature, reason, and enlightenment”” (Randall, 1988:58). In *Cloud Nine*, three instances come to mind. Diamond cites the man playing Betty in Act One as “a walking contradiction of the verbal and the iconic” (Diamond, 1985:277). Secondly, the black butler is played by a white actor, showing how the oppressed take on the aspirations of the oppressor. Thirdly, the embrace of the two representations of Betty at

the end of the play; one the incarnation played by a man (from Act One) and the other by a woman (from Act Two) to gesture the coming to terms with her real self. Actors take on opposite gender roles in Act One and switch to playing roles of their own genders in Act Two.

These 'contradictory' or deconstructed images are reversed with genders 'restored' when characters become more resolved/reconciled with their true selves. Such a rearrangement of codes is a violation of the realist form where coherence of character and its development is concerned. Churchill uses the theatricality of performer/role fracture to provide on-going commentary in Act One and to show the possibility of change and the potential for future transformations in Act Two. Unlike visual imagery contained as literary metaphors in a Shakespearean play, these images are manifested in performance.

Cross-gender and cross-racial casting in *Cloud Nine* is used to ironise and thereby expose the social construction of gender and race. This is achieved by using the 'doubleness' as signifier during performance to disturb and destabilise the unities that engender stereotyped signifieds, thus bringing assumptions of gender-roles into question. The subversiveness of performance is used to undermine any stereotypical or clichéd emotions associated with gender and race. As Blau warns that:

the personal may be political, but without exceptional disciplines or the extremist measures of camp or canivalesque they will tend to reflect the deepest feelings through an established repertoire of behavioral images and emotional forms. So far as a political theatre is concerned it may very well be, as sometimes argued, all the more effective for that.

[Blau, 1992:137-8]

In *Fen*, the audience meet the image of a boy shouting and chasing crows away in the field, upon entering the theatre. The set, designed by Annie Smart, is a kitchen placed in a potato field. Visually, the juxtaposed images of domesticity and agriculture provide a unifying element. Not-on-scene actors are in frozen tableaux on stage left and right, always visible to the audience. The Japanese businessman's lecture, Frank and Val dancing, the chapel scene and other episodes take place on stage in juxtaposition to, or contextualised by, the images of the set and the frozen tableaux. This opens up the imagination, creating opportunities for plural reading. Once Val's ghost is 'resurrected' the episodic structure fractures even more as the narrative becomes completely disrupted by the theatricality of multiple transformation of roles, helped by the framing of an already radically juxtaposed, surreal set. Val being able to 'see' other ghosts "unleashes on stage the power of collective imagination" (Kritzer, 1991:159). All the characters in the various preceding episodes are emancipated, entertaining some hope for the future. What is significant is that the transformative empowerment happens to a community on stage with the "climatic and impossible moment" (Kritzer, 1991:159) reserved for the "amazing and beautiful" melody that May "would have liked to sing", making *Fen* a play which "almost manages to give the mute a voice" (Brustein, 1983:24).

Symbols and metaphors are often used as linguistic devices expressed in speech form; they remain as literary signs or spoken metaphors which, at best, make good dramatic literature. In performance, there is great potential for signs to be theatricalised to appeal more immediately to more senses than just via the cerebral experience. Images can be created by skilful design of non-literary theatrical conventions, such as lights, costume or setting the image of the actor against the image of the role. *Cloud Nine* uses cross-gender casting to question the social construct of gender roles in Act One. In Act Two, despite the fact that the actors play characters that correspond to their own genders, the 'ghosts' of the subverted images are ever present. The indexical sign, compressed with accumulated meaning, travels into Act Two.

Firstly, stereotyped images can be quoted for their hegemonic presences and then deconstructed. In using theatricalised signs, reified images are more immediately and playfully destabilised or disrupted. Furthermore, the indeterminate nature of a reified image in the process of being erased problematises decoding processes; it delays and prevents reductive or tired associations and encourages complex visioning or “re-visioning”. Secondly, they are more versatile and mobile. Iconically, information is compressed/abbreviated and therefore economical. They can either be used to sustain an idea without being too intrusive, interact with another image or move from one situation to another, recontextualising a scene or be recontextualised along the way. Thirdly, performed visual staged images are images recuperated from language but performed instead. They are an effective means of implicit communication. When Betty’s new self embraces the old self, difference is performed rather than suppressed. The play is conscious of its own constructedness. In exploiting its constructedness by using second-order theatrical signification, the montage is made up of the impossible - two images that would otherwise be unable to occupy the same space in reality. This helps to communicate the message of transformation contextually; the message being but one possible reading. There is simultaneously distance and emotion, critique and revision. The visceral appeal is achieved by privileging the pictorial theatrical convention which traditionally is secondary to the dominant verbal language. Contextual signification of theatricalised signs disguises authorial presence more effectively than institutionalised textual devices. Plural or even contradictory readings are possible because theatricalised signs are usually more open, shifting, fluid and ambiguous. In so doing the playwright shares the authorial space with the audience.

[A] density [of signs] allows for complex and even inherently contradictory communication to an audience; in semiotic terms, it permits the simultaneous production of multiple signs.

[Kritzer, 1991:8]

However, the sign system is a kind of vocabulary that when not used creatively (i.e. limiting it to only iconic or symbolic use) can fall into the similar trap of literary language. It can create authorial presence and close up the text. Kritzer qualifies the use of the sign system as a “density” of signs. This is found in a Churchill play through the use of framing, fracturing and juxtaposing devices. In assigning a more primary function to non-literary elements, they begin to break the hierarchical position occupied by language. This reflects Churchill’s political disposition. As Selmon points out:

Churchill, compelled by her political programme, employs the potential within these hierarchies “*to change the way a culture sees the world*” (Eco, *Theory*:274). The rules of our language and our world, like the cards in *Traps*, no doubt are fixed. In each case Churchill reshuffles the deck.

[Selmon, 1988:66]

## APPROPRIATION AND INSTITUTIONALISATION

Churchill has created many innovative devices to break conventional ways of perceiving reality and to avoid a singular reading of her work. However, critics and reviewers often provide a feminist perspective to her works. In doing so, they ‘assert’ authoritative meanings to her works, and also unwittingly reinforce the label of Churchill as a socialist-feminist playwright. This is aptly conveyed in Walter Benjamin’s quotation of Brecht in *Reflections*: “There is no longer any doubt - the struggle against ideology has become a new ideology.” Thus, what is open and plural can become devalued through the process of being institutionalised. As Patrice Pavis says, “[if] we accept the idea that the modern text’s meaning is only what can be reconstituted by the hypotheses and open tracks of the reading process, then this text can be read according to a schema entirely constituted by the recipient, and then both difficulty and polysemy vanish forever” (Pavis, 1986:3).

Churchill is wary of the socialist-feminist label (Itzin, 1980:279) that continuously contextualises her works, jeopardising multiple readings.<sup>5</sup> Yet, her works show a dialectical engagement with the human impulse for definition, the need to question and to *know* what is beyond the presented, to *assign* meanings, to capture, to appropriate and colonise through rational participation.

Therefore, narrative disruption and fracturing-the-performer devices, although necessary, are sometimes insufficient to explode rational categories that are already captured in language. Furthermore, reading the work can be limiting especially if the content continues along overt feminist themes. Churchill has a strong sense of her utopia and has been exploring both form and content to express it. Her dissatisfaction with words is their inability to capture utopia without coming across as inane. As she says: “But it always sounds both ridiculous and unattainable when you put it into words” (Thurman, 1982:54).

Churchill’s attempts to escape the logocentrism in language meant not only a reexamination of textuality within the realist tradition but looking outside it. Her move into cross-genre interdisciplinary collaboration, which employs non-literary elements more primarily, provided her with vocabulary systems other than the word-based literary strategies of the realist tradition.

In *Vinegar Tom*, *Cloud Nine* and *Serious Money*, songs punctuate the text. However, these works were more multi-disciplinary in nature, reminiscent of Joan Littlewood’s relatively more traditional ways of combining multiple disciplines. Having watched productions from Trisha Brown, Pina Bausch and Second Stride which combined “movement, light, music and text” (Radin, 1986:1334), Churchill participated in a performance art project, *Midday Sun* in 1983 by contributing text to it. This later

resulted in a collaboration with another playwright David Lan, director Les Waters and choreographer Ian Spinks. *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986) marked an important departure for Churchill, shifting from multi-disciplinary to interdisciplinary collaboration. Churchill later continued working with Second Stride as a co-creator for *Lives of the Great Poisoners* and *Hotel*.

*A Mouthful of Birds* contained many wordless sequences and dances celebrating ecstatic and anarchic Dionysian energies to investigate the theme of transformed states/selves when possessed, obsessed or in dream. Dionysis is androgynous and dances without speaking throughout the performance to show his/her non-complicity with the language “system devised by humans to express thought and will” (Kritzer, 1991:178).

Euripides’ *The Bacchae* was a reference point from which the artistic team explored ideas expressed through movement and dance. The performance uses the theme of possession to explore the “abandonment of reason [...] as a means of political change” (Kritzer, 1991:180-181). To depend only on the rational and cerebral can distance people from their emotions and creative energies. Just operating from the rational can close people up. When one is in touch with the emotional and creative realms one may, through empathy, become more open and tolerant of multiple or alternative viewpoints. This may help change conventional reading strategies. Language is perceived as promoting rational thought. To redress the balance, language is subordinated to impulses and sensations of image and rhythm as an attempt to free the imagination from the shackles of established rational thought.<sup>6</sup>

The text was deconstructed through narrative disruption and the use of episodic structure. Character-and-role fracture and the multiple-role device were also employed. More significant was how music, dance and visuals were privileged as primary vocabularies to produce a density of signs. The performance text comprised multiple contradictory

messages simultaneously played out; a political resistance to logical appropriation of the play's meanings by simple and stable means. Instead of reading for intention, audiences are confronted with opportunities for spontaneous production of meaning by chance occurrences.

*Poisoners* has three narratives; those of Dr. Crippen, Medea and Madame de Brinvilliers, poisoners from Edwardian London, Greek myth and seventeenth-century France, respectively. A contemporary poisoner, Thomas Midgeley, inventor of leaded petrol and CFCs, moves through time and interacts with all the other poisoners.

*Poisoners* was created for four dancers, four singers (one doubling up as actor) and one actor. *Hotel* involved 13 singers, 2 dancers, a pianist and a double bass player. For both productions, Churchill collaborated with music composer Orlando Gough and choreographer-director of Second Stride, Ian Spinks.

*Hotel* has fourteen characters comprising two sets of tourists - a couple from the USA and a French couple - a couple having an affair, a gay couple, a silent couple (dancers), a drunk couple, a business man and a single woman. The performance depicts the characters' night at a hotel; rows, reconciliations, sex, loneliness, dreams, neuroses. The six couples and the two single people occupy eight rooms, but it is as if the rooms are superimposed; the action takes place in the same space. There is one bed, one wardrobe, one basin and one dressing-table on stage. All the performers are on stage throughout and the focus shifts between the occupants of the eight rooms. The opera has two parts. The first is Churchill's 40-minute libretto and the second is a choreographed 25-minute cantata-style piece for two dancers, further developing the 'life in a hotel room' theme, using the same cast, musicians and setting. It is more metaphysical and abstract and less mundane.



Churchill's collaborations with Gough and Spinks demonstrate her aim to resist legitimisation and to explore works that defy rational compulsion. Instead of becoming predictable, her interdisciplinary works show her moving again away from easy categorisation. But legitimisation, according to Kruger, cannot be all that bad, depending on what one does with it. She warns that "women on the rise may well adopt the aesthetic and political values of the institution rather than use their success to expand the social as well as the aesthetic range of performance in Britain beyond its habitually narrow boundaries" (Kruger, 1990:27-47). An example cited was *Serious Money*: "[Its] satirical tone [...] on the West End, [was] applauded by those very stockbrokers the play presumes to attack, affirms the power of that audience" (Kruger, 1990:27-47).

However, whether Churchill falls into the legitimisation trap must be evaluated in context. Before *Serious Money* (1987), Churchill took risks with *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986) and after it, continued in the *exploratory* vein with *Mad Forest* (1990) at The National Theatre, *Poisoners* (1991) at Riverside Studios, *The Skriker* (1993) at the National Theatre and *Hotel* (1997) at Second Stride Studios.

The abstract *Poisoners* received critical acclaim but also frustrated audiences.<sup>7</sup> Its integration of disciplines defied categorisation as "[f]or dance-goers there might not be enough virtuosity, for theatre-goers [...] too much dance, and musicians might find it not close enough to opera..." (Rubridge, 1991:15). This brings us to the perennial debate on content and form. Issue-based theatre relies on content and realism as a form to communicate or suggest the utopian ideal. Has avoiding legitimisation led Churchill to abandon her socialist ideals as she forays into more abstract and conceptual art where form is privileged over content? Are such abstract works elitist, playing only to the converted? Yet if art is to be considered autonomous and not obligated to a social agenda or to fulfil the task of social transformation, then can Churchill's *Poisoners* and *Hotel* be

still considered theatres of empowerment? Do these abstract works transcend class and educational backgrounds, albeit defying the expectations of conventional theatre, as they are ultimately targetted at engaging and activating the audience's imagination? Or has beauty and aesthetic become the chief censor of socially-committed theatre?

However, it is important to note that both *Poisoners* and *Hotel* are not devoid of social allusions. As much as *Poisoners* deals with murder and CFC, *Hotel* focuses on the lives of characters in an urban setting. Churchill still employs her devices of spatial and temporal frames. Although these literary structures are no longer as pronounced as her previous works, only because other disciplines like movement, music and image projections are also employed, the text remains as one of the elements. Therefore although form is privileged, it is not achieved at the expense of the content. These works testify to an artist keeping abreast with the times; socially committed theatre responding to change. If rationalised mindsets have become the symptom of urban living in the age of advanced capitalism, these works belong to the contemporary theatres of empowerment.

Criticisms are symptomatic of a resistance to new forms. Whatever the case may be, theatre must have space to fail lest it becomes a 'museum'. Churchill's unswaying artistic integrity in exploring new ways of working has gradually shifted her to creating these abstract works. A new theatrical form which earns highly contradictory responses from both audiences and critics is testament to the creator's tenacity and creative verve in breaking convention. Only in resisting co-option can artists create the space and environment best suited for new works that continue to enrich the imagination. This is political resistance.

## TEXT AND PERFORMANCE: 'NEW REALISM' IN *THE SKRIKER*

Theatre's fundamental premise is story-telling. Narrative has been a traditional element, a strength of the realist text. Traditionalism is a resistance to change, a preoccupation with a sense of romanticism and nostalgia that results in conservative paralysis, inspiring museum pieces. If one does not confuse tradition with traditionalism, one will appreciate the value of holding onto basic conventions and not sacrifice them in the name of innovation. Churchill, despite her creative deviations, jealously guards the narrative.

Churchill's involvement with performance is not one of linear progression. After *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986), she returned to writing *Serious Money* (1987), *Icecream* (1988), *Hot Fudge* (1989), and *Mad Forest* (1990). In 1991 she collaborated with Second Stride for *Poisoners* and then wrote *The Skriker* (1993) and returned with Second Stride for *Hotel* (1996). In 1997, she wrote two short plays; *Heart's Desire* and *Blue Kettle* for Out Of Joint at the Edinburgh Festival. Churchill's return to the realist text shows her exploring the relationship between text and performance, but always holding on to an aspect of theatre tradition - telling stories.

In *The Skriker*, performance was radically employed to deconstruct the text; with eccentric images, physicalised speeches and the syntax of sentences fractured in the Skriker's long opening monologue to express its damaged being and its potential to destroy mortals:

[R]eminiscent of someone who has had a stroke or who is suffering from schizophrenia. It constantly begins sentences that it has difficulty in finishing because its train of thought is interrupted by other meanings and possibilities, in the form of word

clusters that are interrelated through associated meanings, puns or similarities of sound, and that attach themselves to the original idea.

[Cousin, 1996:178]

The disjointed sentences or the physicalised speech do not make rational sense but every now and then, familiar phrases escape causing the audience to constantly recall the previous one until it becomes a 'wash-over', experiencing a sense instead of only an understanding of this being.

Realistic scenes of two women are interrupted by non-naturalistic scenes of the Skriker (shape-shifter and tale-spinner) performing while speaking its fragmented text. The underworld is embellished with an expressionistic staging that counterpoints the realistic scenes. A dancer dances throughout the performance, creating simultaneous juxtapositions to on-going scenes. The contrapuntal, almost musical, structure ironises the text at points.

In *The Skriker*, the fairies seek revenge on the mortals for their callous behaviour of polluting the environment. The Skriker spins tales (drawing from fairy tales such as 'Rumplestiltskin' and other stories) on the relationship between mortals and the fairies. One of them is its encounter with two girls, Josie and Lily. The Skriker enters the human world and takes on the shapes of human characters who are usually in need. Lily is being tricked more often than Josie. Both journey to the Underworld separately, but upon Lily's return, a hundred years have passed, and the earth is damaged, along with its inhabitants.

As with *Poisoners* and *Hotel*, *The Skriker* is not a feminist play in its content. The Skriker, being a tale-spinner, provides the licence for multiple narratives. It has an

episodic structure in terms of jumping space to and from the mortal world and the corresponding Underworld. In terms of temporal frame, Lily's return to earth is a hundred years later.

There is a fairy tale played out by Josie and Lily called *The Kind and Unkind Girls* or *Diamonds and Toads* which becomes a play within the play. Their roles prefigure the roles they play in their respective visits to the Underworld. The framing devices provide for much ironic commentary which serve to destabilise both meaning and plot, making the play unpredictable.

Instead of historical contexts, Churchill here uses the imagined realities of the fairy and the mortal worlds to juxtapose and deconstruct the present world, commenting on contemporary life. This seems to be Churchill's bleakest play, where transformation is a deconstruction of selves to reveal the darkness in human beings in the context of the future. Lily's self-sacrifice in the Underworld cannot redeem the earth's impending doom.

The shape-shifting metaphor does not represent multiple possibilities that lead to positive transformation. For example, in Churchill's past plays transformation is usually associated with positive images, such as the Betty/Betty embrace in *Cloud Nine*, or with uncertainty and transience such as in *Mad Forest*. In *The Skriker*, transformation is associated with destruction. Multiple possibilities are seen as a construction of illusions. This is most evident in the Skriker's disguises; one being a kind woman wanting a hug and another being a child in need. The mutual fascination between mortals and fairies foregrounds a dialectical and antithetical victim-oppressor role-switch and is never stable. The fascination is an irresistible spell, rising almost to a metaphor hinting at human obsession with self-destruction.

Generosity, human kindness or positive human traits are always exploited without reward according to expectation. While Lily suffers these betrayals, Josie seems to represent the result of them - in being damaged, cynical and suspicious. These characteristics do not get her into trouble, rather, they protect her. Her disbelief and defiance of the fairies' prohibitions about certain ground rules once damns her to fairyland and later gets her out of it. On the other hand, Lily's disposition is not the ready solution. Her goodwill in the Underworld cannot redeem the world. In fact she is punished when her return to earth is greeted by her deformed great-great-granddaughter and by her granddaughter who is an old woman. Lily's goodness is impotent when set against a human will bent towards its own destruction. The fairies are portrayed as vampires, dependent on human blood. They are shape-shifters, not to be trusted. No longer are they the trustworthy fairies that one hears about during childhood. These subverted images deconstruct our beliefs and are disturbing. Yet we cannot judge them without implicating ourselves for their transformed state.

One possible reading is that this dark tale confronts the audience with dystopic images. The tale portrays everything that we hope will never happen but we do nothing anyway to prevent the ongoing destruction. At the end of the performance one feels a self-consciousness about the work; the prophetic warning seems to be accompanied by a sense of it being unheeded. But like the Skriker, a compulsive story-teller, this tale will be spun again; tirelessly, relentlessly, expecting the worst but hoping to be proven wrong.

The pendulumic sense between bleakness and hope comes across in how meaning is constantly eclipsed and then made accessible as experienced with the Skriker's opening monologue. Throughout the play meaning is deferred; the episodes provide digression and a suspension of closure. In the final episode, Lily returns to a doomed earth. A hundred years have passed and the environment is so contaminated that mortals are

surviving on oxygen tanks. This is displayed in stunning theatrical starkness. Structurally, the final episode provides the anchoring frame/context to this episodic play - it functions as a perspectival frame through which the whole play must be 'revisited'. Yet at the same time, this episode does not restrict plural readings. It is thus enclosed but boundless.

Despite writing the text on her own, the original production was a very physical and theatrical one, casting, as the Skriker, Kathryn Hunter (who is associated with the physical performance company Theatre de Complicite), and employing dancers and movement-based performers. The literary text is part of the many other disciplines involved in the creation of the mise-en-scènes. Whether it be physicalised speeches, danced narratives, pure dance/movement, video projections, music (as background or performing a more primary function), or just psychological realist scenes with plain interactive dialogue, *The Skriker* did not discriminate against but encompassed various mediums, making it an eclectic performance. All the forms and media were at some moments used for themselves, at other moments, set against one another in different combinations.

The play is always anchored in the multiple stories; narratives provide a sense of unity, but the dispersal of meanings is in how the stories are told. As long as there is a trace of order, audiences seem able to be more tolerant and thus more open to reading the plural meanings or defer the closure of their reading by just taking in the moments.

What Churchill keeps, despite using more radical forms, is the telling of stories; adopting a multi-faceted approach to appeal to as many senses. As her theatre develops into one that is viscerally and experientially challenging, it is not over-indulgently so. *A Mouthful of Birds*, *Poisoners*, *The Skriker* and *Hotel* are thus political attempts to empower the imagination:

So in order to maintain the best of realism while at the same time revising it to accommodate new realities, critics have heralded a “new realism.” The congenial blending of these qualities of realism with more adventurous styles, that express - through altered or ironised dialogue, self-conscious theatricality, or expressionistic staging - a felt sense of the difference and contradiction that informs contemporary experience is said to promise playwrights an effective method for dealing with the changing consciousness of our time.

[Heuvel, 1993:16]

## CONCLUSION

For Churchill, the break from realism has been motivated by her desire to express her personal pain and anger which was translated and given perspective by a social and political context of contemporary struggles. She differs from Beckett largely because of her socialist-feminist impulses and her involvement with the collaborative method which gives her the interdisciplinary vocabularies to articulate the unrepresentable, and hence escape the route towards nihilism. Although the pain in her plays can be felt, Churchill seems always to be conveying a positive creative strength. Even in her bleakest play, the tireless reminder reflects the artist’s responsibility to bring across an age-old prophecy in a new way in the hope that a new method might bring it across.

New forms are new methods. They are never permanent. They change with the times to be effective. They all differ in terms of authorial presence. Some have stories to tell but want to have more control in how they are to be decoded. Churchill’s talent and genius in the innovation and use of devices have been responsible for the essential breathing space for audience intervention, instead of choking them with her message.

Her work has moved from 'politics of content', to the invention of her own devices, to employing techniques from other disciplines. She has 'collaborated' with Brecht in terms of employing and modifying his techniques. She has collaborated with Monstrous Regiment, with various directors and actors from Joint Stock. She has also worked with Second Stride in a team comprising a musician, choreographer and set designer. She has worked with Geraldine Pilgrim and Pete Brooks for *Midday Sun*, with students from the Central School of Speech and Drama and contributed to *Floorshow*. She has written for radio and television. She has adapted a play. She has written on her own. As Churchill states in an interview: "The only point of working is to do the kind of work you want to do" (The Guardian:12 March 1991).

Even if her works do not transform perceptions, her collaborative method of work leaves behind a legacy for playwrights as an emblem of innovation to keep abreast of the times; on the one hand, not to resist change, and on the other hand, not to take on change at the expense of the playwright's traditional role. The motivation for collaboration is to stimulate the imagination which she continues to empower. And whilst doing what she wants to do, she always considers the audience.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “THE DANCE REPRESENTS ALL THE WORK I’VE DONE”

[LeCompte, quoted by Aronson, 1985:74]

### THE WOOSTER GROUP IN CONTEXT

The Wooster Group (TWG), a theatre collective, operates from the Performing Garage in Wooster Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, New York. TWG, developed from the Performance Group, is an offshoot of the off-off Broadway movement, descending from the American ‘60s avant-garde movement. First wave practitioners included the Living Theatre and the Open Theatre. The second wave, enhanced by the anti-Vietnam War movement, produced Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson, Mabou Mines and Richard Schechner’s the Performance Group. Since its inception in 1980, TWG has risen to its present status as an avant-garde institution on the international theatre circuit.<sup>1</sup>

Richard Schechner founded the Performance Group in 1967, which Elizabeth LeCompte joined in 1970. In 1974, she became assistant director to Schechner who was then developing his work in environmental theatre. He attempted to redefine traditional theatre conventions of space and the relationship between performers and spectators by “breaking down barriers: between art and life, between performance space and audience space, and between production elements.” LeCompte collaborated with Schechner for six years. She was “influenced by his use of disparate texts and acting styles and his development of work through improvisation” (Savran, 1991:2).

While working with Schechner as an actor, LeCompte also started directing. In 1975, collaborating with Spalding Gray and some members of the Performance Group, she directed *Sakonnet Point*. In 1980, when the Performance Group dissolved, TWG took

over the Performing Garage with LeCompte as its artistic director. TWG's artistic vision moved from ritual-based to information-saturated environment-based theatre.<sup>2</sup>

LeCompte's earliest directorial work, the *Rhode Island Trilogy*, was a series of performance pieces based on Gray's biography.<sup>3</sup> Gray's solipsistic performances were offset by LeCompte's composition of form and structure. This was achieved by using other actor-collaborators, improvised materials, architectural set design to create environments, and the privileging of objects, light and sound elements as primary signifiers in composing the mise-en-scènes.

TWG's early influences included American practitioners Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, Stuart Sherman, Meredith Monk and a reaction to Schechner's highly symbolic, ritualistic and psychological theatre. LeCompte found Wilson's and Foreman's use of non-realism and suggestive material more powerful than that which she had encountered in the dominant American realist plays. She began to compose works which were non-linear, non-psychological, using non-naturalistic gestures. She also used visuals and tapped from 'musical' and 'geometric' forms as opposed to the cause-and-effect logic form.

TWG's aesthetics must be appreciated in the historical context of the '60s and '70s American avant-garde. Then TWG's works revolted against the authority of theatre's own traditions. Orthodox theatre was perceived to be dominated by rational and social concerns. Art should be for its own sake and not a means to any end. Physical performance, the politics of ecstasy and the total displacement of text by autonomous performance were some theatre companies' manifestos. These strategies questioned the assumptions that defined theatre conventions. This resulted in largely non-communicative, alienating and anti-humanistic works highly subjective and introspective in nature.

Attempts to explore and express tendencies of modernist anxieties that resulted in ahistorical and apolitical works were generally viewed by American theatre critics as unsuccessful and useless. Firstly, transcending meaning was a myth. No matter how practitioners attempted to disperse stable meanings, there was always a return to rational analysis. On the part of the performer, as Blau states, “performance seems *written* even if there is no word-text, for the writing seems imbedded in the conservatism of the instincts and the linguistic operations of the unconscious” (Blau, 1987:171). On the audience’s part, the mind tends to fabricate or assign meaning in order to fill up gaps. But meaning is always already inscribed in human memory and survives into interpreting performance despite the absence of the word-text.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, the indulgent and solipsistic works benefitted the creators more than the audience. Audiences were expected to surrender to the primal impulses that radiated from the performance and be open to the assault of images. “[T]hese performance works pursued desire rather than what constrained it, and disregarded culture rather than seeking to understand its power structures” (Heuvel, 1993:55). This led to a re-evaluation of the ahistorical and apolitical stances in American deconstructionist thought in theatre which led to a reassessment of the word-text’s value to contain human, historical and social perspectives. After its foray into autonomous performance, the American avant-garde continued to explore the creative dialectics between text and performance, applying the lessons learned about performance’s potency.

In 1981, TWG was accused of racism when it employed the *black face* (Pigmeat Markham routine) in *Route 1 & 9*, the first part of a trilogy entitled *The Road to Immortality*. As a result, the New York State Council stopped funding TWG for a year.<sup>5</sup> While preparing for the next part of the Trilogy, *L.S.D. (...Just the High Points...)*, it got embroiled in another controversy, this time with playwright Arthur Miller.<sup>6</sup> When

LeCompte was denied permission to use a segment from Miller's *The Crucible*, she responded by having the actors say their lines in gibberish during that scene. This developed into a new 'witch-hunt' scene (written by one of the actors). But whenever a performer "accidentally" quoted *The Crucible*, a buzzer would go off. LeCompte elaborated:

I was saying there was another way of making theatre, another way of viewing politics that is not literal, issue-orientated - it's not attached, so to speak. My intuitive way of making theatre was being called irresponsible [...] I was forcing myself to look at the worst side of the way we work as a theatre company, and what art is, and what we do with it. But I tried to keep that connection tenuous. I just tried to locate an emotional centre that felt right, and worked from there and watched the connections evolve.

[Aronson, 1985:73-4]

A conventional well-made play (the thesis-antithesis-synthesis paradigm) employs antithetical elements, counter-arguments, ironies, sub-plots, subtexts, symbols, metaphors, satires, parodies and other literary strategies to avoid a pedagogical stance. But these strategies, however subtly applied, ultimately serve to persuade audiences to the favoured viewpoints or ideological leanings of the author(s).

As most devices and strategies are neutral, TWG's deconstructionist aesthetics includes the above-mentioned ones. However, it is TWG's politics that informs the application of these devices and strategies, the invention of new ones and the appropriation and/or modification of those from other disciplines. TWG's main object is to expose the assumptions that uphold institutionalised perceptions rather than to *recommend* a new way of seeing. There are many new ways of seeing one thing and selection is a personal choice. Its modest project is merely to free the imagination, to show an individual that

s/he has a choice and to enable him/her to take that next step independently. To present plural readings, the conventional 'thesis'-construction process is substituted by a non-linear form and the relevant tools such as fragmentation, fracture and montage are also employed.

## **THE POLITICS AND AESTHETICS OF THE WOOSTER GROUP**

TWG's history shows how it has moved from introspective, apolitical and ahistorical phase to one which has a strong sense of its politics. TWG's process usually begins with found texts; materials that belong to the indigenous shared cultural and social histories. It is important that TWG uses what American culture offers to challenge aspects of the American ethos. Only then can it cite relevant signifiers and resonant images, especially those that are emotionally and politically-charged.

Secondly, these found texts or materials contain hegemonic 'presences'. Hegemonic 'presence' refers to authoritative, established, canonical or institutionalised views. The assumptions behind these constructed views often go unquestioned or unchallenged. These perceptions determine how people think, evaluate, judge and behave. Through a rigorous analysis and questioning process, the thought patterns that maintain the 'presences' in found texts are identified. Intimacy with these texts enable TWG to see the possible ways in which it can 'inhabit' them and eventually undo the embedded assumptions. The aim is to free the imagination so that it is open to other new and possible ways of making meaning which includes the re-visioning of 'wronged' images. For TWG, it reinvents these reified images literally as modern metaphors.

Therefore, resistance does not mean that established viewpoints are not represented. Transgression, appropriation, revision, recontextualisation best characterise TWG's aesthetic vocabulary of resisting 'presence':

[Barthes] notes that [...] transgression must operate as subversion from within; it must take place within the confines of the culture in question, “within a play of structures and writings.” In contradistinction, any critique that attempts to establish an independent mythology will be doomed because bourgeois society will always co-opt the mythology for its own purposes. Given modern culture’s endless capacity for recuperation, “there is only one thing a writer has the power to wrest from this society: its language; but before this language can be destroyed, it must be ‘stolen’...”. It must be violently wrenched from its context; it must be seized from the cultural continuum. Only then can it be turned against the voice that uttered it, can it be used as an instrument to dissect the society that produced it.

[Savran, 1991:92-94]

Ownership and power are issues that pertain directly to TWG’s aesthetics. TWG is often misconstrued as notorious in its irreverent treatment of classical texts. Classics, legitimated into the canon, are perceived as being co-opted by the establishment. However, TWG’s project is not about contemporising the classics, for example, rendering *Troilus and Cressida* as a motorcycle gang play. For TWG, contemporising the classics may well mean still reiterating some of its stereotypes. As Barthes posits, to be revolutionary does not automatically mean replacing or displacing but rather, transgressing whatever holds the power. He elaborates that it is necessary to recognise and reverse the process (Barthes, 1985:47).

Defending the right of artists to use other people’s works, LeCompte cites examples of how some famous writers and composers quote from others’ works. She proposes that it is not plagiarism as long as the emerging work is a new one. TWG insists that it is “the author of the piece, and [that it] incorporate[s] other people’s work in the process” (Simons, 1991:9). Their legal battle with Miller is what LeCompte describes as “an inevitable outcome of [its] working process” because of TWG’s “necessary relationship

to authority” (Savran, 1991:103). As Auslander elaborates, the “confrontation with authority is a *result* but not the *object* of [TWG’s] process” (Auslander, 1987:34).

Most of TWG’s productions have a house-styled, self-reflexive and self-referential dramaturgy. Its works often include iconic references, whether it is quoting America’s cultural and social histories, TWG’s, or individual members’ autobiographical accounts. In its works TWG usually implicates itself of its own construction. One example is how the Miller controversy is cited in *The Crucible* segment of *L.S.D.* In Part I, excerpts from the beat generation writers’ once censored radical texts were read. A buzzer went off to stop each reading. Miller’s allegorical political project on McCarthyism resonated well with TWG’s then current legal debacle with Miller, lending double irony to the work.

However, while quoting its own histories and predicaments, TWG’s use of self-referential devices evaded indulgence as they made both artistic and political points. By quoting the controversy, TWG placed itself in the same position as the ‘hunted witches’. At the same time, it offered a radical but possible reading of Dr Timothy Leary (the American drug guru cited in *L.S.D.*) as a hounded victim.<sup>7</sup> TWG revised its victimiser image (transgressor of the Miller text) to victim. But this was achieved by ironic association, implied confrontation and contextual signification rather than assuming an explicit or self-righteous stance.

TWG gained media attention and created a forum - a space to document, debate and voice its viewpoint publicly, denying Miller the last say on the legal debacle. TWG used the dominant power’s text (Arthur Miller’s *Crucible* ) to defend itself against Miller; his attempt at controlling the freedom of artistic expression. Here, performance was an act of cultural empowerment; a reclaiming of power by wrenching the very language of the dominant power.

TWG often includes fragments from its past productions in its current work. Unused ideas from the processes of past works are recycled and used ideas are reused in new ways. Often sets, props, costumes, scenic effects and spatial arrangements from earlier productions find their way into the new work. These recognisable features, more significantly used in the trilogies, are visual links to past productions. Sometimes they function as signifiers to encourage meaningful cross-references or associative linkages to past productions as possible ways of perceiving the new work, or vice-versa, thus challenging one to stretch one's imaginative, creative and critical capacities.

Psychiatry as a motif in *Rumstick Road* has a continued presence in *Nayatt School*, the second work of the *Rhode Island Trilogy*. The *black face*, video monitors and a metallic frame set were repeated features in its performances. Its recent work, Eugene O'Neil's *The Hairy Ape*, employed the above features which also served the production's purposes. For example, the *black face* was used, this time more naturalistically, for the coal-stained faces of the sailors working in the ship's boiler. The metallic frame set was reconfigured to simulate the ship's lower station in the first act and raised in the final act, doubling up as part of a zoo cage that fell and crushed the 'hairy ape' to death.

These recycled features served as irony, contextual signposts and showed TWG's self-consciousness of its own construction. But while these features, creatively and variedly applied, developed TWG's signature (codified dramaturgy and aesthetic vocabulary), they were not used at the expense of audiences new to its works.

## STRATEGIES AND DEVICES

The '60s and '70s avant-garde experiments gave TWG a firm foundation from which to develop its own deconstructionist dramaturgy. TWG always draws from its intimate

knowledge of American social culture. The premise of its aesthetic in the '80s and '90s is the deconstruction of the narrative. Instead of developing a main idea chronologically, it relies on juxtaposition, digression and fragmentation devices. To LeCompte, this reflects "the way modern Americans live" (Rea, 1986).

TWG selectively uses devices such as multiple texts, collage and montage, masking, mixed-media, simultaneous stage action and television techniques of editing, distancing, cross-cutting, free associations and storytelling. Since the devices and strategies include both literary and non-literary elements, the work process favours an interdisciplinary approach, lending itself to collective ways of making theatre.

TWG's work is mostly text-based, resulting in frequent experiments with intertextuality. Barthes illuminates with his notion of the text: it is "a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes, 1977:146). However, the 'source' texts are often reworked, rearranged, juxtaposed or made to overlay one another. Yet some become materials for visual/pictorial and theatrical metaphors, choreographic pieces and monologues. Texts are blended through creative processes and are ready for use in the evolving work. These texts either echo their original contexts or confront one another and become recontextualised in the new work. Intertextuality is also a potential political and aesthetic sign-posting and masking device that encourage associative and contextual reading.

TWG has taken texts ranging from modern classics to a private telephone interview; some are further processed and some used as raw materials, wholly cited into its works. Classics included T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* for *Nayatt School*, *Point Judith*, *Route 1 & 9*, *L.S.D. (...Just*

*the High Points....*) and *Brace Up!* respectively. In recent years, TWG has taken on full classic texts such as Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1995) and *The Hairy Ape* (1996). However, TWG does not heed the recommended stage directions. Instead, its performance dramaturgy inhabits these full texts and continues its deconstructionist project on 'presence'.

*Saint Antony* is by far the most extreme example of TWG's experiment with intertextuality. (*Appendix H* shows a list of 'source' texts used). The process of creating *Saint Antony* was not one of editing a play.<sup>8</sup> The first readthrough took place before casting and creating the play. TWG discussed the 'source' texts and explored different performance styles, making it difficult to separate text from performance. The process began at the readthroughs and continued during the rehearsals. Through collective rewriting of 'source' texts and improvisation sessions, the original playscript was constructed.

Texts become porous under collective analysis and scrutiny. For example, for *St. Antony*, TWG sat around the table and read a text based on Ingmar Bergman's *The Magician*, which was intended to be used as a mask. As LeCompte read with the other members, she attempted a muffled voice, a rapid, gibberish manner or a deliberate misreading of the text. The readings were usually interspersed with judgments, commentaries, digressions and allusions to contemporary social issues. An actress rose "from the table and demonstrated the action of staggering backward to illustrate the point she was making about a particular scene in the Bergman screenplay" (Cole, 1992:94). Boundaries between "reading," "analysing," and "acting" became tenuous. When exploring, TWG's playfulness played a creative role in the invention of devices, some of which survived in the final work.

*Saint Antony* was about TWG impersonating a theatre company impersonating the Del Fuego dance company. The performance comprised rehearsal scenes where the director, with the actors, reauthored ‘source’ texts, providing “the intervention of an interpretive [...] consciousness”(Cole, 1992:98). In the early phase, the narrative “mode” was associated with the story-line of Bergman’s *The Magician* and the “rehearsal” mode with Flaubert’s *Saint Antony*.

Later, LeCompte decided to overlay the *Saint Antony* and Lenny Bruce texts with the subtext scripts based on Bergman’s *The Magician*. The subtext scripts were written communally but with respect to individual systems “as if the operative forms of the working scripts [were] as numerous as the members in the company” (Cole, 1992:101). Below, extracted from Cole, is an example of TWG’s process of selective appropriation and deconstruction:

***Bergman action script***

“Tubal sighs and belches.”  
“A uniformed man...opens the coach door.”  
“Tubal tries bribing him.”

***Wooster Group action script***

“Cubby relieves himself.”  
“Tony comes in and Cubby gets rid of him.”  
“Cubby tries bribing Tony  
Tony shoves Cubby...”

***Psychological subtext script***

“Cubby tries to bribe Tony because Tony is complaining that there are too many people in the [hotel] room. A church bell rings, reminding the troupe that they have to rehearse Flaubert.”

[Cole, 1992:102]

“Masking” is another of TWG’s strategy to disguise its own discourse. But it also leads the audience to look behind what is presented. Masking also helps bring across politically-charged messages contextually and non-rhetorically. For example, Thorton

Wilder's *Our Town*, a widely read American classic celebrating the idyllic American society, made an ideal mask for *Route 1 & 9*. The 'source' texts included the original play's graveyard scene and extracts from a television education programme's lecture-documentary format on *Our Town*. These texts were re-performed and video-recorded by TWG.

*Route 1 & 9* opened with the image-text of an actor-lecturer (Ron Vawter) using a small model/box set to discuss the themes of life, culture and death in American society. He portrayed a 'classic American', in formal coat, tie and spectacles. He performed his role with a solemn air of authority with no hint of parody. Here, TWG used found materials where both content and form (i.e. *Our Town* and the lecture-documentary format respectively) were American cultural icons. The nostalgia was amusing and entertaining, disguising the foregrounding of assumptions behind the 'presences' (i.e. *Our Town*'s canonical status and a lesson on the play's authoritative interpretation) so that TWG's deconstructionist intention was not betrayed. The lecture-documentary's metaphorical potential was fully appreciated after having watched the whole play.

Through an interplay of American cultural historical contexts, a critical commentary emerged as a possible reading. The absence of social and racial tension in the idyllic white American portrait of Grover's Corners was thrown into sharp relief. The historical and social realities of the blacks existed literally outside *Our Town*. These assumptions remained uncontested in the lecturer's authoritative interpretation. The Pigmeat Markham dance deconstructed Wilder's assumptions and exposed the absence and the white construction of black representation in *Our Town* and the *black face* respectively. *Our Town* was an effective mask which TWG exploited to entice audiences to see beyond it, thereby making *Route 1 & 9* a 'distanced' political play.

TWG's intention in *Route 1 & 9* was to challenge American political correctness and expose its hypocrisy and the abuse of it. Whilst *black face* was deemed a cultural embarrassment and effaced, *Our Town* was hailed as a contemporary American classic. Political correctness does not necessarily reflect a genuine attitudinal change or a successful eradication of prejudice. Instead it is often conveniently used to disguise prejudice.

TWG's earliest works (e.g. *Rumstick Road*) were relatively more performance-based; subjective and solipsistic. In her next two works (*Nayatt School* and *Point Judith*), LeCompte began to use more dramatic texts. After *Point Judith*, the last work of the Trilogy, Gray left TWG. It was a huge transition for LeCompte who then became more central in TWG. TWG's personal, subjective and apolitical aesthetics shifted to one that was more overtly political. As Jill Dolan argues:

Feminist postmodernism does not play indulgently with meaninglessness or plurality, charges that might be leveled against some postmodern performance auteurs. Feminist postmodernism is committed to meaning, to sifting through the referents of material reality and drawing blueprints of their construction that can be historically revised and changed.

[Dolan, 1989:69]

Some critics feel that autonomous performance alone has little potential to re-order mindsets because it is too dependent on the audience's reading, which may be dependent on social conditioning. In that light, interpretation is not confrontation; a conservative reading of an autonomous performance piece cannot be prevented, leaving established or rationalised thought patterns unchallenged.

On the other hand, texts hold history and culture. More importantly for TWG, texts contain 'presences' formed by socio-historical forces. If a historical text is montaged

meaningfully against a contemporary one, historicisation or “a way of seeing” as posited by Diamond, takes place. Historicisation turns audiences to ‘historians’, making them more aware that they are writing their own histories even as they are watching the play. However, to communicate the point even more contextually, TWG relies on audio-visual signifiers, drawing from the resources of performance and television.

The dialectics between text and performance holds the political potential for effective recontextualisation and deconstruction. It is more beneficial to radically explore and redefine the roles and relationships of text and performance than to totally do away with either of them. For example, when text and performance are regarded equitably, one confronts instead of serves the other, the traditional dialectics between the two can be contemporised. This equitable relationship gives rise to the performance text. Heuvel writes that in the relationship between text and performance, “when one dominates without the mediating influence of the other, [the result] tend[s] to confirm and endorse ‘Presence’ and to give a self-confirming illusion of power” (Heuvel, 1993:12-13).

TWG does not privilege performance over text nor does it seek to discover a neat and stable synthesis between them. Texts are used for their ‘presences’ and/or historical contexts as points of departure. The texts undergo intense collective analysis and improvisations to determine their relationships to one another and to other mediums. By reworking the ‘source’ texts, TWG plays through and across them so that the various texts, images and acts resonate with one another significantly. ‘Resonate significantly’ here means that the theatrical elements are not used to explain, interpret, analyse or elaborate the points raised in the work for the audience. Instead, they are used to suggest, imply and provoke audiences to imagine how the points can connect meaningfully when perceived in a different context, in new relationships or with a new mindset; very much like montage.

The next thing to consider is TWG's notion and application of performance. Firstly, it chooses to work with performers with no formal theatre training and are therefore not assimilated to the prevailing Stanislavskian or Strasbergian Method acting. Instead TWG redefines the performer's responsibilities and alters the traditional relationship between actor and role. Secondly, as LeCompte believes, literary texts are only given life when they are reconstituted as theatre scripts. If performance is regarded with equal emphasis to literary text, the former has the potential to recontextualise or deconstruct the latter.

Theatre critic and actor Michael Kirby formulates a continuum, ranging from 'not-acting to acting'. At the 'not-acting' end of the continuum are 'Nonmatrixed Performing'; where the performers are "not embedded [...] in matrices of pretended or represented character, situation, place and time", and 'Symbolized Matrix'; where "the performer does not act and yet his or her costume represents something or someone" (Zarrilli, 1995:44). Johannes Birringer describes how "the actor should not 'enact' a character, role or persona, but should rather perform a series of actions" (Birringer, 1991:224). "A series of actions" refer to a performance score comprising non-naturalistic, acrobatic acts or stylised movements that are not derived from psychological motivations. According to Kirby's formulation, the essential difference between 'acting' and 'enacting' is that the former is an actor performing a task and the latter is that of impersonation (Campbell, 1996:108). The assumptions behind the traditional relationship between actor and role are thus contested.

TWG's deconstructionist aesthetic problematises *representation* as an acting style. In an *L.S.D.* scene, Willem Dafoe placed glycerin in his eyes to s(t)imulate tears. The audience was *presented* with an 'emotional' character 'crying'. There was no interest in portraying or feigning emotional or psychological expression as the only 'truth' was in reproducing the real as a task; performing it technically without a character's interior motivation. The

performers searched for masks of themselves and not for character masks. By presenting the character through these tasks, the performer quoted rather than attempted to become the character. The performer was present to the audience. The audience was made conscious that the performer was conscious of his/her mask. The object was to present an actor's true moments instead of reproducing those of a character. The performers had to be truer to themselves on stage than they were in real life.

Besides not enacting characters, TWG's performers do not break out to comment. Instead they rely on their performance vocabulary to comment contextually. So a text could be read fast (eg. Miller's *Crucible* segment of *L.S.D.*) or with a costume and prop (the actor used toy spectacles as accident victim of the final segment of *L.S.D.*) or a character's lines could be rearranged into a monologue and delivered to points beyond the stage space or to the stage narrator (*Brace Up!*). In *Brace Up!*, the performers did not make eye contact when speaking except in rare moments of convergence. They constantly reminded the audience of the present, the theatre, the setting, the space, the actors; they reminded the audience of itself.

In *Nayatt School*, where T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* was used, Gray never entered into the role but stood in for Reilly, the psychiatrist. He delivered a plot summary, played a record with Alec Guinness in the role, read his favourite speech in the play and shared some funny anecdotes. He gave a dramatic reading rather than portray psychological and emotional depth. In one instance he delivered Reilly's speech on salvation in lecture form, simultaneously taking two roles; that of a teacher and the actor playing Reilly (LeCompte, 1978:84). Soft music shifted to a loud disco tune forcing Gray to shout the final axiom: "Go in peace, my daughter. Work out your salvation with diligence." In the 'reading' of Eliot's text, performance was used to deprive language of its power.

In Part II of *L.S.D.*, TWG performed Miller's courtroom scene in fast-paced gibberish with the censorship buzzer. The visceral effects of the stylised hallucinatory screams and the buzzer intermittently interrupted the scene. Part III was the performance of the same scene but done in a deadly slow pace and in a dimly-lit atmosphere. TWG had recorded a rehearsal of Miller's courtroom scene conducted while high on acid. During the performance, TWG faithfully reenacted what it had recorded. Two forms of hallucination linked the two scenes, associating the 'possessed' girls and TWG with Leary, hounded for 'promoting' something that society was not ready to accept. These examples show that when performance is valorised, there is a performance score which functions as a text, that when juxtaposed with a word-text, creates an intertextual dialectic between the two.

Another common feature in TWG's works is 'bricolage', Lévi Strauss' term to describe a process of forming structures not based on cause-and-effect or cognitive relations but on the ability to form new relationships among diverse elements.<sup>9</sup> LeCompte and the performers arrange the texts in their works in a kind of bricolage. This structure combines the elements and at the same time places them in ironic opposition or contrapuntal relationship to one another.

In TWG's works no single part of the play illustrates another. All the elements of the piece have their own life and they are not supportive or secondary. These montages resonate with one another; each montage has the potential, at any one time, to be the context for another. It is always possible to have several relations; between montages and between any one montage and the whole. TWG does not use thematic or character relations as links or building blocks. Cause-and-effect connections between events are disrupted and dislocated. This was already seen in works as early as *Route 1 & 9*. Four live performers transforming into vampires in Part III was not a direct line of action from the violence evoked by racist stereotypes in Part II. In Part III, the eruption of the

violence or the payoff was seen in the vampires' frenzied and visceral explosion. The links were thus associative, producing many possible conceptual schemas. These emotional wave-like frequencies and impulses engaged the audiences' senses.

### **INTERMEDIA IN *BRACE UP!*, *ROUTE 1 & 9* AND *L.S.D.***

TWG's interdisciplinary approach is better described as intermedia. Dance and movements are used. Voices are amplified and reconfigured through microphones. Tape-recorders and walkman sets are used for immediate reproduction of interview texts. Mediatized (film and television) aesthetics, music, singing and sound bites are used. LeCompte, who has a visual arts background, works with these tools in a painterly fashion, making them count as signifiers rather than ornaments to embellish a scene. Intermedia provides the framing context for texts or narratives (as in mixed media for montage work) so as to facilitate intertextual reading, signify the construction of scenes, mask intentions, fracture or deconstruct representation, create digressions and provide textural variety, producing the necessary mood/atmosphere.

For *Brace Up!* television monitors were used as masks but in a more radical way - to stress the stillness of the performers. LeCompte describes the mise-en-scène of *Brace Up!*, a reworking of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*: The stage was divided into "zones" with different performance modes, and different formal devices for both the television and stage performers (refer to *Appendix I* for a description of the "zones").

The monitors were used to communicate contradictory information (that disturbed the linear narrative), and confirm information (images that enhanced the stage mood). They also made background noises. Random images from TWG's library of material, collected in tandem with the rehearsal process were used. These had no literal relationships to the

form and content of the Chekhov text, (eg. the Godzilla imagery substituted the missing Solyony character).

In *Route 1 & 9*, the original performance forms were subverted - *Our Town*, a stage play, was on video-monitors whilst the Pigmeat Markham routine, a television entertainment programme, was performed live. The naturalistic psychological realism of *Our Town* was achieved by removing the original stage-manager character. Secondly, the television's close-up device hyper-realistically showed characters in an emotionally intense graveyard scene, mimicing a naturalistic soap opera. This drew the audience in but critical distance was achieved with the *black face* which substituted the stage-manager character's Brechtian function.

Two different media (television monitors and live performance) framed two different performance forms (i.e. television acting versus dance routine) and narratives to signify that they were juxtaposed to be read intertextually. The Puritan restraint of the Webbs and Gibbises of Grover's Corners and the coldness of the graveyard scene were set against the raw vitality of the *black face* dance routines (Auslander, 1994:87-8). Both were results of white construction drawn from the history of American performance which historised the contemporary political correctness phenomenon. Have Americans really dealt with racial prejudice? The use of different media accentuated and catalysed the deconstruction of the American myth.

In another example, when Michael Kirby was unable to perform for a run of *L.S.D.*, his part of reading Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* was videotaped and he was replaced by a television monitor. Upon his return, his performance was juxtaposed with the television monitor; "sometimes speaking along with the tape and sometimes altering the cadence, weaving in and out of sync with his own video image" (Simons, 1991:9). With such juxtaposition, construction and deconstruction appearing visually, 'presence' and

‘absence’ played intermittently in a single montage. And one canceled out the other in a constant flow.

LeCompte mentions that she watches several segments of movies at any one time when she sits in front of the television. Living in a culture where one is able to change channels with a remote control, one seldom watches a movie from beginning to end. Yet the several segments one watches constitutes a “complete” show for the night. When interviewed on the use of television screens on stage, LeCompte replied:

I love the image. It’s beautiful. It’s like a Noh mask. The screens allow me to have a close-up, which you can have in film and you can’t have in theatre. And people love close-ups. It’s part of our vocabulary.

[Rea, 1992]

Peter Sellars, a New York-based experimental theatre director, argues that early American films borrowed from the theatre. TWG “has taken this language of film and television and brought it back to theatre and through this cross-pollinisation created a totally new theatrical vocabulary...” (Harron, 1986).

TWG’s intermedia vocabulary consists firstly of the use of television, video and filmic material. Secondly the form of television editing informs the montage device. Thirdly, performance forms such as dance, other choreographic movements, and actors performing tasks (as opposed to reenacting characters) are also employed. Fourthly, LeCompte uses microphones to “give her a controlled aural field in which the play can envelope the audience if desired” (Rea, 1992). The conventions of set, costume, lights and sound that are traditionally considered secondary to the literary text are privileged for theatrical signification.

With the use of intermedia vocabulary in *Route 1 & 9*, TWG was empowered to resist 'presence'. Firstly, without using video monitors in deconstructing *Our Town*, TWG would have risked exposing its programmatic agenda because its critique of racism would have come across too strongly and functioned as a controlling perspective. TWG's works were not confrontational in the classical political sense. It ensured that the counter-arguments in its work were varied, challenged or masked, lest they culminated to a singular counter-thesis that would amount to 'presence'. Through intermedia, TWG's discourse was made more probabilistic than definite.

Secondly, by appropriating popular culture (i.e. the soap opera genre) the play resisted its commodified status by owning its power and recontextualising its use. Auslander describes the way in which "*L.S.D.* demonstrated the workings of mediatisation, but was also caught up in them. [...] the production was as much a *symptom* of information's self-consumption as an analysis of it" (Auslander, 1987:33). Auslander goes on to say that in implicating its own 'constructedness' and its self-conscious mediatisation, TWG's deconstructive dramaturgy resisted the numbing effect of mediatisation. Mediatisation was simultaneously critiqued and appropriated as artistic form. By including the hegemonic 'presence', the work "asked as many questions as it answered" (Auslander, 1987:33).

### **'ABSENCE' IN *L.S.D.* (...JUST THE HIGH POINTS...)**

In *L.S.D.*, TWG created the flavour of the '60s, of people who wanted to change the world, through a collage of associations and feelings. Part I opened with TWG reading aloud several texts from beat writers and gurus of the drug culture such as Ginsberg, Leary, Burroughs and Kerouac. The texts were read spontaneously at random by male performers in 1980s street clothes, with music from Lou Reed and the Kinks. Nancy

Reilly, the only female performer, acted as Ann Rower (Leary's babysitter ), reading selections from a taped interview, with the help of headphones and tape-recorder.<sup>10</sup>

In Part II, female performers in historical costume joined the men. *The Crucible's* trial scene was read at breakneck pace; going through "just the high points", ending with a dance. Part III was a recreation of TWG rehearsing Part II while on acid. TWG video-recorded themselves and reproduced the scene with minute details. Thus at their most indulgent on stage, the actors were most professional. This scene was set against a video that moved from the New England woods (Leary's territory) to Miami (land of G. Gordon Liddy).

Part IV took up the connections introduced geographically by this video; performers recreated part of one of the Liddy-Leary debates. On another part of the stage was another story - a grotesque dance rehearsal by a pseudo-Latino trio. During the rehearsal phase, the above two stories/images appeared in LeCompte's mind. They had no logical links. But after trying them out at rehearsal, she decided to juxtapose these two montages simultaneously in performance.

On stage left was the Liddy-Leary debate. One performer, wearing a pair of toy spectacles, read the text of an accident victim (the accident was caused by someone high on L.S.D.). The victim, who had undergone major facial surgery, confronted Leary, accusing him of condoning violence. On stage right was the vaudevillian sequence of an amateur dance rehearsal by Dona Sierra and the Del Fuegos. Dona Sierra tapped her feet and flicked her skirt. Every time she froze in a pose, two shirtless men standing in a trench at her feet would slam their shoes noisily on the floor. The montage radiated a mixture of flamboyance and uncompromised dignity which was conveyed by a precisely timed repetitive slamming as the dancer rehearsed. This effective foil accentuated the pathos of the other on-going montage, where the text was read flat, devoid of emotion.

The actual image of Leary on video was yet another montage juxtaposed with the above two montages. When the reading of the victim's text ended, an actress bade goodnight. Whilst the lights dimmed, the dance and the video images of Leary were sustained. About two seconds after the stage lights faded out, the video image was abruptly switched off. The audience, in complete darkness, was greeted by the final slam of shoes on the floor.

The multiple juxtapositions created ambivalence that destabilised any attempt at premature judgement. Leary professed sadness about what had happened to the victim. The psychological realism of Leary's response had strong emotional appeal despite and because of the video's distancing effect. Framed by a monitor, Leary's victim status seemed heightened. The allegation against Leary seemed unfair as he did not condone violence. But this was counterpointed by the cold, matter-of-fact reading of the accident victim's text. This emotionally detached and flippant treatment of the accident victim evoked sympathy. One's horror was further intensified by the on-going nonchalance of the simultaneous dance rehearsal montage.

If TWG had opted to realistically act out the confrontation between Leary and the accident victim, its emotional impact might have prejudiced the audience against Leary. Instead of attempting to represent the confrontation, TWG exercised restraint. It masked the obvious by fragmenting the event and using different mediums - Leary, naturalistically represented, but framed by the monitor and the accident victim played stylistically on stage. There was no attempt to achieve emotional identification in order to 'seduce' the audience into any illusion. In not illustrating or playing the result/effect (i.e. the creator's expectation of audience's response) on stage, the work did not dictate how the audience should feel. Instead, the critical distance challenged the audiences to participate; an effective strategy to provoke a turbulence of conflicting emotions in them.

There was no objective viewpoint or frame of reference in the work. The absence of judgement undermined the safe, high moral ground which audiences were conditioned to look out for. They were thus challenged to transcend the material and engage in complex vision (Savran, 1986:55): “At the end of *The Road to Immortality* you won’t know if [LeCompte thought] Timothy Leary was a good or bad thing, but you [would] have passed through an extraordinary re-creation of the psychic atmosphere of America in the Fifties and Sixties, unclouded by sentimentality or nostalgia” (Harron, 1986).

Therefore, with the use of fragmentation, masking, montage and bricolage, TWG explores the dialectics between text, performance and other media to create performance texts that are more polysemous, multiple, shifting, provocative but non-instructive.

## CONTEXTUAL VERSUS TEXTUAL

Absence does not mean non-existence. Many of TWG’s works are highly political although it submerges its own viewpoint. Postmodern resistance to authorial presence (deferral of meaning) and traditional political theatre have irreconcilable differences. Although TWG’s works demonstrate the paradoxical possibility of managing both, such experimentations have been controversial.

By using the *black face* in *Route 1 & 9*, unmediated by any overt anti-racist signposts, TWG challenged contemporary American political correctness. The assumption was that behaving in a politically-correct manner did not mean that one was above prejudice. “The intent of the production was to confront the audience with the stereotypes its culture had produced and required it to accept and to transform those stereotypes” (Auslander, 1994:86). But other critics, like Janelle Reinelt, views TWG’s works as “a portrait of white culture [...] without reliance on an outside vantage point, [...] without positing a

way outside of it from which to comment” (Review of the Los Angeles Theatre Festival, *Theatre Journal* 43, 1991:109).

Savran felt that taken on its own, the *black face* comedy was racist. But in the context of the whole play, especially when juxtaposed with *Our Town*, it was “an act of liberation” (Savran, 1986:30-31). According to Auslander, there were sufficient “distancing mechanisms” in TWG’s use of *black face*. After all there was enough historical distance for it to be perceived as an iconic quotation and therefore a “critical gesture”. There was also the context of the performance - it took place in an “experimental theatre loft in New York City” and was not mass entertainment. Thirdly, TWG’s deconstructionist dramaturgy operated as “an intrinsic distancing mechanism [thus] depriving all of their representations of authority”.

Auslander also said that critics missed the point because TWG’s resistance to ‘presence’ had been “implicit and contextual” as opposed to “explicit and textual” (Auslander, 1994:89). He posited that the “absence of overt commentary [typified] postmodernist political art” (Auslander, 1994:87). Therefore, racism as one of the possible readings could not be denied; the operative word being ‘one’.

In reference to this debacle, *black face* reappeared in *L.S.D.* In the *Crucible* (Part II) segment, Kate Valk played Tituba in *black face* complete with dialect. In *black face* and dialect she continued to play Mary Warren applying white makeup over her *black face* during the *Crucible on L.S.D.* (Part III) segment. This irony was a critique of the white man’s construction of black representation; as inexact as the theatrical *black face*.

Aronson commented that the white makeup caused a separation of sign from object, depoliticising the sign. The absence of a referent had opened it to diverse interpretations. Auslander counter-argued that the sign was not devoid of political meaning. As *black*

*face* had always been culturally charged, the application of white face over *black face* signified the deprivileging of whiteness; that “whiteness itself became a second-order representation, a mask over a mask” (Auslander, 1994:91).

Auslander compared the use of *black face* between *Route 1 & 9* and *L.S.D.* concluding that the latter was a more successful “iconographic manipulation [...] emphasis[ing] the ideological baggage of the convention by thematising its conventionality and opened a space for critique by deprivileging whiteness” (Auslander, 1994:91). Both productions used juxtaposition to prevent a controlling perspective from emerging. However, the irony was sharper and theatrically more successful in *L.S.D.* Because although in both works, the irony was conveyed intertextually, *L.S.D.* only used one medium where *Route 1 & 9* used two; the juxtaposition was done on a single performer (Kate Valk). Furthermore, the juxtaposition was executed in a linear time sequence instead of simultaneously as in *Route 1 & 9*.

LeCompte admitted that due to the *Route 1 & 9* controversy, she reverted to using the “narrator ‘hook’ of earlier work” for *L.S.D.*: “For me, however, Ann Rower’s testimony did not frame the piece the way narration would, but rather, became one discourse juxtaposed with many others” (Savran, 1986:182). Hence, even if a controlling signifier was introduced, it was enmeshed so into the work that its true function was embedded. It was present without overtly directing the audiences’ thinking. It existed in the flow of associations.

The juxtaposition of *The Crucible* and the Leary texts exposed not only racist but also the sexist assumptions in Miller’s characterisation. *L.S.D.* associated the men with the text and ‘phallic’ microphones and the women in period costumes (“historical domesticity”) with “visual, pictorial signification” (Auslander, 1994:93).

The costume's visual appeal was set against its stereotypical connotation. The natural-sounding voices, when compared to the artificially amplified ones, sounded more appealing. The stereotyped images were employed precisely for their clichéd connotative value and turned on their heads. Therefore, as TWG exposed Miller's sexist assumptions with the use of microphones and period costumes, it also challenged the assumptions behind the commodification of its theatrical use.

Sexism continued to be problematised in the final part of *L.S.D.* The pseudo-Latino dance-rehearsal montage showed two shirtless men in the trench (a lower position) slamming shoes on the floor to produce the sound effects whilst the beautifully dressed woman danced and posed. The dance was deconstructed as the backstage function and onstage dance were juxtaposed in a single performance montage, visible to the audience. There was uncertainty as to whether the woman or the men had more 'control' over the dance.

TWG used sexist images to revise the concept of sexism; resisting and critiquing the narrowness of the social notion of sexism as constructed by political correctness. By its ironic and 'in-the-face' treatment, the authoritative definition of sexism was meant to be destabilised. This recalls Derrida's notion of "using against the edifice the instruments or stones available in the house" (Derrida, 1982:135). However, the implicit irony was missed and TWG was alleged to be sexist.

In another case, the persecution of Abigail and her followers was juxtaposed with that of Leary. This was meant to revise the authoritative cynical view of Abigail as the manipulator and recast her as a visionary-cum-victim. In the light of Leary, Abigail's position could be re-written as an "attempt to subvert a repressive status quo by questionable means" (Auslander, 1994:92).<sup>11</sup>

However, TWG did not anchor or rank this interpretation. The absence of a controlling viewpoint problematised the task of distinguishing the ironic from the non-ironic. To avoid the heavy-handedness that irony can sometimes bring to a work, TWG had made it “free-floating” (Savran, 1991:54) and thereby diluted its conventional function. Although a work may be more open, the multiple meanings and the non-committal use of irony account for weak sign-posting. Having said that, alternative devices such as narrative framing or framing by non-literary media can be effective sign-posting substitutes. However, it is not just the choice of device; it is also TWG’s politics that ultimately determine the ways in which the devices are used. Its object is to avoid too much weighted presence so that reading associatively is not sabotaged.

An episode or montage in TWG’s work usually comprises multiple images. The images, be they racist, sexist or pornographic are largely disturbing in themselves. However, some only become disturbing when juxtaposed with other apparently unrelated images. Yet these juxtaposed images are not used solely to shock. Instead they provoke further investigation. Audiences willing to participate can become the “protagonist”, searching for possible connections while journeying through the work.

Such predominant contextual communication gives TWG’s works paradoxical tension. TWG’s strategy of quoting/appropriating ‘presence’ to resist it is often so radical as to risk being misconstrued. The strategy is radical; TWG quotes the very icons that are deemed stereotypical in order to deconstruct the assumptions behind them. Auslander calls for a discernment as to “when postmodernist appropriation of historical and conventional representations may enable a critique and when it merely restates a reified image” (Auslander, 1994:83). The attempt to revise a stereotypical image raises questions. When is laughter used to ridicule and undermine oppressive images? When does irony survive as critical commentary and when does it collapse into reification?

TWG's "gendered imagery [...] straddle[s] the uncomfortable line between deconstruction and reification" (Auslander, 1994:93).

Another reason for being easily misconstrued is the lack of a controlling perspective. Whilst TWG's object is to destroy established viewpoints for their narrowness and prescriptive influence, it is obliged to evade proposing a viewpoint. Moreover, to implicate its own participation in construction, TWG is often self-referential, deconstructing its own 'presence'. Such works open themselves to two inevitable consequences. Firstly, a "kind of open-ended, sometimes contradictory multiplicity - a kind of theatrical cognitive dissonance..." risks the survival of a work's basic premise (Simons, 1991:10). Hence the racist and sexist allegations although TWG was actually using these inflected images ostensibly. Secondly, with progressive deconstruction, there is a tendency to depoliticise a work, privileging play and aesthetics.

*Frank Dell's The Temptation of Saint Antony* was intensely self-referential of TWG's creative rehearsal process. In *Saint Antony*, the last of *The Road to Immortality* Trilogy (*Route 1 & 9* and *L.S.D.* being the first and second), the leader of the theatre company 'incorporated' Lenny Bruce's Frank Dell, Flaubert's Saint Antony, Bergman's Magician, the fake Dr. Del Fuego, actor Ron Vawter, and director Elizabeth LeCompte. This work epitomises one critic's comment of TWG as "maddening in its self-reflexive, almost solipsistic indifference to the canons of communication" (Wetzsteon, 1989:48).

Savran analysed this aesthetically beautiful work as an attempt to recover "the magical power of the theatre to cheat death, to commemorate what is no longer there [as it] performs a kind of high-tech séance, listening to and broadcasting the voices of the dead" (Savran, 1986-7:36-41). He was however sceptical of TWG's "giddy undecidability" between a Nietzschean and Marxist aesthetics. He went on to say that he was unable to determine if the artistic repositioning was a result of "anxiety over government funding or

[marked] a carefully considered change in direction, whether it [represented] a gesture of compliance with or an indictment of the aesthetic tide” (Savran, 1991:53).

TWG has always dealt with the paradoxical tension between the politics of performance and political performance. Hitherto it has achieved a clever balance between political issues and postmodern openness. TWG’s works set it apart from other postmodernist practitioners. “Unlike Robert Wilson and Martha Clarke, who explore relativity, irrationality and evil in the context of beautiful, eye-pleasing tableaux, TWG’s theatrical collages present the violent inexplicable collision of cultures and artistic materials without prettification or overt moralising, although the work resonates with a post countercultural despair” (Holden, 1987:C3).

But in *Saint Antony*, TWG uncomfortably tips the balance and is preoccupied with aesthetic gymnastics. Savran voices this criticism: “I have become increasingly sceptical of those artists (and critics) who produce a cultural critique so subtle and so endlessly sceptical that it finally does little else than deconstruct itself” (Savran, 1991:53). However, Savran was able to appreciate *St. Antony* in the context of the Trilogy:

[T]he trilogy begins by formenting [revolution] in *Route 1 & 9*; continues by textualising it, in *L.S.D.*; and concludes by turning it into an aesthetic experience, in *Saint Antony*. In the course of the three pieces, action is gradually recast as contemplation, demonstration as discussion, and the combative as the solipsistic. *Route 1 & 9* forces confrontation, both inside and outside the theatre, by using black face comedy to deconstruct the racial stereotypes deployed by *Our Town* and ratified by liberal humanist discourse, *L.S.D.* reads a collection of documents from the countercultural revolution of the 1950s and 1960s to prove the unbridgeable gulf between history as a body of texts and history as a sequence of events. *Saint Antony* moves from historiography to aesthetics and reconstitutes revolution as theatre, magic and death, dissolving it, with sleight of hand, into a shimmer of language and

swirl of theatrical fog. Revolution is collapsed into history, which is then collapsed into theatre.

[Savran, 1991:52]

In some postmodern works ambiguities arise from the attempts to conflate the aesthetic and political realms. Such elliptical works are often susceptible to being misunderstood. The aesthetics are so radically politicised that any political nuance is eclipsed, rendering the work politically ineffective.

On the other hand, TWG has been described as a 'theatre with a politic' rather than a conventional political theatre company. The difference is that the latter's priority is to transform society. Its intention is to prescribe by recruiting more members to its way of thinking. The former's priority is to artistically express, reflect and share its beliefs and worldviews but at the same time question them. In so doing, it might influence some audiences to be more self-reflexive, open and accepting. But this exists as a potential influence rather than a pro-active political objective.

TWG's 'theatre with a politic' deconstructs thought patterns, liberates and empowers the audiences' imagination. Its politics includes one's accountability in determining one's own morality. Due to globalisation and the advanced stage of capitalism, most things are interrelated, but are far too complex to be deciphered by employing a reductive cause-and-effect paradigm or a single ideological perspective. TWG's works are filled with co-existing media, texts, images and montages that are apparently unrelated, ambiguities, destabilised meanings and self-reflexive uncertainties. These characteristics show how a postmodern consciousness can no longer qualify to prescribe a singular alternative programme by which to make sense of life and the world today.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the strategies and devices used in TWG's intermedia works account for the tenuous relations between texts, often resulting in unintended associations. The instability of relations make multiple dialectic links possible at any one time, radiating a "galaxy of meanings". Some audiences at *Rumstick Road* thought the work condemned psychiatrists. Others saw the psychiatrist as the only one who really tried to help Gray's mother (Savran, 1986:55). For TWG, meaning is always processual, provisional and indeterminate and gives rise to multiple perspectives, minimising 'presence'. This disorients the audience's conventional reading patterns, thus creating spaces to produce meaning.

LeCompte draws from German Surrealist Kurt Schwitters who used to make collage sculptures from rubbish: "He envisioned a total work of art, which would embrace all the arts in a single unit, but rather than a Wagnerian fusion, it was Dadaist" (Holden, 1987:C3). She is also inspired by post-impressionist painter Paul Cézanne, whom she says leaves the canvas showing here and there, as an analogy that the method in the work has no closure.

James Gleick's Chaos Theory has been used to explicate TWG's anti-theatre works and its exploration of relations between text and performance. TWG finds new and viable forms to "mirror a universe that is rough, not rounded, scabrous, not smooth [...] a geometry of the pitted, pocked, and broken up, the twisted, tangled and intertwined" (Gleick, 1987:94). The classical Euclidean paradigms are based on "certain abstractions of reality - triangles, spheres, various polyhedra - that are endowed with a great deal of intrinsic value by an episteme stressing harmony, balance, and proportion" (Heuvel, 1993: 98). Such shapes promote the determinacies of linearity in the ways in which we discover, explain and express our universe/reality. Linear methods of thinking are unable

to capture the shapes of chaos and disequilibrium. In investigating the attributes of dimensions and textuality in theatre, non-linear or other geometric apparatuses and forms emerge to challenge the limitations and assumptions of the linear form. The singular perspective is given up for more relativistic readings with works whose shapes are less formalised and solid than those of the conventional text.

LeCompte cites Part IV of *L.S.D.* to contextualise her poignant feelings and as an analogy of the paradoxical position she and TWG were caught in when accused of racism:

The only thing [Leary] could say, of course, was, "I feel very sad." First of all he said, "I've never condoned violence," because this man accused him of [it], just as people accused us of racism. But at the same time, he couldn't say, "That's not my fault." He could only express sadness, which is all that I could ever come to about the *Route 1 and 9* controversy. I could never get beyond that; I could never figure out what I had to do with it, or why. I always felt that it was the flip side of anything that's radical...So we finally decided that the last section in Part IV would be a question - an unanswerable one. It would have to be juxtaposed for me with my work. And my work was the dance. That is, the dance represents all the work I've done in the past seven years. And it is all the idiocy, all the threat, all the fun, all the violence.

[LeCompte, quoted by Aronson, 1985:74]

## CHAPTER THREE

### COLLABORATION AND INTERDISCIPLINARY WORKS

The selection, layering, and orchestration of signifiers can be accomplished through a variety of working processes. Each director develops a method of working that suits his/her personal style. Each director produces a unique production through the conscious and intuitive selection and arrangement of the signifiers of the *mise-en-scène*. All the planning in the world can only result in a generalised concept of what a production might end up looking and sounding like. Only through the process of design, rehearsal, trial and error, experimentation, and confrontation and cooperation between multiple artists can a fully staged production be actualised for the audience. Depending on her personal working methods, a director can rely heavily on the creative imaginations and activities of her co-artists to develop the performance. The postmodern directors [...] fall into one end of the collaborative continuum or the other; rarely do they work at a midpoint. They either dominate every aspect of the *mise-en-scène* or they allow their co-artists significant authority to contribute.

[Whitmore, 1991:225]

### COLLABORATION AS A CREATION PROCESS IN THE THEATRE OF EMPOWERMENT

In the first part of this chapter, I analyse the collaborative processes of Churchill-Joint Stock, Churchill-Second Stride and TWG. A collaborative work already begins with the choice of artists in a team. The team plans a *process-structure* (or composition procedure) which helps manage artistic resources within a time frame and anticipate potential crisis arising from the complexities of multiple artists working in a low-hierarchical context. The chapter's second part begins with *Audience As Co-Artist*. It analyses a team's aesthetic impact on the application of artistic devices in organising a work's materials to

engage the audience as co-artist. Co-artist refers to the audience co-creating with the team via the work.

For the lack of better criteria and at the risk of being reductive, I have chosen a ‘conservative-radical’ continuum to aid analysis. It is not my interest to imply that ‘conservative’ or ‘radical’ accounts for an inferior or a superior process that determines a work’s political effectiveness. As much as a radical process can fail, a conservative one can succeed. It is more beneficial to view each model as having different strengths and weaknesses.

A radical collaborative process is necessary for an interdisciplinary work because its signifying system is comprised of materials that draw from several disciplines’ vocabularies. The multiple disciplines interact more fundamentally, *supplanting* rather than *complementing* what each is doing.<sup>1</sup> A medium’s content usually recontextualises rather than illustrates the text framed or expressed in another medium. Despite using music, dance and acting, *Poisoners* was not a musical but music theatre, which has more similarities with opera. The relationships of the disciplines are not ranked or premised on unity but are equal in status and function. This is clearly illustrated when *Cats*, a West End musical is compared to *Einstein On The Beach*, a postmodern opera by Philip Glass and Robert Wilson.

In *Cats*, the physical performance illustrates the narrative or cat gestures in the dance. For *Einstein*, the musical structure completely interweaved with the stage action and lighting. Instead of illustrating, the disciplines interact to evoke sensual associations: “[the] renaissance-pure vocal lines, the blast of amplified instruments, a steady eighth-note pulse and the hysterical chorus chanting numerals as quickly and frantically as possible” in the climactic scene hint[ed] at nuclear holocaust (Page, 1976:9).

Although collaboration does not always result in a non-moralistic work, interdisciplinary practice holds the potential to disperse or disguise authorial presence in many creative and interesting ways. Every artist monitors the way his/her discipline applies or interacts with another so that s/he can professionally recommend possible solutions. The team then can decide on the best strategy; to mask, reduce or counter an existing or emerging dominant discourse. It works on the dynamics that the more the limitations the more precise the suggested treatment is.

## THE JOINT STOCK MODEL

Joint Stock, a theatre collective formed in 1974, was reputed for creating new, ensemble-based plays in a democratic spirit. The Joint Stock 10-week production period was divided into a 4-week workshop and a 6-week rehearsal. It comprised of four phases: pre-writing, writing, rehearsal and performance. The pre-writing phase was the most collaborative: encompassing conferences with the director, field trips, discussions, workshops, improvisations and drama exercises with the actors. This phase developed team spirit and provided 'raw material' for a playwright to draw upon.

Churchill first collaborated with Joint Stock in 1976. Collaboration here differed from collective devising as Churchill did not transcribe. Nor did the work evolve from the workshops.<sup>2</sup> There were many instances where what an actor had said or done directly connected to something in the text. More importantly, how the text was written was inspired by an actor's accuracy and commitment to his/her craft (Plays One, 1985:184). When Churchill wrote *Cloud Nine*, she returned to an incidental idea that surfaced in the workshop - the parallel between colonial and sexual oppression. Although the scenarios and characters were not developed in the workshop, she drew a lot of material from it, claiming that she would not have written the same play without it (Churchill, 1985:245).

Discussions were important, especially in challenging a playwright's personal views and offering him/her a range of alternative ideas.<sup>3</sup> As Churchill commented: "[Y]ou [were not] isolated; you share[d] ideas [...] Other people [saw] things differently to you which [was] extremely stimulating" (Wearing, 1991:24). Working in a social context gave her the impetus to translate personal anger and pain into the expression of a public perspective (Itzin, 1980:285). It reinforced her socialist-feminist instincts (Randall, 1988:18), resulting in works that reflected a more confident sense of social and political consciousness. "After this turning point, moving beyond the personal perspective into a perspective shared through communal theatre groups, Churchill [wrote] a string of successes: *Cloud Nine* in 1979, *Fen* in 1983, and *A Mouthful of Birds* in 1987" (Randall, 1988:20).

## THE SECOND STRIDE MODEL: CROSSING DISCIPLINES

Churchill's interdisciplinary experience continued in her writing of two libretti for Second Stride, a dance company: *Lives Of The Great Poisoners* and *Hotel. Poisoners* involved Churchill as a member of a team that included Orlando Gough as music composer, Ian Spinks as choreographer-director and Antony McDonald as designer. The team's decision was to have each cast member contribute from their respective disciplines instead of everyone doing everything. Gough lamented that western culture had always compartmentalised musicians and dancers so they shared a "mutual distrust and a terrible sense of hierarchy: the musicians [were] there simply to service the dance" (Churchill, 1993:xi). He envisioned musicians and dancers working together but the musicians' physical actions were hampered by their instruments. A *capella* singing solved the problem.

*Hotel* comprised the same team as *Poisoners*, with the exception of Lucy Bevan as designer. It had solos, duets, trios, quartets and ensemble sections. The musical texture arose from the combinations of the scenes in different rooms. At one point, for example, the drunk couple were having a row, the affair couple were whispering sweet nothings, the businessman was talking to his children on the phone and the TV (played by one of the singers) was droning on. At another, everyone was reading from the hotel brochure. At yet another, everyone was asleep; some people were singing their dreams, some were snoring, some were silent. In the morning, they left. For some it had been a crucial night in their lives, for others an ordinary one.

The theme, stories and scenarios for *Poisoners* were worked out as a team and then distributed among the performing forms. Churchill went off to write, sending scenes to Gough as she wrote them (Churchill, 1992:ix). For *Hotel*, there was no pre-writing discussion. Churchill wrote a story and with Gough approached Second Stride who decided to put it to workshop. Both wrote the words and music. When they were more or less fixed, movement, set and costume designs followed soon after. The more word-based characters were developed first and the others were developed in the rehearsal process. Churchill explained: “At the beginning of rehearsal some characters [had] large parts down on paper while others still [had] their parts to be made” (Churchill, 1993:ix). After the text was written, the music was scored. *Hotel* had a long on-site rehearsal period to compose the performer’s (singing and movement) scores; *Hotel’s* 45-minute libretto underwent a three-week workshop with another rehearsal period to develop the 25-minute dance piece in part II. During rehearsals, performers were encouraged to flesh out their characters independently. If revisions were required, the artists on the team responded from their respective disciplines.

## COMPARISONS BETWEEN THE JOINT STOCK AND SECOND STRIDE MODELS

The Joint Stock's low-hierarchical pre-writing phase ceased once the writing phase began. Here, Churchill took on a traditional playwright's role; she wrote alone, handing the creative baton over to the director only after the writing phase had ended. The only difference was that she had a pre-writing experience to tap from to innovate theatrical devices. The Second Stride's initial phase was linear and compartmentalised as the text was written first and then scored. The workshop and rehearsal processes were neither ranked nor linear. The artistic team was on-site to compose the performance text. Here the collaboration process-structure was the reverse of the Joint Stock model; traditional collaboration ceased and radical collaboration began with the workshop phase and continued till opening night.

As the project involved multiple disciplines, composition was not limited to literary devices.<sup>4</sup> The musicians, choreographers, singers and dancers interpreted, created or translated ideas in terms of their respective disciplines. A difference was that the Joint Stock works were word-based (eg. *Top Girls*) and the Second Stride pieces were more sparse on paper (*Hotel* is only 8 pages), indicating the fundamental importance of Churchill's co-artists' non-literary contributions to the final work.

## THE WOOSTER GROUP MODEL: COLLABORATION AND CHAOS

The tradition of theatre has always been collaborative. All of those people (Shakespeare, Moliere, Euripides and Brecht) worked in a group, and there was life and spirit in the theatre that came out of those groups. The playwright did not do it alone.

[Actor Kate Valk as quoted in Simons, 1991:9]

TWG's process is best described as a collective approach that respects artistic autonomy. The collective held long discussions, working together intensely over texts: individual performers had a say about how each wanted to play the text or fashion the roles. What the individual performer offered was further modified and became material to be "collaged" into the evolving work.

TWG's devices directly reflected their work modes: its style seemed "simultaneously to inhabit and subvert the culturally coded structure of meaning we call (however imprecisely) realism" (Heuvel, 1993:197). TWG rejected commercial theatre and its production mode. Instead it created its own collective and developed its own dramaturgical principles, tools and theatrical vocabulary.

TWG questioned the subordination of the *mise-en-scène* to a pre-written script and considered movement, text, design and music of equal importance (Savran, 1986:2). The once dominant literary text had now to share its status with television monitors, microphones and dance movements. TWG needed a long process-structure as it had to draw from the vocabularies of many different media, let alone combine them in various permutations to compose the *mise-en-scènes*. LeCompte elaborated: "that's truly what writing [had] come to. It [had] to take its place alongside the visual and aural media in collaboration" (Rea, 1986). TWG used literary and non-literary media simultaneously as material and tool. LeCompte's theatrical aesthetics included the principles of other performance disciplines: "It [was] really just integrating what [had] been developed in visual composition, musical composition, and, most importantly, dance composition in the last 30 or 40 years [...]" (Simons, 1991:8-9).

Devising was the crux of TWG's method. The chance occurrences that devising yielded and exploited accounted for scripts being literally 'written' during on-site rehearsals (Heuvel, 1993:101). Although LeCompte came with "ideas, strategies [and] connections

already conceived in private, [...] the operative creative process in rehearsal [was] visibly communal” (Cole, 1992:105). Because of the work’s intermedia nature, LeCompte needed to “see” how it evolved in a three dimensional space; conceptualising and composing not only mentally but also architecturally/spatially. The performers worked on a range of found objects, improvisational exercises, mutual confrontations, film footage and texts. This resulted in montages composed of literary, visual, audio and performance elements. These images made up the episodes’ scenographies instead of the conventional scenes and acts.

TWG worked with many collaborators. Resident designer Jim Clayburgh participated as intimately in a work’s evolution. After some preliminary discussion, TWG gave filmmaker Kobland total autonomy to create a film for *St Anthony*. He then produced a rough film for LeCompte to manipulate into the work. The collaborative process was very interactive and organic as his work took its impulse from the rehearsal process and returned to it as “an original text” (Cole, 1992:107). Peter Sellars choreographed the dances without being involved in the earlier process via a special arrangement with LeCompte. He too enjoyed total autonomy with the cast; altering the assignment and arrangement of lines, and suggesting adjustments to vocal delivery. After confirming individual episodes, he asked for readthroughs and suggested further adjustments. What was significant was the amount of creative freedom the collaborators enjoyed. They were given fairly open briefs with perhaps some necessary artistic limitations (eg. the purpose of choosing a particular media to frame a particular text). The constructed film and dance texts were to be treated and reframed again by TWG once it had decided on how to use what it had to get what it wanted in the context of the episodes.

This modular method served a montage-collage strategy of organising material which accounted for the high intertextual resonances in *Saint Antony*. TWG was directorless, a company of self-generating actors: “the collective will, experience, and abilities of the

entire company of performers and designers [was] tapped as primary source material for signification” (Whitmore, 1991:224). TWG’s seemingly chaotic model must be evaluated in the light of LeCompte’s historical relationship to the group, her personality and working style.

## THE DIRECTOR-AUTHOR, THE ‘OUTSIDE EYE’

TWG rejected the traditional division of labour and created a theatre where the director was the *central* (i.e. not at the apex of a hierarchical structure) creative force - a conjoint playwright/designer/director (Savran, 1986:2). For TWG, the director’s traditional role was not contemporised at the expense of all its aspects. Instead some were kept and modified. The collective version of collaboration, aesthetic vision, unique deconstructionist vocabulary, intermedia strategies and LeCompte’s personality determined the director’s role. With a 20-year shared history, the ensemble was sufficiently stable and secure to trust LeCompte as the ‘outside eye’. Hence, feedback such as “When you guys get too much of a presence, I don’t like it: it’s too much like a play” and “It’s got the preciousness of art in this space” (Cole, 1992:100) by LeCompte was usually taken in the spirit of trust. During the on-site rehearsals, she served TWG by discerning, from its rehearsals, if it was achieving what it had set out to do.

TWG’s use of intermedia was informed by its aesthetics. Therefore, what, when, how, where and why a media was employed was accounted for and not incidental. For example, intermedia functioned to comment, suggest, counter, digress or signify another viewpoint through intertextual reading and not for unifying purposes. As the ‘outside eye’, LeCompte looked out if the work was achieving the former and not the latter.

The ‘outside eye’ also looked out for potential signifieds in a work; multiple alternative chains of associations. She had to detect blatant and loaded associations so as to counter

or mask any emerging privileged viewpoint, protecting a work's openness and plural readings. Hence, LeCompte's role involved a set of responsibilities that were different from those of a traditional director. What mattered was not a director's traditional status but if and how the redefined role contributed effectively to its collaborative process by the very virtue of being outside the work.

LeCompte had to look out for significant potential ideas that might surface by chance. She had to be creatively resourceful, alert and sensitive to imagine how to use appropriate devices and strategies to craft, translate and frame her collaborators' contributions and found materials to serve the work's agenda; like an effective teacher who would use his/her students' examples to achieve the lesson objectives.

When working experimentally, chance procedures, occurrences and trial and error were important strategies for the creation process. Such limitations, welcomed as creative stimulation, would usually happen when artists have to confront external, practical and/or technical circumstances. The persevering attempts to solve difficulties often accounted for innovative solutions. Only when various montage permutations were explored on-site, with varied media in a "three-dimensional" rehearsal experience, could the 'outside eye' be enabled to analyse and offer constructive recommendations.

"When the limitations [did] not occur by chance, LeCompte [tended] to impose them, constantly undercutting easy or obvious theatricality" (Aronson, 1985:71). LeCompte called it 'chance work': "like throwing a handful of beans up in the air. And when they [came] down on the floor, I must use that pattern as one pole against which I work my dialectic" (Savran, 1986:51). LeCompte elaborated: "When I put together a piece, I take ideas either randomly or intuitively and don't impose a thematic structure" (Holden, 1987:C3). This meant a high degree of trial and error and developing improvisational strategies, having to zig zag from discussion table to performance site. These

interruptions showed intermittent consultation to be a feature of TWG's collaborative method. Whenever there was a block during rehearsal, she encouraged exploration as she thought on her feet. She relied on the cast's creative input, often giving them free rein to make something up so that she could *see* and then decide whether to keep or discard the proposals (Cole, 1992:100).

Being the "outside eye" could be an isolating task, especially when exploring *intertextually*. The performers could not comment as they were inside the intermedia work. TWG's theatrical vocabulary made great demands when it came to untangling the interwoven threads if there was an impasse at "synchronising seemingly disparate scripts" (Cole, 1992:109).

Obstacles were common; these included having too much information to compress, determining the aesthetic balance of theatrical conventions, not losing sight of the narrative(s), detecting repetition, monitoring whether or not episodes recontextualised or illustrated, and so on. Sometimes it involved editing, recuperation of material and changing a performer's role - removing him/her from a scene and re-introducing him/her in another role elsewhere in the play. LeCompte's strategies included moving as far away from the literal as possible, turning the problem around to seek out the opposite or returning to materials rejected earlier: "*The Devil Dance*, choreographed by Sellars but provisionally rejected by LeCompte, opened up a space for the coming together of the Bergman and Flaubert 'source'-texts" for *Saint Antony* (Cole, 1992:109).

Recomposing an episode was not a matter of crushing a piece of paper and starting on a fresh sheet. Once during a *Saint Antony* rehearsal, a visual image had to be corrected. Believing the solution to lie in the existing material, the stage manager had to lower the back wall of the set. The performers were told that it was not *what* they were doing (i.e. lifting the bed, as if it was levitating) that was wrong but the way in which they were

doing it. They continued discussions and LeCompte demonstrated the image of a crowd under the bed raising their arms in a particular way (Cole, 1992:108). With intermedia works, the cast and the entire stage and production crew are involved in revisions.

Documenting an intermedia text was yet another difficulty. TWG's works developed in performance and underwent fundamental changes even during a run. Together with dramaturg Marianne Weems, LeCompte only completed *Saint Antony's* final version after several performances and not before the opening night.

Apart from being an "outside eye", LeCompte often functioned as a conceiver; whether it be inviting other artists as collaborators such as Kobland and Sellars or determining if a work was a single piece or had potential to be developed into a trilogy. Conceptualising trilogies required her to be simultaneously inside and outside the works.

## **COMPARISONS BETWEEN THE CHURCHILL AND THE WOOSTER GROUP MODELS**

Some of the essential writing has to be done in forms moving away from print: in writing and recording voices - not only local rhythms but more general rhythms and sequences - and in stills and in actual work at the place of production. This co-operative work has to be consciously learned by a writer. It is often avoided because of the fear of 'creation by committee' [...] In a slowly and consciously assembled form, very similar in that respect to writing, co-operation can be very different from what is possible in a relatively sudden and separate performance. In these conditions the new methods can in practice be made.

[Williams, 1996:381]

Although the playwright's and director's devices may differ, they shared some similarities. Both Churchill and LeCompte explored radically the dialectics between text

and performance to create the performance texts. Churchill held onto the playwright's narrative as she gradually progressed to employ more performance strategies whilst LeCompte began to use full play texts to which she applied TWG's deconstructive performance vocabulary. Both worked on-site to compose the performance text.

The Joint Stock model was relatively more conservative as compared to Second Stride's and TWG's models, because the non-hierarchical feature only applied to the pre-writing phase. Other than that, the rest of its process was similar to that of the traditional structure. Second Stride's and TWG's models shared more similarities, one being the inclusion of both hierarchical and non-hierarchical features. The hierarchical feature occurred when discipline-orientated or formally-trained collaborators became involved in the process.

Churchill's institutionalised theatrical devices (i.e. the multiple-role, juxtaposition and time-space travel) served a similar function as TWG's unique deconstructionist vocabulary. This was a necessary authorising element. Working with disparate texts and media, a unifying feature such as an established vocabulary was essential for accessible signification. Both vocabulary systems existed before the secondary creation phase began. However, whilst the Churchill-Second Stride's artistic team included Churchill, Kobland and Sellars did not compose alongside LeCompte.

Churchill's vocabulary was discipline- or literary-orientated which only fulfilled part of an intermedia vocabulary whilst TWG's was intermedia-orientated from the start. That explains the Churchill-Second Stride model's need for a non-hierarchical phase to search for and develop its intermedia vocabulary. TWG appropriated Kobland's and Sellars' autonomous works as found materials and then used its deconstructionist-intermedia vocabulary to transform and quote/frame them into its work. Churchill-Second Stride went through a similar process during the early pre-writing conferences for *Poisoners*

and then relied on Churchill's literary devices and strategies to thread the narratives. Whilst both models used the hierarchical structure as part of their processes and only as a means to an end, the traditional structure did not include a non-hierarchical feature and was therefore not comported for intermedia works.

Churchill's models began with a script as a base whereas TWG began with 'source' texts. Unlike Churchill's libretto, TWG's 'source' texts were not yet artistically treated. Whilst Churchill's models were more stable, TWG's was more precarious because of its apparent liminality. For example, the artistic team of Churchill's models was not at a loss. As a unifying base, her pre-written script enabled one to visualise or conceptualise each episode before exploring them on-site. It also orientated and gravitated other disciplines' contributions.

In dealing with intermedia without a script and only the space and set as stable elements, it was no wonder that TWG staged its works as works-in-progress; the liminal or processual phase often extended to performance. As collaborators, audiences' responses helped on-going creation: "It [was] not a finished draft, but I [had] to do it [that] way - in front of an audience. It enable[d] me to watch the tension in the room, to gauge where the feeling [was] and to make my decisions based on that" (Holden, 1987:C3). TWG was not looking for unanimous approval but for the potential range of *subjective* responses the work could elicit.

TWG could afford a longer liminal phase as it possessed a rehearsal-performance space, a shared working history, developed vocabulary, a permanent ensemble and a resident designer. Whilst LeCompte relied on her collective outfit, Churchill was relatively 'nomadic'. However, despite her predicament, Churchill worked with those she had a history with, relying on Gough and Spinks for her interdisciplinary collaborative works,

and directors Max Stafford-Clark, Les Waters and Mark Davey for her solo-written works.<sup>5</sup>

## AUDIENCE AS CO-ARTIST

Reception theories grapple with how a creator's intention is not an important criteria for interpretation: "[a] reader responds to a literary work by assimilating it to his own psychological processes, that is, to his search for successful solutions within his identity theme to the multiple demands, both inner and outer, of his ego" (Holland, 1975:128). Holland claims that one is predisposed to produce meaning or decode a work's signs through one's core values and psychological mettle. These predispositions depend on factors such as educational level, cultural heritage, social experience, mood, physical impairment and the ability to concentrate. Furthermore, audiences possess different skill abilities (Whitmore, 1991:17). Recognising audience heterogeneity as unranked necessitates the creation of open works.

Contemporising social transformation theatre to a theatre of empowerment, for my work with TNS means a shift in emphasis from empowering a marginalised community to empowering the imagination. This means a reevaluation of traditional elements and the innovation of new devices informed by contemporary temperaments. A theatre of empowerment is not only about an artist's imagination. But rather if and how its imagination considers the audience as co-artist; a creator's authorial position becomes a shared space. How sincerely convinced an artist is in valuing audience's participation is indicated by the occurrence and quality of breathing spaces in a work.

[The] meaning of a work [or of a text] cannot be  
created by the work alone; the author never produces

anything but presumptions of meaning, forms, and it is the world which fills them.

[Roland Barthes, Preface, *Critical Essays* :xi]

To change habitual ways of seeing is a two-fold process. Firstly, to transform the audience's role from a product recipient to an active participant in the creative process. Secondly, a creator should not rely on but instead cease rationalising, interpreting, explaining, justifying to resolve antithetical elements. S/he has to resist protecting a work's meanings or authorial intent and let the audience decide. Substituting analyses and explanations with open, breathing spaces might entice audiences to explore many possible ways to 'complete' the play. Churchill and Lecompte left works 'unfinished':

If we can come back to a difficult painting time and again, why shouldn't we do the same with a theatre piece. I think it's awfully patronising to cater for an audience and say, Oh I don't think they'll understand this so I'll have to alter it. I would never do that. There might be confusion in this piece, but it's also exciting. And it does grow on second and third viewings. That's why we play the same pieces in repertory for years and years. [...] I think the old theatre was definitely made for that kind of once-through viewing. But that form is no longer applicable to the way we're living, and if we continue to go to the theatre to be lulled and comforted, that's definitely the end of the art form.

[LeCompte as quoted by Rea, 1986]

Many traditionally-written plays use the rationalised formula of anti-heroes-redeemed-at-the-final-moment. A character's deviant behaviour is seldom left indeterminate but conveniently rationalised. For example, a drunk context justifies the deviant behaviour. Installed early in the exposition, deviant behaviour can be used to show:

1. that it is punishable, if not suppressed, by ending the play tragically;

2. A character's development or character's potential for change. Through a journey, s/he transcends it;

3. a misreading. When another context surfaces later to reveal yet another aspect that recontextualises his/her deviant behaviour. A valid reason for the late revelation convinces the audience who eventually feels guilty for having prematurely judged the character.

Is empathy/pity only earned if qualified/convinced by rationalised strategies? Must tolerance and acceptance always be the result of rational conviction? A play that interprets or rationalises itself and provides resolution, via catharsis, occupies much of the meaning-making position. Securing a story's meaning, by employing tight plot control, prevents it from being appropriated by the audience. Secondly, it shows a low tolerance for plural proposals for fear that some might not be in tandem with the author's hidden instruction agenda. The social transformation theatre construct is rationalised along ideological lines. Plays guide the audience through a moral journey only to arrive at ideologically-constructed solutions. Its determinate pedagogical stance, which propagates another rationalised way of visioning reality, causes its own redundancy in an already rational-saturated, contemporary urban context. These points expose a pedagogical stance that is tantamount to disempowering the imagination.

The rational and ideological cause-effect paradigm needs space to build its thesis in the play which resolves alternative perspectives to a singular vision construct. Social realism relies on rationalised conventions such as three-dimensional characterisation and complex plot-lines to disguise authorial intent whilst transforming habitual perceptions. Its rigorously accurate representation uses familiarity and scores on identification and accessibility. But without critical distance, this familiarity does little for the audience as co-artist. To cease authorial control, Churchill updates the traditional use of context. She innovates structural devices such as time-space frames or juxtapositions to destabilise the absolute and determinate cause-effect paradigm, making the familiar strange. This

unpacks established associations for reassessment thereby enhancing critical inquiry and empowering the imagination.

Opening up breathing spaces makes a text porous. This enables plural readings and complex vision. For Barthes, to interpret a text is not to give it a meaning but to appreciate the plurality in it:

Let us first posit the image of a triumphant plural, unimpoverished by any constraint of representation (of imitation). In this ideal text, the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach.

[Barthes, 1974: 5-6]

A Chinese theatre academic and writer, Professor Yu Qiu-Yu believes that - a good art work should be translucent and multi-layered at once. Whilst a play avoids patronising the intellectually adventurous, it evades alienating/intimidating those who are less so. Strategies and devices such as Churchill's clear narrative, juxtaposition and structural framing, and LeCompte's implanted 'hook', masking and the use of popular culture all serve as entry points.<sup>6</sup>

Churchill's use of a single media for her narrative, and her story-telling skills are Qiu-Yu's translucent 'scrim'. Her devices are applied discriminately, in linear sequence rather than simultaneous execution and counter privileged viewpoints with irony, subtext and reflexivity for more to read intertextually. She is careful to integrate, justify and naturalise found texts within strong frames, resisting overt attention to fracture, fragmentation and a play's own self-consciousness to prevent them from dominating interpretation. A modest

disposition of device application affirms a conscious artistic option of doing less for more. This option sacrifices cutting-edge deconstruction for a more readable one, denying elitist participation and enhancing accessibility to a play's multi-layers.

TWG's deconstructionist aesthetics are manifest in non-linear episodes of disparate appropriated texts that cite American icons and scenarios. Montages, comprising performance- and visual image-texts, are juxtaposed and simultaneously executed. Frames contain masked ideas sans analytical interpretation. Intense self-reflexivity, free-floating ironies and signifieds provoke 'a galaxy of signs' unrelentlessly assaulting the senses. These devices and strategies fracture and fragment authoritative texts to expose, confront and critique 'presence' to undo old associations. However, although an audience is not expected to understand much in the first viewing, accessing too little frustrates autonomous production of new meanings. TWG's unique aesthetics make elitist theatre which is targetted at its cult followers' reading abilities.

Easy accessibility and extreme inaccessibility account for audience passivity, leaving established mindsets undisturbed. Theatre of empowerment has to negotiate between the accessible and difficult elements to critically engage the audience to think more independently outside socially prescribed patterns. By citing the Abigail and Leary cases, both familiarity and contexts were gained. When these two cases were juxtaposed to TWG's Miller-debacle, new associations could be made. Old stereotyped images could be recuperated in new contexts.

Although the quoted content/material was familiar, the associations were not. But TWG did not over-process the relations of materials in the work, resolve contradictory viewpoints (i.e. antithetical elements) or recommend associations. TWG was described as "a theatre with a politics" rather than a "political theatre" (Auslander, 1987:33). The premise being that the method of organising materials in a work must ensure that

audience's imaginations be enabled to read relativistically and remain free to make new associative links. When difference is not suppressed and contradictory elements and views coexist, the work becomes "an arena of contestation" replacing "the pedagogical function [...] by encouraging a mode of perception that will enable the spectator to make sense of the dislocating postmodern sensorium" (Auslander, 1987:33).

## CHURCHILL AND LECOMPTE - STRATEGIES AND DEVICES

Issue orientated works are countered by devices and strategies that engender breathing spaces to ensure works remain non-prescriptive. These devices deconstruct 'presence', historicise perspectives and are self-reflexive of their proposals.

When comparing Churchill-Joint Stock (except for *A Mouthful of Birds* ) to TWG's model, the former was more conservative because of strong narrative presence and a modest use of non-literary devices. The audience remained an interpreter, collaborating to fill up the gaps. TWG's simultaneous montages showed bolder structural fractures; to extend the analogy, there were more holes than gaps

Perhaps the main difference was the degree of the absence or presence of 'controlling' elements. There was more breathing space with montage and simultaneity than narrative disruption. The two acts of *Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls* may be very different but each act's long narrative scenes allowed for many antithetical elements to converge. In TWG's works, the radical and simultaneously-executed fragmented montages containing multiple image-texts continuously masked, interrupted or undermined through-lines. In Churchill's works, subtle through-lines were complemented by clear structural frames as sign-posts that eventually guided reading. On the other hand, clear framing allowed for easier context identification to enable potential deeper intertextual engagement, exemplified by *Top Girl's* banquet scene.

Self-reflexivity in Churchill-Joint Stock works was usually limited to contradictory or oppositional dynamics (eg. *Cloud Nine* Act II's response to Act One). However, this binary vision (eg. Marlene and Joyce of *Top Girls* ) made the works audience-friendly. In comparison, TWG's digressive nature - the inclusion of contrapuntal and tangential views - was meant to destabilise established, reductive or easy reading patterns which may be assumed as a prerequisite for some to read more plurally. TWG's intense self-reflexive and self-referential focus, its unique deconstructive aesthetics and anti-theatrical disposition, accounted for its works' inaccessibility to mainstream audiences.

Churchill used juxtaposition and intertextual devices more discriminately (or conservatively?), evident in most of her Joint Stock works; the two acts' narrative-juxtapositions in *Top Girls* and *Cloud Nine* were sequentially linear. Even the intertextual dynamics of the multiple women stories in *Top Girl's* opening scene was naturalised within a banquet framework. Moderate simultaneous juxtaposition was evident in *Cloud Nine's* cross-gender casting where the actors' gender disrupted their role's gender. The overlapping speech device, in *Top Girls* and *Serious Money* was yet another example. The selective realist kitchen-and-field visual juxtaposition of *Fen's* set stayed throughout the play, allowing modest and subtle intertextual resonances with the play's scenes. Not-on-scene performers remained visible in frozen tableaux. They posed off-stage, a given spatial context.

The above examples could be compared to TWG's 'tripod' strategy (i.e. *L.S.D.'s* final scene), which showed three montages in simultaneity, with each containing a developing narrative, multiple image-texts or a brief but repetitive narrative (the dance rehearsal). Simultaneous juxtapositions can occur in the smallest unit of an image-text, between two image texts within a montage or between montages. But some form of classical balancing (orchestration) of the overall stage-picture composition was observed. Here was where

an interplay of convergences and divergences could be either planned or left to chance occurrence.

Its performance vocabulary included actors slipping in and out of role on stage in mid-scene or while the other montages were still on. A single montage could comprise one actor enacting a role, another not performing but in costume and another reading a text with costume and prop. The set, which usually included an anonymous but very versatile and huge metallic frame, television monitors, chairs, a table or found objects, defined the stage space. But usually the spatial contexts would overlap fluidly as the plays progressed. There were more differences (eg. viewpoints and media/disciplines) and less suppression of them in TWG's works. This was so because the use of digression, simultaneity, montage and intertextual devices, informed by deconstructive aesthetics, disrupted and fragmented more unities. Whilst Churchill relied on ironic and satirical elements as sign-posts, TWG's 'free floating' ironies made points without drawing much attention to them.

The Churchill-Second Stride and TWG's models shared more similarities. The former produced more fragmented and fractured works than the Churchill-Joint Stock model. In the Churchill-Second Stride model, music, dance and visuals played more primary roles, equitable to her own devices (i.e. narrative disruption and multiple-roles). Gough and Spinks were committed to making music and dance traditions work more organically. With more disparate texts, eclectic media and multiple and simultaneous scenes, the team succeeded in creating a performance vocabulary and consequently, a performance text with a density of signs.

In conclusion, although collaboration is a necessary but insufficient method for creating interdisciplinary works, it does not guarantee audience as co-artist. Depending on how a team's politics inform its aesthetics, the 'presence' of its collective imaginative

participation can ironically undermine the audiences'. For example, taking into consideration audiences' varied reading capabilities and aesthetic inclinations, distancing (alienation) devices can either function as a mask to entice or hinder/discourage further inquiry. How conscious a team is of the ways in which its politics impact on its work method, rehearsal process-structure and its use of devices and strategies in material organisation will determine a work's sensitivity towards empowering the audience.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THEATRES OF EMPOWERMENT

This chapter traces and discusses the development of the relationship between the literary text and performance in the light of the criticisms that surround autonomous performance and anti-realist works, the limitations and currency of realism and the emergence of New Realism.

Émile Zola's manifesto on Naturalism, in the mid 1880s, was about the art of the future.<sup>1</sup> The revolution then rid the theatre of the falseness that traditionalism perpetuated; of what did not belong to the contemporary environment. It was necessary to abandon Tragedy and romantic drama for:

[n]aturalism [which] alone corresponds to our social needs; it alone has deep roots in the spirit of our times; and it alone can provide a living, durable formula for our art, because this formula will express the nature of our contemporary intelligence. [N]aturalism is the expression of our century and it will not die until a new upheaval transforms our democratic world.

[Bentley, 1976:359]

Henrik Ibsen developed naturalism to handle complex issues about humanity. Difficult works such as *Ghosts*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Master Builder* and *When We Dead Awaken* all showed increasing subjective perceptions embedded under the mask of naturalism.<sup>2</sup> August Strindberg saw that to remain faithful to naturalism, as a movement that rebelled

against falseness, he had to depart from some of naturalism's tenets, one example being characterisation.<sup>3</sup>

Because they are modern characters, living in a period of transition more hysterically hurried than its immediate predecessor at least, I have made figures vacillating, out-of-joint, torn between the old and the new.

[Bentley, 1974:62]

Although anti-naturalists usually gained credit for originality or departure from traditions, they were indebted to the naturalist movement: "Bertolt Brecht's Epic Drama, a type of theatre, that, for all its originality, for all its eclecticism, owed its greatest debt to the naturalistic tradition" (Bentley, 1945:41). In fact, the naturalists were also revolting against traditionalism in the theatre of their own time.

Contemporary revolutions in theatre are often initiated by artists who feel the need to use more than one form to articulate visions of urban life in the age of advanced capitalism. There is a departure from realism into more abstract, anti-realist works. But such works over-value the resources of performance; they can become self-serving and cease to engage the audience.

Postmodernism is premised on the rejection of authority. However, with the collapse of the grand narratives, capitalism is left with no ideological sparring partner. Hal Foster posits that postmodern culture sees the collapse of economic and cultural realms: the "breakdown in the old structural opposition of the cultural and economic in the simultaneous 'commodification' of the former and 'symbolisation' of the latter" (Foster, 1985:145). In reflecting and responding to the climate of the era, postmodernism is often associated with nihilistic tendencies. Some works emerging from postmodern theatre are

often characterised by deconstruction and apoliticality.<sup>4</sup> A postmodern work disrupts the development of any authorial controlling perspective, embracing plural and even contradictory viewpoints. By not ranking any discourse, synthesis is displaced, resulting in dispersed meaning. This accounts for postmodern theatre's disparate, fragmented and open-ended nature.

The purpose of some highly deconstructed, self-reflexive and self-conscious works is to turn the authority structure on its head; to shift the production of meaning from creator to the audience. Self-reflexivity, for example, serves to ironise a work by implicating its own construction. However, if self-consciousness recurs throughout a work, it can ironically result in didacticism or 'presence'.<sup>5</sup> When applied progressively in a work, intense self-reflexivity has the potential to veer it towards meaninglessness. Such a work can become pretentious, inaccessible, elitist, indulgent, esoteric and depoliticised.

But not all postmodern theatre moves along the nihilistic, apolitical paradigm. The '60s and '70s social transformation theatre can be re-visioned and contemporised rather than discarded. It is possible to find contemporary currency to traditions. Therefore, it is pertinent to identify and critique the assumptions behind '60s and '70s issue-based theatre in the contexts of contemporary perspectives of global politics and its impact on consciousness. Only then does one know what assumptions to keep or discard. In the light of the deconstruction-reconstruction dialectic argument, one sees the significance of Churchill's and TWG's efforts at revolutionising their methods of work and their devices and strategies to rejuvenate issue-based theatre to theatres of empowerment.

For me, New Realism best expresses one of the many revised forms that has surfaced from the struggle to develop realism and to connect works back to the historical and the social. Narrative rupture, digression, fracture, juxtaposition, historicisation, self-reflexivity, montage, intertextual framing and intermedia are devices and traits in New

Realism. As devices, they hold the potential to enable new ways of seeing. However, being neutral, they can also be used to depoliticise or imbue 'presence' in a work.

## **THE RISE AND FALL OF THE PERFORMANT FUNCTION**

The rising importance of performance over the literary medium is an important phenomenon to investigate as an initial response to the rational appeal of word-based theatre. Jean Alter defines theatre's "referential function" as signs aimed at imparting information in the traditional communication of a story (Alter, 1990:32). For Alter the "performant function" refers to that "which seeks to please or amaze an audience by a display of exceptional achievement [which is] achievable by any arts of the theatre - lighting, design, directing, costuming" (Carlson, 1996:82). Instead of signifying, the "performant function" is primarily concerned with the direct physical presence/experience of the event; achieved by the technical skills and virtuosity of the performer in the visual display of dazzling acrobatic feats or scenic effects. Theatre involves both functions.

However, Carlson observes that most western writers from Aristotle onward (i.e. Goethe, Charles Lamb, and most of the symbolists) have not given much focus to the performant function. Instead they have perceived it to be distracting, if not an aesthetic flaw. Until the rise of the performant function, plays have been text-bound and regarded as stable written objects; the use of performance usually restricted to a mimetic role, expressing only the psychological processes.

From Aristotle to Hegel, theorists spoke of the three forms of poetry - epic, lyric, and dramatic - a division continued into more modern times as prose, poetry, and drama. Not until the rise of the modern interest in performance was there much thought that a play might be presented in a different contextualisation, not as a cousin of such literary forms as the poem, or the novel, but of such performance forms as the circus, the sideshow, the

parade, or even the wrestling match or the political convention.

[Carlson, 1996:82]

The once marginalised “performant function” gained prominence with Meyerhold and Brecht, both of whom had had contact with the Chinese practitioner, Mei Lan-fang. Artaud’s exposure to Balinese dance enhanced his theatrical theories on *Theatre of Cruelty* and the resistance to word-based theatre. Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia have stressed the “performant function” of acting, lighting and the use of sound in their manifestos. Performance Art, rooted in dadaism, surrealism and absurdism, saw the increasing collapse of categorisation between word-based theatre and performance traditions, creating new forms of theatre.

Today, the institutional definition of theatre is no longer Eurocentric. Postcolonial theatre has brought more works from non-western cultures to the fore. With post-colonial consciousness and globalisation, varied theatrical forms emerging from age-old Asian civilisations have been introduced to the world bank of theatrical vocabulary. Increasingly, these performance forms have begun to impact word-based theatre tradition, seen in the interdisciplinary collaborations of the likes of Peter Brook, Eugenio Barba and Ariane Mnouchkine. Such cross-pollination of theatrical concepts and forms continue Brecht’s legacy of the technological transfer and modification of Chinese Opera performance techniques that generated his epic form.

Performance gained prominence in the ‘60s and ‘70s in America but was not widely used to undercut the dramatic text. Instead, autonomous performance substituted the literary text. With no mediating medium, it guided the audience’s thinking reducing engagement to a mere guessing. This was a painful but invaluable experience of the American avant-garde: “In the haste to radicalise and subvert existing dramatic conventions (and sometimes to do without them altogether), experimental theatre artists of the ‘60s often

did not pause to consider the validity or ideological weight of those conventions” (Heuvel, 1993:40). According to Heuvel, resorting to the ritual and politics of ecstasy to achieve transcendence via the body, by practitioners like Richard Schechner, was “pushing performance to do something that, within its ontological limits of representation and illusion, it simply could not do” (Heuvel, 1993:41).

With the valorisation of the performant function, more anti-realist works have begun to emerge. Anti-realists employ resources of performance to disperse or disguise authorial presence. But abstract works can mean subjecting the audience to a creator’s idiosyncratic use of multiple media. Anti-realism presumes that an audience is not only willing but *able* to produce meaning. An authorship role for the audience might not be what they want or what they are in a position to fulfill.

In championing plurality, radical postmodern works avoid even subtly ranking the different views as any hint of a stand is tantamount to a controlling perspective which is perceived as ideological construction. Multiple viewpoints are necessary to counter ‘presence’ but must not be too potent lest they prompt closure. Therefore, they are either fractured, masked or embedded via mixed media. Audiences are left to encounter them by chance or association and often left baffled. Hence, the essential mission to empower imagination or revise established viewpoints is ironically undermined. Audiences may miss the range of alternative views or possible signifieds let alone engage in the dialectic dynamics of multiple viewpoints to construct their own moral responses. For example, in preventing the audience of *Poisoners* from pronouncing a judgement on Midgley, he is made to *step out* of the corruption and “start thinking of new ways in which to change the world and make it better” (Constanti, 1991:9). One critic’s response illustrates how she had missed the subtle counterpoint:

This affable, good-humoured character is awarded a place in this rogue's gallery as an honorary poisoner, which isn't fair. However eco-fashionable his presence in the drama might be, Midgley genuinely believed he was doing mankind a service with his inventions and he failed to see their poisonous consequences. The crime lies in their continued use.

[Levene, 1991:17]

It is ironic that whilst striving to achieve the objective of tolerance for difference, postmodern anti-realist performances can sometimes be so intolerant and ungenerous at attending to audiences' need for identification. They may appear to have nothing really to say that is worth coming to the theatre for; turning newcomers off it. How can audiences be challenged if they are absent?

Realism still holds the potential to express 'deep structure'. It need not be deconstructed to expose the 'human lie' and "classic realism's single, indisputable reality [...] is disputed by much postmodernist thinking" (Keyssar, 1996:6). For Keyssar the definition of realism is inconclusive. Realism should still be valued for its ability to introduce new content to the masses and to raise consciousness. Some feminists have defended realism's currency, maintaining that the well-made play can help raise awareness of women's oppression. For Michelene Wandor, realism "allows an audience of ordinary working-class and middle-class people to be at ease with the theatre and thus to be more receptive to political and social ideas and behaviours that they might otherwise avoid" (Keyssar, 1996:5). Moreover, anti-realism does not have enough followers among practitioners and audiences. Realism empowers in very ordinary ways; serving both the issues surrounding the marginalised entity and the audience. To be politically effective, a marginalised entity's objective is to disseminate its message to large audiences. Not to capitalise on realism's accessibility may be a naive and foolish option.

Materialist feminists contend that realism's linear structural development and word-dependency are male-orientated and patriarchal. According to Dolan, the materialist feminist approach "suggests a new poetics of performance embracing radical revisions of content and form" (Holderness, 1992:49). Anti-realist performance forms provide feminism with an alternative apparatus. Yet other feminist sectors disagree that that should be the authoritative definition for feminist theatre; alleging it to be essentialist, contradicting the feminist's precept of respecting difference. Furthermore, the 'ghetto' view that realism colludes with dominant literary features and thus lacks resistance is countered by the view that 'presence' is also possible in autonomous performance. It merely uses a more subtle strategy to mystify its relationship to the spectator (Heuvel, 1993: 12-13). Therefore, instead of totally doing away with text, authorial presence should just be more creatively disguised.

If theatre of empowerment is invested in education and transformation, it has to rely on the literary text's role to provide historical and cultural reference frames to engage the audience's collective memory. It should not transform itself beyond recognition and identification. Besides, realism empowers "one [to be] in touch with the resources of one's own humanity, with the ethos of a nation, and with the dynamics of the human experience" (Berstein, 1980:x). Radical cultural politics must be approached cautiously and not be allowed to determine theatrical forms; that people should not judge others not using postmodern forms as politically ineffective. Theatre of empowerment cannot survive if it is reduced to adopting only one form.

The issue is not whether the realist or interdisciplinary form is politically more effective. It much depends on a project's objectives and target audience. A conscience-raising play may make accessibility a priority as its object is to reach out to large audiences. If the aim is to challenge the audience's conventional theatrical expectations, then an interdisciplinary form may do. However, although a radicalised form can potentially

challenge negative perceptions, who benefits if it only reaches out to the converted? Whether the social issue or the audience is to be empowered (or both) can determine if the realist or interdisciplinary form is to be relevantly employed. Yet as much as interdisciplinary forms are used to disperse authorial presence they can still *point* to a stand. On the other hand, new forms of realism with modest deviations, structural explorations and defamiliarisation strategies such as a play within a play, dreams and hallucinations, carry the potential to present multiple perspectives, contradictory views or alternative realities. Characters under duress or influences can express states “inconsistent” to their nature, debunking the myth of determinate characterisation. Where plot is concerned, narratives can be structurally contained and juxtaposed, employing more flashbacks to achieve open-endedness, prompting a re-evaluation and preventing closure. The above recommendations can be achieved without distracting and alienating the audience with experimentations of form.

However, it is important to note that new forms are emerging with exploration and development within the realist form as well as without. It is still possible and necessary to engage with the form. Perhaps if one struggled long enough with it, coupled with today’s sensibilities, one would, like Strindberg, make a breakthrough. Besides, realism is an effective ‘sparring’ partner, against which other forms can emerge.

## **CRITICISMS OF DECONSTRUCTION**

The view that realism promotes a certain construct of reality problematises the premise which theatre of empowerment rests upon. For a marginalised community, to establish its identity is a priority so that their voices are recognised, even if it means using the dominant apparatus such as the realist form. Feminism, for example, is invested in the dialectical deconstruction-reconstruction process as seen in Churchill’s works that are rooted in realist conventions. As a strategy, asserting representation through realism is

equally valid to finding an alternative form. It is really a question of the ends justifying the means.

Theatres of empowerment need a controlling perspective, however subtle it may be. Deconstructionist thinking has been criticised for being the new nihilism. The project has been suspected for its amoral and ahistorical stances, stripping language of meaning and privileging difference to a point where a non-consensual world is the utopian ideal. Deconstructionist thinking harbours several hypocrisies, perhaps because it refuses to be pinned down or defined absolutely.

1. The world is reducible to textuality. This is critiqued as a denial of reality and used by scholars to affirm their own academic exclusivity;
2. The deconstructive claim of equal validity of multiple meanings, that the selection between multiple contradictory interpretations is 'undecidable,' is arguable. Ordinary people in fact make decisions all the time and go about their lives quite well. For example, a request such as "please pass the salad" might have different meanings, but most of the time taken for itself, language does succeed as a competent means of communication;
3. Deconstruction and politics are antithetical as they render reality inaccessible. Political goals are dependent on ethical frameworks but deconstruction makes ethics impossible. Deconstruction is preoccupied with questioning dominant assumptions, overturning the authority of power structures such as tradition, institution and moral precepts as a strategy to privilege oppressed communities such as women, racial minorities and victims of capitalism and imperialism. However, when no moral perspective is privileged, ethical nihilism implies a legitimization of atrocities such as Nazism and genocide. "If the dominant power authority is genuinely serving the human community and if the forces it

‘suppresses’ are truly harmful [...], would not deconstruction [...] simply unleash evil upon the world?” (Parks, 1992:552-553).

Theatres of empowerment can benefit more when performance and text are equitably employed or mediate one another. For example if the stream of physical actions do not illustrate the verbal text, audiences have to reconcile the gaps. This is best seen in *The Skriker’s* fragmented and physicalised opening monologue. That is the space from which New Realism has emerged. New Realism is premised on the inclusion of hegemonic presence in the work; a more sophisticated and mature political methodology than anti-realism’s confrontational and reactionary one.

## **ART OF THE FUTURE: THE POLITICAL RESISTANCE OF NEW REALISM**

Neither the literary text or performance alone can re-order established mindsets. Human mental power disposes us to make sense out of anything we see. This leads us to read the mimesis of autonomous performance along rational tracks:

[T]he rules of dramatic structure, redefine them as you will, are based on the rules of human perception and that’s what enables deviation from them to work. [...] There’s really nothing there other than randomness, in a lot of instances, but it works because the human mind will always order randomness.

[Mamet, 1987:15]

To avoid leaving interpretation to narrow mindsets, one has to exploit both the literary text’s role of providing historical and cultural contexts and performance’s deconstructive potential. Other mediums like music, image projection, lights and sound can be valorised

to mask or disperse counter viewpoints. Only then is it possible to rearrange the rules of power; to frustrate and explode authoritative perceptions.

Although reservations surround anti-realism, recourse to realism is not the route out for alternative theatre that invests in new forms. Churchill's interdisciplinary explorations with *Second Stride* enable her to innovate new non-literary devices and reinvigorate realism. Working on *Poisoners* challenges her writing as seen in *The Skriker* and *Blue Heart*. Despite writing these plays solo, the performant function is fundamentally considered when creating signifying systems in her composition. The Group also benefits from its experiments with text and performance. With a developed performance vocabulary, it deals with full classic texts in its recent efforts; Eugene O'Neil's *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*.

Anti-realism's emphasis on autonomous performance has made practitioners bolder in crossing disciplines. As traditional categories break down, practitioners can creatively exploit other vocabularies. New Realism's intermedia approach is politically and artistically relevant, whether they empower the imagination, expose artificial social constructs or circumvent censorship.

Resistance to change is a hindrance to the new.<sup>6</sup> The difference between traditionalism and tradition is that the former is a nostalgia-motivated refusal to change and the latter, an acknowledgement of roots. A competent knowledge of traditional conventions qualifies one better when one wants to depart from them to create new forms. New Realism is a contemporarised form of realism. As illustrated by Churchill's *The Skriker*, the 'political' option is to increase the theatricality of word-based theatres and not abandon realism altogether.

The political resistance to avoid directing audiences' thinking is a challenging task. The absence of an alternative proposal can be deemed socially irresponsible. But on the other hand, forwarding a convincing alternative may hinder imagining others. Since New Realism exploits many disciplines and places a value on the narrative, there are many potential ways of remaining ideological without being rhetorical.

In *Poisoners*, “[b]oth Churchill and Gough emphasise narrative over and over again, a narrative that works alongside the oblique, multi-layered approach [which is] the work’s great strength” (Wearing, 1991:25). Although the performant function is privileged, the work is largely anchored in the narrative. Jann Parry, a dance critic of Second Stride’s productions commented: “*Poisoners* is the most coherent of its productions, no doubt because Caryl Churchill’s text pulls the various strands together with her distinctive intelligence” (Parry, 1991). The presence of a narrative prevents the audience from being distracted into providing one to make sense of a work so as to remain open to relativistic reading.

Associative links can only be made when the audience encounters the “physical text [which] serves not only to help to tell the stories, but also to comment upon them, now overtly, now covertly” (Rubridge, 1991:15). The experiential engagement with the stories demands the present attention of the whole being because *what* is said, is in *how* it is said/performed. Often what is offered is an assemblage of ideas for each member of the public to put together instead of resorting to easy or reductive solutions.

Alternative theatre is an arena for artistic exploration. But new forms, like New Realism, are difficult to categorise and market. This often means that economic viability and constraints can prevent artists from doing what they really want. They are often sandwiched between two forces: the value of original work or the need to be produced so that recognition gained might mean they can later better afford to do what they really want

to do. As Jill Dolan remarked: “a playwright’s recourse to realism is still intimately tied to a play’s economic life and its acceptance into the mainstream critical canon” (Heuvel, 1993:16). Both process and the exploration of new forms are antithetical to the more production-orientated rationale of commercial and mainstream theatre practice. Thus in not falling into the trap of being legitimated or commodified, the option to work with such risks becomes a form of political resistance. In fact, such explorations hold the key to rejuvenating theatre as a whole. Ian Spinks, the director of *Poisoners*, when faced with the closure of Second Stride due to lack of funding, remarked:

I like to work in a safe atmosphere free from the pressure of time and need to produce a product...The mainstream world takes, quite liberally, from the world of experimental work, so it is doubly important not to stamp it out altogether.

[Wearing, 1991:24]

An interdisciplinary work uses costume, performance, lights and sound in a fundamental way, making it necessary that it is experienced live where the time and space are shared by performers and audience. Besides it does not translate well into another media (i.e. television, film or radio) as realist ones. With such works, theatre has found a form that resists easy appropriation.

All things considered, anti-realism has prompted new forms of realism: “[T]hese hybrids avail themselves of realism’s referential power without succumbing to its ideological conservatism” (Diamond, 1989:68).<sup>7</sup>

One result is a new dialogics for the theatre, built upon an open-ended and speculative relationship between the dramatic text and its claims to objectivity, its human reference, and its satisfying sense of closure on the one hand, and the emphasis

on interiority, deconstructive dispersal, and liminality  
inherent to performance on the other.

[Heuvel, 1993:13]

New Realism allows spectators to develop a means to interpret and speculate about the world in which they live. In fact it often tells us more about ourselves. Since speculation is processual, it is best that theatre advocates to the spectator this breathing space created by the interplay of media rather than imposing the single author's vision or text upon the audience. The pluralistic space such theatre opens up is, like Einstein's four-dimensional "closed but unbounded" universe, receptive to and perhaps generative of new modes of perception and interpretation (Heuvel, 1993: 14).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THEATRE OF EMPOWERMENT AND THE NECESSARY STAGE

After my research I returned to Singapore to apply what I had learned to my practice. My objectives were to work collaboratively in creating interdisciplinary works with social themes. I wanted to ensure that the works would be open enough to engage the audience as a collaborator. I would like to discuss the processes of two productions I directed, *Pillars* and *Galileo (I Feel The Earth Move)*. I will now briefly describe the processes.<sup>1</sup>

#### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF *PILLARS*

*Pillars*, a work about ethnic issues charted historical and social relationships between Singaporean Malays and Chinese. *Pillars* marked a change in both the method of working and the aesthetic strategies used in our works. A fragmented process-structure was used to create independent episodes without a linear narrative.<sup>2</sup>

*Pillars* took 6 months to create, including a trip to Penyengat (an Indonesian island), interviews with Malay and Chinese communities in Singapore and research at the Oral History Archives. This time around, there was no 'writing' period Sharma wrote a script based on improvisation transcriptions whilst I structured the play. We juxtaposed and meshed together literary, visual, audio and performance text-fragments to create emotionally-charged images, montages and a tapestry of events with some taking place simultaneously on stage.

Aiming to create a work that would evoke, provoke and resonate, we found it necessary to compose on-site. It provided the team the opportunities to observe and capture the potential multiple and possible associations that the images, montages and episodes

emitted. While mindful that meanings should be left ambiguous and indeterminate they should not be so obscure that audiences be overwhelmed instead of provoked into participation.

### **BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF *GALILEO (I Feel The Earth Move)***

*Galileo* was directed by both Resident Director Kok Heng Leun and myself with a choreographer, Kuo Jing Hong. Inspired by Brecht's *Life Of Galileo*, we extracted about 5% of the original text and borrowed the original structure of 'Discovery', 'Assertion' and 'Recantation' to structure our own *Galileo*. It was made up of vignettes depicting the lives of Singaporeans, moulded as they are by contemporary urban myths.

*Galileo* took 5 months and a 400-hour fragmented process-structure to compose. We used slides, video projections, audio texts and visual tableaux. The actor playing *Galileo* rehearsed on his own. The 7-actor ensemble created the physical episodes of *The Fly*, the 4 vignettes (in groups of 2s) of marginalised Singaporeans and the epilogue. Together, the full cast created the 'Recantation' scene.

The directors, choreographer and cast were fundamental collaborators in *Galileo*. After each episode's improvisation phase ended, the transcripts were handed to playwright Sharma, who although uninvolved in the process, did some dramaturgical work. The episodes were returned to director and cast who further edited them during the last rehearsal phase.

## REVIEWING *PILLARS* AND *GALILEO*

*Pillars* had fewer logical links between scenes. The messages were enmeshed beneath many texts and discourses. For example, the first episode dealt with the Sang Nila Utama (the king who first set foot on Singapore, founded and named the island) legend which was about a Malay king who sacrificed his crown by throwing it into the sea to lighten the load during a storm to save his crew. A later episode dealt with the Laksamana Bintan legend, about another Malay king who killed a pregnant woman alleged by him to have defied his authority when she consumed a fruit from his garden before he did.

The first episode used representational acting which deconstructed at the end with actors falling out of character and being interviewed. In the latter, a traditional Malay street theatre story-telling form was used. It was a story about a brother-and-sister acting troupe (SitiMat) which toured villages to re-tell the Laksamana Bintan story with a bias in defence of the murdered woman's warrior-husband who avenged her death by killing the king. In their multiple-role performance, SitiMat deconstructed the myth to revise the warrior's status from one alleged of treason to a hero.

The different performance forms, episodic structure and structural-frame devices in *Pillars* masked our obvious intention for an audience to compare the Malay kings, and also the Malays' present day status to its royal past. These devices made it possible for TNS to engage social themes more contextually. However, to avoid being too explicit or implicit, a head prop as a small sign-post was used: a golden crown casually changed hands between the actors who played the kings in the two episodes.

The point that Malays are economic and social underdogs who had lost their native status in modern Singapore was reflexively counterpointed by an image of a corporate-suited

Malay man climbing a ladder; symbolising the Association of Malay Professionals' efforts to raise the position of Malays today. In modern Singapore, a new race which cuts across ethnicity has emerged - the yuppies and nouveau riche. More Malays, able to access the opportunity structure, are also more socially and economically mobile. Yet this does not replace the loss of their native status. The historical journey of the Malays was represented by a Malay actor who took on multiple-roles as he moved through four episodes, three of which had no word-text. He played himself, a 'orang laut' (sea pirate), hippie and drug-taker, and a Muslim man praying during a race riot before he finally took off his wig, donned a corporate suit and delivered a speech, challenging Malays to push forward. However, nearby, a Malay actress was seen prompting him throughout. Later, he carressed a Chinese woman in black face with a red-head wig. He expressed a preference for Chinese women and reasoned that as a young, modern and independent Malay professional, his newly-acquired status entitled him to individualistic pursuits, which he had chosen over observing traditional obligations like endogamous marriage. With the montage device, composing on-site and the use of an actor instead of a character as a sign, we were able to 'paint' a through-line. This visual narrative or image-structure symbolised the socio-economic progress of the Malays without 'screaming' the point across.

The final episode, a modified forum theatre form, opened with a Chinese family dispute. The father reprimanded his teenage daughter for being irresponsible as his peace-making wife mediated. The fight climaxed as the daughter, when told to leave the house, disclosed her father's extramarital affair. Characters from previous episodes surrounded the scene. As 'spect-actors' they waited to intervene.

Sang Nila Utama, without his golden crown, 'replaced' the Chinese father (a loaded sign diluted by former replacements) and bemoaned the death of Tradition. He was hurt by the absence of his statue/crown (verbal and image texts were juxtaposed) in today's Chinese-

dominated Singapore landscape. Instead, Sir Stamford Raffles's statue has replaced his, to symbolise the historical beginning of modern Singapore. Colonial leadership has since been transferred to the Chinese majority but this point was brought across contextually when Utama lamented, with ironic vengeance, that this island was 'lost' and wished to 'find it again'. Such a seditious but true remark was given voice as Utama, by now a 'travelling' metaphor and icon for traditional/historical authority, expressed it whilst looking at the audience. Treachery (or ingratitude; an anti-family value which easily resonated with the current on-going campaign on filial piety in Singapore) was implicitly turned towards the present-day sons of Singapore, implicating the *Pillar's* audience as well. The implicit question asked was whether Utama was abusing his authority for wanting to reclaim the historical status of the Malays or was the present Chinese-dominated leadership abusing its authority for suppressing it. Abuse of authority was pitted against treason, recalling the Laksamana Bintan story. Using irony and satire, effective play and slippage allowed this bold and rather subversive articulation to survive on stage, circumventing censorship and conservative sensibilities. The potency of exploiting the sign's instability, ambiguity and the availability of unranked multiple and possible associations afforded TNS the freedom of expression, transgressing out-of-bound markers, unprecedented in our reality.

Utama then proposed a need to preserve Tradition. As an example, he offered an axiom upholding the view that a Malay wife's duty was to serve and not disobey her husband. Siti replaced the Chinese mother's role and started feeding Utama. The corporate-suited Malay man replaced the Chinese daughter and interrupted Siti. The audience members who initially empathized with the marginalised status of the Malays became unsure with Utama's patriarchal demand. Chinese conservatives who might have found Utama's wanting to 'find the island again' treacherous might suddenly be in uncomfortable agreement with his traditional axiom. These counterpoints were ironically conveyed through symbolic juxtapositions and image subversions, framed such that the *Pillars'*

audience was in a privileged position of watching the 'spect-actors' offer solutions as the latter watched and replaced the Chinese family characters. TNS had created the Chinese family dispute story and then used the modified forum theatre form to inhabit and interrogate the narrative. This aesthetic with a politic created a virtual space from which multiple texts and voices could emerge, collide and implode.

In yet another example, the stereotypical criticism of the Chinese as pragmatic, acquisitive and materialistic was counterpointed with the ways in which their pragmatism saved them from atrocities. One episode in *Pillars* was on the Japanese Occupation.<sup>3</sup> During the Occupation, the Japanese persecuted the Chinese but befriended the Malays and trusted them with work. The 'peranakan' women blackened their skins with a mixture of coal and powder, donned Malay traditional dress, spoke Malay and lived with their Malay neighbours.<sup>4</sup> Chinese by ethnicity, they put aside their prejudices and made the necessary ethnic-switch with no qualms about not upholding racial integrity.

An actor playing a Japanese soldier conducted an interview (in white stage lighting) with the actor playing one of the Chinese women who assumed a Malay character for refuge. The interviewee replied as herself commenting that she was racist against her own ethnic group and the human race. As the actor fell out of character, the mise-en-scène was also stripped of its stylised effects. A possible interpretation was that behind the mask, be it a character or ethnic role, was a human being who was either a victim or victimiser of racial discrimination. There is yet another possible reading. The character of the Chinese woman assuming Malay ethnicity was played by the same actress who, as herself had confessed that she was racist against her own race. This demonstrated that the victim-victimiser can very well exist within an individual.

*Pillars* illuminated the often eclipsed Malay historical perspective of Singapore by drawing heavily from Malay cultural and historical accounts, its story-telling form and its actors'

performance skills. These elements, some modified, made up most of *Pillars'* content and performance, empowering an ethnic minority's state in Singapore today.

I encountered some initial difficulties attempting to draw the relevant Malay performance skills from the actors, whilst directing the SitiMat episode. It was difficult to obtain the humour and Malay teasing nature essential to the acting duo's vocabulary for the Legend of Laksamana Bintan performance. To break the impasse, the two actors were given the full script and told to really believe they were directorless and without resources. How then would they present the piece to the villages they were going to? I then left them to rehearse on their own. Upon my return, most elements of spontaneous play were included; teasing and slapstick that were in a traditional performance genre (i.e. the 'bangsawan' - the traditional Malay opera) and during rehearsal breaks, when they were naturally playful. Perhaps their perception earlier of me as the director had caused them to self-censor. The blocks had vanished when they were left alone. The Malay villagers they were playing to had appeared in their imaginations.

*Galileo* had new elements - collaboration with another director, a choreographer and the use of video and slides. The use of another discipline and media encouraged a more collaborative process-structure. However, in relying on the structure of Brecht's *Life Of Galileo* for our Galileo episodes, the spine was made too clear. The episodes (refer to *Appendix F* ) showed Singaporeans marginalised by existing policies and campaigns which were constructed urban myths. As much as Galileo fought against the popularity of the myth that the sun revolved around the earth, these characters struggled with the ramifications of the myths that moulded their lives. Galileo's failure to break the myth was due to his refusal to risk his life in defying both church and state powers. The Singapore characters were equally impotent in resisting the urban myths for lack of power, resources and enlightenment.

The Galileo episodes resonated with the contemporary urban myth episodes. As the parallel narratives developed, the notion that an imbalance of power perpetuated the suppression of truth was reinforced. One episode included a video presentation of a woman hawker pleading with a karaoke songstress to stop seeing her husband. This was done in a melodramatic Cantonese soap opera form with close-up screen projections. Downstage, a broadcaster read news headlines with projections. The headlines, delivered “deadpan”, were taken from the Straits Times and other news sources. Most were about Singapore’s economic performance regionally and internationally. The humorous headlines included “Chinese leader Deng Xiao Peng has died. Insiders say that he will not be able to witness the Hong Kong handover. Singapore’s economy will not be affected by his death”. Gradually the headlines included the incidents and character mugshots from preceding episodes. All the characters’ faces were then pasted onto one slide and projected. Media colluded with the state and used its power to uphold the state’s myths. The final headline was self-referential, anticipating the closing down of *Galileo* due to an audience complaint that it contained cross-dressing scenes.

The parallel Galileo narrative and the Singaporean urban myth episodes finally merged in the ‘Recantation’ episode. Galileo recanted (Brecht’s text) while a gregorian chant played in the background. Small wooden structures with candles, canes and sheets of paper were brought down by the flybar to the respective actors who, individually went centrestage to recant. The recantation was a dig at the myths. Each character confessed his/her failure to meet up with Singapore society’s demands. For example, the working-class Robin read out his identity card number and stated that he was sorry to have to pass his mediocre genes to his future children. When it finally came to the transvestites, they were silent, signifying their voicelessness.

Compared to *Galileo*, *Pillars* was relatively a more open work. Although both were episodic, the latter had fewer synthesising tendencies. The relentless fractures, fragmentations and simultaneous montages continuously destabilised interpretation. Each *Pillars*' episode was an independent story, further differentiated by varied performance styles. *Galileo* was fairly didactic especially in its attempt to demythologise unquestioned local policies and campaigns. By quoting the parallel *Galileo* narrative, an inevitably singular reading had been recommended. The 'Interrogation' and 'Recantation' episodes, despite the ironic treatment, heavily rationalised and synthesised preceding ones.

Another factor was the juxtaposition of the image texts with the on-going scenes. The Doreen and Tutik episode, satirising a mistress-servant relationship, included a historical still projection of an English man on a rickshaw pulled by a local Chinese, an ASEAN (economic body equivalent to EEC) logo still and a video footage on Singapore's National Day parade. Another episode showed single Grace desperately looking for a husband to appease her ailing grandmother. The video footage was a TNS-produced local campaign promoting marriage and a newspaper article still with statistics on the rise of the single woman in Singapore.

Although the images pointed to the social reality outside the play, lending contexts to the episodes' personal scenarios, they elaborated more than commented, told more than provoked and explained more than digressed. The idea-gaps between the images and on-going scenes were conservative; making associations coalesce too easily. This stabilised ambiguities and reduced the production of meaning to interpretation. The dynamics in *Galileo* was merely a deferment of meaning which closed because of the nature of some of the image texts, the 'Interrogation' and 'Recantation' episodes.

*Pillars* was more sophisticated in providing multiple counter viewpoints despite the absence of video and slides. The diverse media in *Galileo* only enhanced the appeal to

different senses but intertextuality and ambiguity only deferred rather than dispersed meaning. Therefore, what mattered was not the quantity but the way in which different media and devices were used.

In comparing *Pillars* to *Galileo*, the former used devices more subtly. Theatrical conventions were used as a signifying vocabulary for deconstruction. The backstage was onstage. The stage manager and actors sat at the table top. Actors changed costumes onstage. Revealing the artifice of theatre was a metaphor for getting behind the mask of racism and humour guarded against overstating the work's self-consciousness.

The interrogation and recantation of characters in *Galileo* confirmed the victim-of-society perspective. But unlike *Galileo*, *Pillars'* previous characters gathered in the last episode and underwent actor-character fracture. This was achieved when the characters from previous episodes began replacing the Chinese family characters, deconstructing it. This continued to destabilise easy associations. Instead plural texts emerged to further dissociate links so that the unrepresentable could be voiced. A Malay family gradually emerged, through gradual replacements of the Chinese family members. The Utama character, replaced the Chinese father (resonated with the current Chinese-dominant government), vocalised the Malay plight with historical authority. The devices were used to prevent the elements from coalescing, to protect the work's openness. Those who preferred *Pillars* felt they did not gain any new insight from watching *Galileo*. Yet some other *Pillars* audience were less comfortable with the freedom entrusted to them to 'join their own dots'. They were relieved by, and expressed a preference for *Galileo*.

## **TOO MANY COOKS SPOIL THE SOUP? THE PITFALLS OF COLLABORATION AND LESSONS LEARNT**

Firstly, collective decision-making can enhance an actor's ownership and accountability in creating a play. However, not every member participates all the time or is as equally

committed. For example, *Pillars'* and *Galileo's* fragmented process-structure was decided by the directors. The directors attended most rehearsals, knowing more about each evolving episode. Actors with day-time jobs were at a loss during collective decision-making meetings. Yet some actors did not want equal say, asserting that the director should decide how a work was to be structured. Accountability was a burden, if not, an imposition. Some actors did not see this as empowerment.

Collective decision-making is time-consuming, especially if the team has little shared history. Time is needed to understand each other's temperament and to discuss at length before making decisions by vote. If time is not allocated, the team risks unconstructive conflicts that interrupt the process which can be detrimental to the work. For interdisciplinary works, time is needed to explore and integrate the various disciplines. At the late rehearsal stage of *Galileo*, the directors, choreographer and technical manager competed for time. Churchill-Second Stride used professionally-trained artists open to exploring their respective disciplines' rules to find new vocabularies. TWG developed its vocabulary only after working through several projects together. Therefore, a longer process time for a project is not the solution to vocabulary development. Perhaps training time outside the project's process-structure should be considered. The process-structure should be reserved only for applying the vocabulary's principles for composition.

Collaboration "is a recognition of the high status and artistic quality of a partner" (Hughes, 1996:10). S/he must use his/her discipline's vocabulary to initiate and improvise in an exploratory manner so that the artistic team can better decide if what is proposed can contribute to the work. Problems/limitations usually challenge an artist's creativity. In a non-hierarchical arrangement, when a collaborator disagrees with a director, s/he must assert his/her stand; *affecting* rather than *interpreting* the director's vision. Here are two examples. During *Galileo*, the commissioned choreographer sometimes gave in too much to the TNS directors. Structurally containing her

involvement to three episodes, her role became limited to interpreting the Fly narrative using movement. For *Pillars*, a set designer was briefed on what her redefined role entailed, and was brought early into the process. However, she was unable to interpret or imagine her new role's scope, to take on the helm of improvisations. In not making the necessary paradigm shift, she failed to function effectively as a collaborator. During the liminal phase of contemporising traditional roles and relationships, collaborators may be unprepared to exercise their privileged status.

The main collaborators must be together throughout the process. For *Galileo*, the choreographer was not involved as much as the directors:

- a. The two TNS directors engaged one another in informal and frequent discussions;
- b. The directors and cast read through and discussed Brecht's *Galileo*;
- c. The directors accompanied the process of the actor playing *Galileo*;
- d. The directors continued improvisations with the actors to develop the episodes.

The choreographer only spent time with the cast for the Fly episodes whilst hearing reports of other episodes from the directors. The flexibility of a fragmented process-structure, aimed at facilitating as many rehearsals as possible around everyone's busy schedules, ironically placed the artistic team into a hierarchy. This accounted for the directors functioning as main collaborators and the choreographer fulfilling assigned tasks rather than contributing more fundamentally. As for *Pillars*, not all designers were artists or were disposed to artistic leadership. Previous experiences of his/her role had conditioned him/her to feel uncomfortable working alongside the director.

*Galileo's* strong political overtones caused a stir. When the cast was told that the NAC had been alerted to watch the performance, some actors become nervous. One actor wanted to see the performance's video to find out how his scenes were recontextualised

by the ongoing slide-text projected behind him. As collaborators the cast had the right to fully understand what they were involved in so they could check their “comfort zones” and, if questioned, could be fully accountable and convincing. Therefore, in Singapore, an actor’s anxiety may remain a valid consideration for future collaborations as long as the sensitive political climate persists. The director’s decision-making role seems divided into two: one where it can be devolved to the actors. And another, like LeCompte’s ‘outside’ eye in an intermedia work, belongs very much to the director alone.

Some of the above-mentioned problems can be solved by:

- a. planning a more detailed communication network;
- b. having better time management;
- c. including a weekly report of each episode’s progress in the process-structure;
- d. arranging a video shoot for everyone to watch the final big picture before opening;
- e. avoiding or reducing a fragmented process-structure unless necessary.

Equal status amongst collaborators should be observed and preserved. It is important that the working environment is imbued with an open spirit, trust and mutual respect. Usually it falls to those previously occupying high power positions to initiate, guide and encourage the paradigm shift. In the Asian context, seniority or veteran status is usually accorded the final decision-making role. Chinese language actors find it a pleasant change working with TNS as discussions and negotiations are encouraged that include critical comments or questioning a director’s artistic premise.

Trust and mutual respect, evident in constructive criticism, enhance professional collaboration. Professionalism is the generosity to recognise, respect and accept a colleague’s innovative idea or inventiveness in applying a device without feeling envious or threatened.

In transforming how artists relate to one another in a less hierarchical structure, the traditional roles should be allowed to remain. The paradigm shift is to open up other possible working methods. For example, Sharma's initial notion of empowering actors was to impart some playwriting skills/rules to enable them to author their own character's dialogue or scenarios. He has since shifted to watching and learning the ways actors use their bodies to express their character's motivations in physical performance. He has begun working closely with a choreographer. He has struggled to understand and appreciate how a performance score can work alongside literary text and have just sat back during physical improvisations and allowed the created images to speak to him. In not knowing the briefs, what he observed may be far from or close to an actor's intention. But more importantly the experience have inspired new working paradigms for him; how to write word-texts that would supplement the visual and/or performance texts. Sharma's style of writing and not his role has changed.

As director I now give more open improvisation briefs than before when my paternal disposition used to prompt me to include my interpretation and analysis. Thinking I was empowering the actor, I would anticipate outcomes and recommend many counter-positions that s/he could take. In giving briefs now, I encourage actors to assert their interpretations and inputs. At most I would remind them that, if they wanted to, they could defy or disobey the briefs.

In an interdisciplinary model, using one medium to solve the lack in another must be an informed and artistic decision, rather than a convenient and practical option. A script problem could be conveniently solved by directorial treatment - i.e. using movement, audio or visual technologies. This trivialises a playwright's craft and potential. Instead of a premature resort to other vocabulary systems for a solution, the artistic team should

respect the playwright to solve the problem in his/her medium's terms before resorting to other media's vocabularies.

But whether collaborative practice is abused or not depends largely on the personalities in the team, their attitude towards skill/craft development, the rehearsal structure and the nature of the project. The danger happens when a collaborator is not conscious that s/he is not functioning at his/her creative best as the psychological security of being in a team can eclipse urgency and cushion pressure.

Empowering actors with collaboration must not replace their need to be trained. While the status change gives actors more say, some may not possess the creative, emotional and imaginative skills to capitalise on the freedom they have. Actors familiar with established scripts and over-reliant on a director's interpretation, may be masterful in executing rather than creating a role. For example, a preoccupation with a brief's objective can distract an actor, unused to multi-tasking, from exploring other possible routes his/her character may take. Some actors are less capable of abstracting, transforming and transferring material from life experiences to improvisations. High demands are expected from an actor-collaborator - sometimes expected to fulfill acting, directorial and playwriting roles. In an interdisciplinary collaborative work, a physically fit actor possessing performance skills is an asset, giving the team the option to conduct physical/performance-based improvisations. Actors might not necessarily possess the skill to transfer the energy and spontaneity from improvisations to rehearsals, let alone the actual production.

Thawing the hierarchical structure of traditional practice does not necessarily produce better art. Being grounded in classical principles puts artists in a better position to know what rules they are breaking. Although the narrative structures of both *Pillars* and *Galileo* were episodic, we relied on the classical precepts of exposition, development, climax,

complication and resolution. Professionalism here refers to how grounded one is in the fundamentals of his/her craft/discipline.

In a project, one should assess how much of one's own contribution is drawn from experience, expertise or the cutting edge's exploration of one's craft. Being competent may be a necessary but insufficient in an exploratory project. Is one capable of departing from the fundamentals? What is to be explored with that departure? Classical precepts are either embedded as a substructure, reconfigured or translated in an exploratory work, never completely disregarded.

The final critical observation is the myth of authorless creation which advances the notion of pure collective authorship. There are usually two levels of collaboration that can be charted out in concentric circles; at the centre is a team of collaborators comprising the director, choreographer and playwright. This smaller circle exists within an outer larger circle of actors, dancers and musicians. To develop the analogy, sometimes there is no difference in 'height' between the inner and outer circles. Sometimes the inner-circle is raised, when the director and/or playwright or auteur take on the rein, especially when it gets closer to the opening night. Different models have different levels of engagement.

Is a collaborative model less ideal if decision-making is not equitably shared? Why and how does a team draw the material from the actors? Does the team look for ideas and opinions or is an actor expected to present an artistic interpretation of his/her own idea? Is this then retained or does the team reinterpret the input? Can a director, choreographer or playwright recontextualise the actors' materials? It is still highly possible that an auteur of an intermedia work, as compared to an authorless outfit, may succeed better in engaging the audience as a collaborator.

The TNS model approximates that of Churchill's and TWG's. But what and how the devices and strategies are used, the choice of collaborative model and rehearsal environment are determined by the practitioners' personal and aesthetic temperaments and their political orientations. Therefore, the final composition is authored by the aesthetic philosophy and style of the company.

To conclude, although collaboration can be empowering, it can also be reductive. As much as it has the potential to draw from a team's strength, it can also hamper an artist's development. In the hands of a less skilled practitioner or one not grounded in the classics, a process involving many different disciplines can result in mayhem. If there is no professionalism and structure, collaboration can be reduced to individualistic, egoistic and artistic indulgences under a democratisation pretext. LeCompte benefits from capitalising rather than being enslaved by the collaborative approach; she I believe, discriminates between total collective decision-making and exercising the director's authorship as the 'outside eye'.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **A RETURN JOURNEY TO THE LOCAL**

#### **REFLECTIONS ON A THEATRE OF EMPOWERMENT IN SINGAPORE**

What is the relevance of theatre of empowerment in relation to the historical, political and socio-cultural climate in contemporary Singapore? Globalisation and advanced capitalism are in the process of homogenising the world today. Whilst postmodernist theatre practice is a natural evolution in the west, it is increasingly becoming relevant to urban Asian countries. With colonialism and modernisation, Asia is no stranger to western thinking and influences. As metropolitan culture pervades the world, postmodern trends are easily adopted. As more practitioners pursue graduate and post-graduate studies overseas, we easily succumb to cultural imperialism if we do not adapt what we have learned.

Abstract postmodernist works can often be too academic or elitist, alienating audiences or merely playing to the converted. Furthermore, they are becoming trendy and rapidly institutionalised. Postmodern works have recently earned the scepticism of some critics who mock the project's predictability. The impact of postmodern theories on some contemporary theatre has eclipsed the importance of the traditional roles of directing and playwriting and its traditional story-telling function.

To employ collaboration to create postmodern works only for its potential subversiveness is to miss the point altogether. Deconstruction has its purposes but theatre as an art form is more than the ways a practitioner excel in putting academic theories on stage. Although art should be challenged by these theories, it must resist according it too much sanction, lest it loses its autonomy and humanitarian role. It is very easy to fall into creating montage work because of its trendiness and 'cutting-edge' label. Plagiarising postmodern

traits with no deep understanding can reduce montage work to a random cut-and-paste task like most postmodern pastiche. With little or no historical or cultural context, a work can fail to resonate and thus risk losing its relevance to the audience.

## **POST-COLONIAL ANXIETIES**

For TNS to identify the distinctiveness of its collaborative model, we have to first define our predicament. Firstly, collaboration is about contemporising the western model's traditional structure. The second consideration is adapting collaboration to Singapore's context. Thirdly, how does TNS fashion its own collaborative model to achieve its artistic goals?

Collaboration is premised on democratic principles, a major tenet being the respect of individual rights. In the traditional structure, autonomy is expressed in the division of labour paradigm. But the ways in which the hierarchical structure linearly compartmentalises each discipline makes it difficult to create alternative working environments conducive to exploring new forms radically. Anarchy is not the aim but a new working paradigm is.

Democratisation as an ideal presents many difficulties in application. It does not follow that the revision of the hierarchical feature necessarily eradicates the authorial role. David Hughes elaborates that collaboration,

also points to a situation of coercion, working under duress, of compromise and self-deprecation (or perhaps self-aggrandisement), in a power structure. A betrayal of principles and forms in a hierarchy of personalities and art forms that relegate an artist or an art form to a sub-dominate position in a formal or professional structure. Which is to say that one art form or artist may dominate author(is)ing position. [...] What is clear is that the term (collaboration) can mask exploitative situations just as easily as marking

situations of equality - can mark both democracy and demogogy.

[Hughes, 1996:7-8]

A collaborative model is culturally specific. Hughes' above-mentioned demogological anxieties seem more likely to arise from western than Asian sensibilities. Asians do not consider individualism as important as a space to negotiate. As different collaborative outfits comprise individuals with varying degrees of western and Asian sensibilities, it is difficult to create a model that pleases everyone. A Singaporean practitioner's mix of Western and Asian sensibilities already influences how s/he deconstructs a western model's traditional structure and reconstructs an indigenous collaborative model. For example, an Anglo-Asian practitioner already adapts differently from an English-educated Asian.

The stress on respect for the individual sometimes invites subjective and unreasonable expectations. Whilst directing *Pillars* and *Galileo*, I found the need to ask myself some basic questions: Who decides which materials will be in the final performance, and how are they organised? Who details the acting and the overall composition? Is collective decision-making too idealistic? Does it necessarily improve the team's artistic efficacy? Yet, a recourse to conservative collaboration may leave power relations unchanged. If the process is not sufficiently revolutionised, can anything radically new emerge?

Returning to practice from research has prompted many questions. I began wondering how to apply the concepts I have learned to theatre of empowerment at home. Confronted by Singapore's English language theatre's adolescent stage, I was faced with the formidable task of transmitting concepts such as 'postmodernism', 'interculturalism' and 'interdisciplinary'. These constructs were at once familiar and alien to me and, I believe, to the audiences at home. Should I be imposing the cultural precepts of western theatre academics, theorists and practitioners? Are we again trapped into subscribing to their

prescriptions? Do we have a choice? We have gone beyond past generations' post-colonial anxieties and accepted our culture's schizophrenic identity enough to not react. Yet it did not feel right to completely abandon the project of drawing from our own cultural histories to inform local theatre's content and form. To create a market and 'sell' western postmodernism as a product of the national identity of local theatre can be viewed as exploiting local theatre's adolescent stage. Wholesale appropriation and import can be seen as a threat to cultural heterogeneity.

If theatre companies persist in propagating, there is no doubt that they will succeed in 'educating' audiences' aesthetic taste in favour of postmodernist forms. Some have sold it as Singapore's cutting-edge work; an authoritative claim of local theatre's national identity. Is it important for local practitioners to draw from the indigenous pulse, the social and cultural histories when creating a play? There is nothing wrong with exposure. But surely acquired concepts should not be imported and transplanted without unpacking and setting them to rigorous testing against the local cultural context.

As long as current acceptance of 'cutting edge' is defined by practitioners and academics from theatre meccas abroad, plugging into the global market or bank of theatrical forms for trendy concepts will always be a seductive move.

[Tan, 1997:27]

To avoid a total collapse of composing works that exhibit postmodernist characteristics from other cultures, it then becomes necessary to get down from the ivory tower of academia and interact more with the community. Already we suffer from a chronic lack of discourse on Singaporean cultural and social realities. It then becomes all the more important that we explore indigenous culture fully and engage with it more seriously to achieve cultural relevance in our works.

I do not wish to take this situation for granted. Rather I see it as a cultural issue that TNS will constantly address in our work. The English language practitioners are able to appreciate the precepts and arguments behind the social construction of race, gender and nationality, the nihilistic tendency and the 'constructedness' of these truths. But as the world globalises, we cannot but continue to develop the western theatre model we have already begun to use. However, we can only engage with what western postmodernism can offer, bearing in mind the cultural context rather than claiming its truths as our main cultural agenda. For TNS, this cannot be the best route to take if we wish to remain faithful or open to the pulse of our local culture. The starting point of our work is local, never regional or international. The more rigorous we are in excavating, investigating and interacting with the local, the better the chances of the universal emerging in our works.

What has been beneficial to me about this research is the discovery that 'collaborative practice' has to be scrutinised very specifically in terms of a practitioner's cultural context. The exposure to the Churchill and TWG models has shed some light on how their practices are informed by socio-cultural contexts. When a Singaporean artist creates a work s/he should not take for granted the postmodern premise. Western postmodern theatre forms and sensibilities evolve from historical, social and cultural factors.

Singapore's urban culture approximates that of many western urban countries. This contributes to our ability to understand and appreciate what western postmodernism has to offer to local theatre. But we owe it to ourselves to be open to our indigeneous social-cultural forces instead of copying western postmodern traits without any real or deep appreciation of the cultural motivations behind the invented devices and forms employed.

I have also come to a more balanced perspective that realism and the well-made play still have a powerful role to play in the theatres of empowerment. In the English language theatre in Singapore, the newly-acquired postmodernist consciousness runs concurrent to

that of the construction of national identity. One has to consider the context of Singapore as a young nation; that we are still in the midst of excavating and appreciating our cultural histories and our multicultural reality.

The demands that the well-made play makes on traditional craftsmanship should be taken up as a challenge to create more multi-dimensional Singaporean personages who are rooted in their respective cultural histories. The adolescent theatre scene, despite making good progress, has only begun to explore complex characterisation and the tenets of the well-made play. Yet the push to excel in all fields has prompted theatre practitioners to adopt the avant-garde trend of postmodernist practice. An over-focus on alternative work has derailed us from engaging local cultures to discover or invent *our own* postmodern content and form.

In the light of the current rise of the local mainstream, it is perhaps wise to allocate and invest some creative energies to create more well-made plays to increase the pool of local classics. These realisations have been most timely. It is important that English language Singaporean practitioners continue developing realism and root postmodern works in the local culture.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of contemporary theatre, collaboration can be a powerful approach when handled knowledgeably, with the attached romantic notions of it in check. Although collaboration is relevant politically and socially to urban, contemporary Singapore, it is more important to distinguish between the utopian values embedded in collaboration's social arrangement and the artistic purpose it can potentially serve. I will end with a piece of advice from David Hughes:

What we have seen over the last ten years is an increased concern for the whole work, the integrated work that pays as much attention to its spatial, visual

and audio elements as to text and live performance. We do need to recognise the attempt to create the integrated hybrid work. If the term collaboration marks this respect for the human contributions, the necessary infrastructures, the attempt to balance and work with different art forms within performance, then collaboration may be used strategically and politically.

[Hughes, 1996:12]

## ENDNOTES

### INTRODUCTION *p1-24*

#### COLLABORATION AND THE NECESSARY STAGE (TNS)

1. p4. TNS was formed in 1986 at the National University of Singapore by a group of undergraduates and was registered as a society in 1987. The aims of TNS are:

- To develop Singaporean plays of relevance;
- To develop local theatre through the nurturing of local practitioners by training, conducting workshops and on-the-job experience so that Singapore will have its own pool of professional talent;
- To explore different themes and theatrical techniques/forms and to develop such forms till they are unique to Singapore Theatre;
- To develop a collaborative and devising methodology which produces plays that are rooted and relevant;
- To reach out and introduce theatre to the general public.

2. p4. For an elaboration on the history and methodology of The Necessary Stage, refer to “A Necessary Practice” by Alvin Tan in *9 Lives, 10 Years of Singapore Theatre: Essays commissioned by The Necessary Stage*, ed. Sanjay Krishnan:251-272. An example of TNS’ early collaborative methodology is provided in *Appendix A*.

3. p5. ‘Peranakan’ or the Straits-Born Chinese is an ethnic product of intercultural breeding; a hybridity resulting from intermarriages between the Malays and Chinese. Due to a revolution in China, many Chinese from south China left their homeland to seek work in South East Asia - namely Penang, Malacca and Singapore (otherwise known as the Straits Settlements). Many lived, worked and married the Malay inhabitants resulting in many cross-cultural influences in language, food, clothing and worldviews.

4. p7. For an elaboration on the history of Singapore English Language theatre, refer to “Singapore English Drama: A Historical Overview 1958-1985” by David Birch in *9 Lives, 10 Years of Singapore Theatre: Essays commissioned by The Necessary Stage*, ed. Sanjay Krishnan:22-52.

5. p10. In a Forum Theatre piece, there is usually a short ‘anti-play’ in which the plot ends tragically. The ‘anti-play’ is replayed. The audience is invited to stop the action at any time they wish. S/he is then invited to replace the protagonist as a ‘spect-actor’ (Boal’s term) to propose his/her strategies to deal with the oppressed predicament - to make changes to prevent the tragic end. The activities are facilitated by a ‘joker’ (Boal’s term). Refer to *Games For Actors and Non-Actors* by Augusto Boal (1992), trans. A. Jackson, London: Routledge:224-245.

The NAC said that such an open event could be exploited by audiences attending en masse to sabotage, turning it into a riot. The NAC has stopped sponsoring such a form. Practitioners persisting to perform it must place a S\$10,000 deposit. For articles and commentaries on the proscription of Forum Theatre in Singapore, refer to *Appendix C*. Another article, “What Art Makes Possible: Remembering Forum Theatre” by Sanjay Krishnan, can be found in *9 Lives, 10 Years of Singapore Theatre: Essays commissioned by The Necessary Stage*, ed. Sanjay Krishnan:200-211.

6. p12. Capitalism, socialism, communism or fascism are rationalised systems that, when in power, nevertheless dictate to suppress difference, homogenising society to maintain

its status quo. The disillusionment with totalitarian systems has prompted global alternative politics towards the value of recognising difference and co-existence, advocating tolerance for the 'other'.

7. p13. Many national policies in Singapore are moulded by Confucian ethics that serve the status quo's values.

8. p14. R(A) rating is Restricted Artistic which only allows those who are 21 years old and above to watch the performance. Refer to *Appendix D* for a review that incorporates the event.

9. p17. The categories of sign as analysed by the semiotician Charles S. Peirce are quoted here in full. In his system,

a sign can be (i) an *iconic* sign, one which has a clear-cut physical resemblance to that which it signifies, as a map of an island replicates the shape of that island; (ii) a *symbolic* sign, one whose relationship to what it signifies rests upon social convention, as when a written exclamation-mark signifies excitement, surprise or danger; or (iii) an *indexical* sign, one which signifies by virtue of an existential or substantial connection with its object, as when a footprint in the sand signals the recent passing of Man Friday, or a rash on someone's body points to the fact that he has caught scarlet fever.

[1961:vol.II]

If a sign is a symbol, the associations between the signifier and its signified may either be strong or weak, depending if it is a clichéd symbol or not. In a clichéd symbol such as bird (signifier) = freedom (signified), the bond is very strong. If a symbol is new (eg. a marginalised community has only recently adopted it), then its signifier (image) may have the potential to have a range of possible meanings to different readers. For example, if the Pet Shop Boys' *Go West* (a popular song at gay clubs) is played during a scene, homosexuals seated amongst the audience will receive the arcane signification. If the audience comprises the same ethnic community (depending on how homogeneous it is), the song will ring a bell for a Malay gay man but might escape or offend a Malay heterosexual.

10. p17. *Pillars* was a play I directed in collaboration with TNS' resident playwright, Haresh Sharma, with a cast of actors from TNS and Teater Kami (a Malay theatre company). The play was staged for Singapore's Festival of Asian Performing Arts 1997. See *Appendix E* for details on the play's structure and content. An article, "Pillars of Postmodernity" by Ismail S. Talib can be found in *9 Lives, 10 Years of Singapore Theatre: Essays commissioned by The Necessary Stage*, ed. Sanjay Krishnan:247-250.

11. p18.

A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules and they cannot be judged according to a determining

judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for.

[Lyotard, 1993:46]

Postmodernism and avant-gardism have been used interchangeably by critics. Yet, the same phenomenon has been described as modernism (Hassan, 1980:120). But some felt that postmodernism was different from modernism because it either rejected or stretched modernist principles beyond its perimeters (Gaggi, 1989:19).

Postmodernism as an extension of modernist principles includes experimentation in collage, atonality, nonlinearity, decentredness, imbalance, scepticism, abstractness, ambiguity, serialization and stream-of-consciousness. When it rejects modernism, it stresses self-referentiality, deconstruction, and popular culture. These strands demonstrate the rejection of the idea that high art is the only art worth exploring (Whitmore, 1994:3).

12. p18. *Galileo (I Feel The Earth Move)* was another collaborative effort which I co-directed with TNS' resident director, Kok Heng Leun, and a guest choreographer, Kuo Jing Hong with the company actors. See *Appendix F* for details on the play's structure and content.

## CHAPTER ONE p25-59

### CARYL CHURCHILL: THE ICONOCLASTIC PLAYWRIGHT

1. p27. Churchill's early themes evolved from "self expression of [her] own personal pain and anger" (Itzin, 1980:279). Weeks after *Traps*, Churchill was working on both *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (with Joint Stock) and *Vinegar Tom* (with Monstrous Regiment). In both these works, she decided to fragment the form more. In so doing, she "politicise[d] the theatrical convention of transformations" (Keyssar, 1984:89) and thus shifted "from the expression of personal anger and pain to the expression of public political perspective" (Itzin, 1980:285). According to critics, both plays marked her as a "mature socialist writer" (Selmon, 1989:52).

2. p33. Described as a 'Wrighter' by Schechner (1967:1-16), Churchill is known for modifying Brechtian devices for her dramaturgical tools; making things happen in the text so as to enhance the audience's participation. Diamond elaborates:

The Brechtian "not, but" is the theatrical and theoretical analog to the subversiveness of sexual difference, because it allows us to imagine the deconstruction of gender - and all other - representations. Such deconstructions dramatise, at least at the level of theory, the infinite play of difference that Derrida calls *écriture* - the superfluity of signification that places meaning beyond capture within the covers of the play or the hours of performance...[I]t invites the participatory play of the spectator, and the possibility for which Brecht most devoutly wished, that significance (the production of meaning) continue beyond the play's end, congealing

into choice and action after the spectator leaves the theatre.

[1988:86]

3. p38. The intertextual device works when many stories are told or juxtaposed so that the 'untold' story or implied message can be suggested. David Harvey, in *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* elaborates:

Cultural life is [...] viewed as a series of texts intersecting with other texts, producing more texts. This intertextual weaving has a life of its own. Whatever we write conveys meanings we do not or could not possibly intend, and our words cannot say what we mean. It is vain to try and master a text because the perpetual interweaving of texts and meanings is beyond our control. Language works through us. Recognising that, the deconstructionist impulse is to look inside one text for another, dissolve one text into another, or build one text into another.

[1989:49-51]

4. p39. The 'radical' text, because of the "disruptive pleasure of *jouissance* ", invites a rethinking of the reality; "what is known becomes 'unknown'" (Aston and Savona, 1991:33).

5. p48. Churchill's feminist concerns are hers because she is a woman and the socialist concerns because she values them highly. But Randall states that Churchill's goal is "not to sell those messages so much as it is to write, to establish her identity as Caryl Churchill, playwright" (Randall, 1988:21). In an interview for *Lives of The Great Poisoners*, Churchill laments:

People always think my work is political, yet that's never what I set out to make it. Midgley is in this piece because he's heavily connected with poisoning - not because we want to make a heavy point about environmental polluters.

[Wearing, 1991:24]

6. p49. According to Esslin, "Churchill, like Brecht, eschews the Aristotelian evocation of pity and fear in favour of stimulating new understandings of specific social situations through 'astonishment and wonder'" (1961:129).

7. p51. One critic, Jacky Hilary's response to *Poisoners* illustrates this point:

I recall similar problems with a brilliant set of playlets entitled *A Mouthful of Birds* - another Spink/Churchill collaboration.

Only after reading the entire programme did I understand the show. This just isn't good enough. Surely good art should be accessible and not depend

on prior knowledge - in the case of *Lives of the Great Poisoners* of a rather bizarre kind - in order to be comprehensible.

Despite my criticisms, I think it is vital that innovative, experimental work like this should be done, and *Lives of the Great Poisoners* certainly provoked discussion, if not unstinting praise. Without risk-taking companies who break new ground, the performing arts become smug and dull.

[Cambridgeshire *Life*, April 1991]

## CHAPTER TWO p60-92

### “THE DANCE REPRESENTS ALL THE WORK I’VE DONE”

1. p60. For a comprehensive history of The Wooster Group, refer to David Savran’s *The Wooster Group, 1975-1985: Breaking The Rules* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986).

2. p61. The Performance Group’s practices were informed by the politics of ecstasy; an attempt at transcendence through a ritualistic approach to theatre: “the goal was to achieve what Victor Turner termed as *communitas* where the Artaudian idea of the gestural meant valorising the physicality of performance over the rationality of text to appeal to instincts and not the mind” (Heuvel, 1993:60).

3. p61. The Trilogy was made up of *Sakonnet Point* (1975), *Rumstick Road* (1977) and *Nayatt School* (1978). They opened again under the collective title of *Three Places in Rhode Island* in December 1978. For detailed descriptions on the processes of the Trilogy, refer to “Three Places in Rhode Island” by James Bierman and “About Three Places in Rhode Island”, both found in *The Drama Review* T81:13 - 30 and 31 - 42 respectively.

4. p62. This makes it difficult to create ambiguity as the mind then interprets in a definite fashion. When classical or traditional conventions are totally done away with, one is handling a poor form. David Williams elaborates:

It’s clear that art forms which don’t have fixed structures, formalities, codes and conventions have great difficulty creating [unresolved ambiguous] moments. This is a problem some contemporary dance which, having fled the ossification of classical ballet, now finds a new freedom but no restraint to work against and within.

[Williams, 1996:66]

5. p62. TWG’s New York State Council of the Arts funding was cut due to allegations that they were racist because of its use of Pigmeat Markham comedy routine performed in *Route 1 & 9* (1981-82).

6. p62. For a description of *L.S.D. (...Just the High Points...)* refer to “Textuality and Authority in Theatre and Drama: Some Contemporary Possibilities” by John Rouse in

*Critical Theory and Performance*, eds. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor:University of Michigan Press):148-149.

7. p66. Leary was confronted in a public debate by an accident victim. The accident was caused by someone who was high on L.S.D. *L.S.D. (...Just the High Points...)* was staged in 1984.

8. p69. For a detailed account on the 'evolution' of *Saint Antony* refer to Susan Letzler Cole's *Directors In Rehearsal: A Hidden World*, (New York: Routledge, 1992):90-123.

9. p76. 'bricolage' refers to the lifting of a number of elements from works, objects or preexisting messages, and to integrate them in a new creation. According to Lévi-Strauss, 'bricolage' includes four characteristics:

- |                |  |
|----------------|--|
| a. découpage   | - preformed or extant messages or materials                        |
| b. assemblages | - discontinuity or heterogeneity                                   |
| c. collage     | - the transfer of materials from one context to another            |
| d. montage     | - the 'dissemination' of these borrowings through the new setting. |

10. p81. Timothy Leary had a babysitter, Ann Rower, who agreed to offer her story for the play. Her informal testimony was repeated by actress Nancy Reilly with the help of a tape recorder during the performance. Rower's testimony provided a version that counterpointed the official published account.

11. p86. Refer to David Savran's *The Wooster Group, 1975-1985:Breaking The Rules* (Ann Arbor:UMI Research Press, 1986):179-80 for more detailed accounts of *The Crucible* and the Leary texts.

### **CHAPTER THREE** p93-115

#### **COLLABORATION AND INTERDISCIPLINARY WORKS**

1. p94. It is necessary to collaborate to produce a mutli-disciplinary work. Joan Littlewood's works were largely multi-disciplinary. She did not believe in the supremacy of the director, designer, actor or even the writer as no one mind or imagination can foresee the outcome of a production. Words, music and movement must work together in an integrated fashion. Littlewood drew largely from popular performance forms. For her, "the music-hall provided a set of concrete theatrical practices, a means of replacing the traditional codes of realism in acting and design" (Lacey, 1995:136).

2. p95. It is important to note that the writer's work remains an independent creative act where Churchill is concerned whether it be the Joint Stock or the Second Stride model.

3. p96. Keyssar has expressed the "inseparability of feminist theatre from politics, which [...] has everything to do with process of production and relations of a given production to audience" (Keyssar, 1996:3). In working collaboratively during the Joint Stock phase, Churchill's writing went through significant change: "my attitude to myself, my work and others had been basically and permanently changed" (Churchill, 1985:131). In an interview Churchill admitted that she liked "being more open, and learnt enormously from it" (Hayman, 1980:24-25).

4. p98. As in *Poisoners*, there is a choice of showing how each character is poisoned: one is danced to death and another "has a long death - a long, sung death" (Scott, 1991).

5. p107. For *Cloud Nine* Churchill gave credit when due: “I worked very closely with Max [Stafford-Clark], and although I wrote the text, the play [was] something we both imagined” (Churchill, 1985:184). However, working closely with directors and actors, it did not make Churchill a ‘lesser’ playwright. Klaus emphasises that Churchill’s work with directors is a model for creativity in theatre for contemporary writers who find it appropriate that a play’s production style should be determined “not only by a playwright’s script, but also by a director’s creative influence upon the script” (Klaus et al., 1991:923).

6. p110. This is an important consideration where artistic crafting of interdisciplinary works is concerned; where the resources of performance (or non-literary media) are valorised and share equal status with the literary text. On the one hand, bad realism can be reductive. On the other hand, anti-realist works can be so esoteric that they are unreadable; generating “mass confusion and a loss-of-narrative despair” (Forte, 1989:115-27). I will use the *Join-The-Dots* activity as an analogy to illustrate my point.

*Model A (Conservative):* All the dots are numbered so that drawers who abide to the sequence will all arrive at exactly the same picture at the end of the activity. Such a work aims for a unanimous response and does not divide the audience as there is no other way to read it. It is very definite and singular with little or no room for ambiguity or controversy; like an agit-prop piece or a West End musical. There is little risk and self-reflexivity involved. Everyone would have figured out who the villains, heroes and victims are, follows a safe journey and waits for the climax. There is nothing substantially new or radically challenging except that it is merely another way of telling the tale of a knight saving a damsel in distress. However, unlike the tale, there may be a few expected ‘surprises’ (to achieve a token break from the formula). Perhaps, like *The Titanic* (the movie), the tragic hero does not get his reward but eventually drowns instead.

*Model B (Moderate):* If each dot has a range of possible numbers, there will probably be drawings with overlapping similarities. As it is necessary to suppress/mask a dominant discourse to protect a work’s openness, it becomes important to install clear signposts (eg. Churchill’s time-space travel frame device). Churchill’s narrative and contextual frames (eg. *Top Girls*’ banquet scene) are entry points for audience to access the work’s world of complex associations. This is an ideal model for *a theatre of empowerment* as it is subtle but clear, complex but not complicated, accessible but not pander, difficult and challenging but not too intimidating or alienating. This semi-guided model is where the theatre practitioner can meet the audience mid-way (points of intersection) but each is not expected to arrive at the same exact picture.

*Model C (Radical):* The opposite extreme to *Model A* is when all the dots are unnumbered. There can be as many different pictures as there are drawers. The performer creates his/her own work for himself/herself. The audience is rarely or never a determinant of how the work is composed. It is art at its most autonomous, as an end in itself, and not a vehicle for political, social or pedagogical purposes. As there is no obligation to communicate to the audience the author’s intent, it is left totally up to the audience to create his/her own meaning. Usually one’s response to the performance tells more about oneself than the performance itself. Such a work does not discriminate against different reading abilities. At its most extreme, anti-realism can be a retreatist, solipsistic and subjective art form.

## CHAPTER FOUR *p116-130* THEATRES OF EMPOWERMENT

1. p116. Zola proposed that everything, from the script to the acting, the costume, set and diction must be “lifelike”. However, Zola cautioned that there was a need to revisit Tragedy, not “to borrow more of its rhetoric, its system of confidants, its declaiming, its endless speeches, but to return to its simplicity of action and its unique psychological and physiological study of the character” (Bentley, 1976:366).

2. p116. *Ghosts* (1881) was described, in an article printed in *The London Daily Telegraph*, as “this mass of vulgarity, egotism, coarseness, and absurdity”. Another editorial further described it as “an open drain, a loathsome sore unbandaged, a dirty act done publicly, a lazar house with all its doors and windows open”.

3. p117. Strindberg, whose works belonged to a later phase in cultural history than Ibsen’s, combined objectivity and subjectivity, realism and fantasy and brought naturalism from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. He modernised the form by destroying the French “well-made play”, brought about a new concept of bourgeois tragedy: “Dialogue and stage setting [were] to be jagged and asymmetrical. Monologue, pantomime and dance [were] to be reintroduced. The theatre was to be small and intimate” (Bentley, 1974:62).

Strindberg’s major contribution to the naturalistic form lay in how he used “substitutions, inversions and telescoping” (1974:96) of dream-logic to formulate his artistic theories, bringing to the stage the inner core of tragic human experience. In the programme notes of *The Dream Play* (1902), he elaborated:

[I]n this [dream play] the author has tried to imitate the disconnected but seemingly logical form of the dream. Anything may happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist. On an insignificant background of reality, imagination designs and embroiders novel patterns: a medley of memories, experiences, free fancies, absurdities and improvisations.

The characters split, double, multiply, vanish, solidify, blur, clarify. But one consciousness reigns above them all - that of the dreamer; and before it there are no secrets, no incongruities, no scruples, no laws. There is neither judgment nor exoneration, but merely narration.

Translated by Edwin Bjorkman  
[Drain, 1995:235]

Strindberg was also fond of using non-literary theatrical elements. Bernhard Diebold, a critic, accused him of resorting to such “tricks” when he could not solve his artistic problem: “Being a theatrical genius, Strindberg evolve[d] a technique of evasion in which the formula [was] to use visual and musical elements to conceal weak spots in the drama” (Bentley, 1974:208). According to Bentley, “[i]t is an intelligent and a necessary argument, necessary because there are always those who will defend the use of music and

spectacle as the real arts of the theatre as opposed to the mere words of the “literary” dramatist” (1974:208-209). But what is significant is that where he used non-literary elements in a primary way, Strindberg crossed over into Expressionism.

4. p118. According to Auslander, “deconstruction is seen as a characteristically postmodern aesthetic strategy, apoliticality as either a cause or a symptom of the prevalence of the deconstructive aesthetic” (Pavis, 1986:18 & Birringer, 1985:23). While Patrice Pavis views deconstruction in theatre as being symptomatic of postmodern depoliticisation (1986:18), Johannes Birringer finds apoliticality inherent in deconstruction itself (1985:23).

5. p118. Lee Weng Choy, a Singaporean art critic, illustrates the point with a local example:

There are many instances of self-conscious theatre from all over the world which betray an unsophisticated understanding of decentralising - or to use postmodernist parlance, deconstructing - the privilege of those with the power to speak. A local example which comes to mind is TheatreWorks’ *Broken Birds*; director Ong Keng Sen prefaced the play by saying it did not have a master narrative but had multiple voices. Yet the constant intrusion of his didactic self-reflection, his constant assertions of the absence of master narrative became, ironically, the master narrative. Self-consciousness does not necessarily make for a more decentred author, but can and often further entrenches his or her authority.

[Lee, 1997:222]

6. p127. It is necessary to challenge the dominant theatrical and dramatic conventions associated historically with realism and naturalism if theatre is to be socially relevant and effective:

Realism is not a mere question of form [...] Methods becomes exhausted; stimuli no longer work. New problems appear and demand new methods. Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change.

[Brecht, 1977:82]

7. p129. In “Closure: Realism and Anti-Realism”, the final chapter of *In Defence Of Realism*, Raymond Tallis concludes:

Anti-realism correctly regarded is not the successor to realistic fiction but its servant, a means of deepening it, sharpening it, and so assisting it in its task of approximating reality. It does not spell the end of realism (or even of fiction); rather it is the precursor to another phrase of realism, a realism made more sophisticated by the anti-realistic critique. Under this

Under this interpretation, anti-realism is secondary, even marginal, but certainly not worthless.

[Tallis, 1988:215]

If naturalism is theatre's attempt to best reproduce life, then realism, in the context of this thesis, is defined as "selective naturalism"; not to reproduce or imitate reality but to choose or extract from reality, to reveal "in Strindberg's terms, what could not necessarily be seen everyday" (Lacey, 1995:113). Hence sub-genres of realism such as working-class realism, social realism and poetic realism "refer to a set of specific intentions, that are often political and moral in focus, and [...] describe a particular tradition of representation" (1995:7). For more detailed views on the sub-genres of realism, refer to Stephen Lacey's *British Realist Theatre: The New Wave In Its Context 1956-1965*, Great Britain: Routledge.

## CHAPTER FIVE *p131-147*

1. p131. For more details on the structure and content of the two plays, refer to *Appendices E* and *F*.
2. p131. The cast was split into different groupings. Each group improvised and rehearsed separately until the last two weeks before opening night.
3. p136. Refer to *e. Three Sisters (The Japanese Occupation - 1945)* of *Appendix E*.
4. p136. Refer to endnote #3. of Introduction.

## CONCLUSION *p148-154*

1. p153. Mr Tetsu Saito, a Japanese composer, arranger and double bass player and a veteran at music collaborations comments: "In a sense, every expression of the arts cannot be moved from the place where it is born and fostered. Even the most avant-garde expression at a glance has its deep root in its native place" (The Substation, Jul-Aug 1996:3).

## **APPENDIX A**

### **AN ILLUSTRATION OF TNS EARLY COLLABORATIVE METHOD - *THOSE WHO CAN'T, TEACH***

I had just graduated from the Institute of Education with a Diploma in Education and was in my first teaching year. I wanted to do a play about teaching with a school setting. Haresh Sharma wanted to explore the theme of change. At the time of the improvisations, we discovered that many schools had dislocated to new sites. We started from scratch.

We gathered four teachers who were also actors. Three of them had been teaching for approximately four to five years. One was undergoing teacher training. Haresh proposed the characters and the actors had a say as to what they felt would be challenging for them to take on. Not everything they preferred was taken on. It was considered.

By now Haresh could decide which points he wanted to consider as limitations that would stimulate and challenge him as a writer.

### **THE APPROACH TAKEN: DOCUMENTING THE PROCESS**

*Phase I* (1 month of 3 nights a week of 4-hour rehearsals)

Material Generation:

- a. Discussions and Brainstorm sessions
- b. Improvisation #1: character search and development
  - exploring given scenarios (briefs)
  - possible relationships of characters (explore permutations)
  - possible plots

Phase I is usually exploratory and therefore rather open. Director, playwright and cast give input and scenarios are attempted based on discussions on characters, relationships and themes.

Director and playwright meet to discuss the dynamics of the improvisations. Both plan other scenarios to see possible development or deepening and fleshing out the characters, relationships and themes. Director and playwright evaluate what is striking, interesting and inspiring from previous improvisations; sieving out salient points or potential dramatic situations in order to plan future improvisations.

During the improvisations, playwright and/or director “side-coach(es)” or slip notes to different actors to fuel the direction of the improvisations. The device of “secrets”, where actors are given different briefs, is usually used. This takes place before and during the improvisation exercise as and when the situation calls for it. Some exercises take 5 minutes and some go on for 45 minutes, demanding a high level of concentration from the cast.

Three objectives are achieved during these exercises. Firstly, rich material is being generated. Secondly, Haresh and I are further informed of the teaching world. Thirdly, the ensemble quality of the cast improves as they experience the richness of spontaneity. The cast build a bond, become more adventurous in investing their emotions and explore other dimensions of their characters and relationships.

Each session usually ends with a discussion and an evaluation. Some questions are raised. Sometimes answers are limited, prompting research outside these sessions. For a different, more intimate and immediate perspective, Haresh visits a school and gets permission to sit in the teacher's room for a day to observe. He carries out interviews with teachers and students. These tasks lend fresh insights to existing material; some are used to enhance later improvisations.

In the later part of Phase I, Haresh and I would discuss the form of the presentation, searching for the ideal marriage of form and content for the play. Possibilities are explored. We brought in volunteers to play the students who also has a choral function.

### *Phase II*

- a. Break in the rehearsal process where the cast rests.
- b. The first draft of the play is written.  
Haresh does not transcribe. He derives the essence of the improvisation sessions and interviews.

### *Phase III*

- a. Cast is called back for a read of the first draft.  
Dramaturgical phase - Discussion and Feedback.
- b. Structural and other fundamental changes are made.  
Structured Improvisations with very specific briefs.
- c. Haresh writes the second draft.
- d. Cast is called back and rehearsals begin with the second draft. The presentation form i.e. the ensembles of both the teachers and the students are rehearsed separately and at times together to integrate some scenes.
- e. During the rehearsals, Haresh and I have further discussions and minor changes are made (2 or 3 weeks before opening)
- f. Last week is spent polishing the play.

For this play, we did not employ the re-staging process. By this time we could capture the procedure. Phases I and II takes care of the play's weaknesses. We did plan for a longer rehearsal period for this project. We are now attempting for a more finished product than a works-in-progress.

**APPENDIX B**  
***OFF CENTRE***

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**APPENDIX C**  
**FORUM THEATRE**

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**APPENDIX D**  
**MOVING HOME STORIES**

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## APPENDIX E

### PILLARS

#### HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXTS

Singapore was originally an island with Malay inhabitants. The Malay natives gradually lost ground when British occupation saw Raffles turning Singapore into a successful seaport. This was a pulling factor for many Chinese (who left South China during a revolution) looking for work in Singapore. Many stayed. Their diligence and enterprise were noted for building the foundation of modern Singapore. Today, Singapore, dominated by the Chinese (about 75% of the population), is sandwiched between two Malay countries, Indonesia and Malaysia, spelling out its vulnerable position where race is concerned. This has given rise to a complex relationship between Singapore and its indigenous Malays, once the natives of the land, today a minority ethnic group.

*Pillars* was staged at the time when the relations between Singapore and Malaysia were strained. Earlier in 1997, the Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, had challenged the nation's patriotism by toying with the possibility of a re-merger with Malaysia. The 1997 post-election period saw the PAP (People's Action Party) hounding one opponent party leader, Tang Lian Hong, who sought refuge in Johore (a neighbouring Malaysian state) before escaping to the United Kingdom. In his attempt to discredit Tang, the Senior Minister made some disparaging remarks about Johore being plagued with hoodlums and criminals. This remark had further strained the relationship between the two countries.

#### DESCRIPTION OF THE STRUCTURE AND THE CONTENT

*Pillars* involved 8 actors, each taking on several roles. The set was a raised wall placed near the cyclorama. The raised wall functioned as an offstage space; the stage manager and some actors sat behind the top of it when retiring, changing costume or watching the on-going scenes below, in full view of the audience. The table-top of the raised wall was sometimes used as acting area whilst the vertical surface facing the audience was used as a screen on which images and texts were projected with the use of two overhead projectors and transparencies. *Pillars* had 9 episodes and ran for 1 hour and 50 minutes. They were:

##### A. PROLOGUE

The play started with actors warming up on stage as the audience entered the auditorium. When the cue was given by the stage manager, the actors started reading texts from cue cards which they held in their hands. The texts included:

1. A quote from a Chinese magazine praising Singapore as a developing nation;
2. Colonial perceptions comparing the Malays and Chinese (see Plate 1);
3. A Malay poem written by a contemporary Malay poet about the Malay dilemma;
4. A list of racist jokes and riddles for e.g. Question: What is the difference between the Chinese and E.T.? Answer: E.T. knows how to go home;
5. Quotations from the book *The Ugly Chinaman*. This book contains self-critical essays by a Chinese man about his own race.

##### B. SANG NILA HAS 'A VISION FOR TOMORROW' (\*) (see Plate 2);

The actors then began to change their costumes whilst an actor narrated what they were going to do next:

Umm...for this part, we're supposed to do the Sang Nila Utama...how he discover Singapore...or found Singapore. Found right? Actually he came from Palembang. Then he went to Penyengat. Yah. There the queen like him; they became good friends. But he was restless and wanted to discover new lands. Fifteen minutes of fame lah, I guess. So he left. And when he was sailing, he, or actually one of his crew, saw Singapore. They saw the tip - the Changi airport side. And so they quickly sailed towards it. That's when the whole storm happened. I don't know how close they were to Singapore, ok, when it happened. And I don't think it's really important. The storm was so strong that when it finally ended - you know about the crown - they were at Collyer Quay that side. Singapore river. So...yah...[pause] Ready?

This segment was presented through English and Malay songs composed by the actors. Simultaneous to the scene, pictures of old and modern Singapore were projected on the wall. With the use of follow-spots, percussion instruments and a chorus (by the actors not directly involved in the scene and seated at the table-top of the raised wall). The scene was a send-up on musicals, leading to the casting of the crown to the stormy sea, as how the legend goes.

A character on board the boat was a pregnant cleaner who, due to the panic of the storm, gave birth. At the height of the storm, as both the king and the cleaner raised the crown and baby respectively, the stage lighting switched to a general wash and the scene was disrupted. The actor playing the king came out of role and talked about his mother. Two other actors, taking on the roles of CNN-type interviewers, came on the scene with hand-held mikes to interview the king and his men about the island they had found. Whilst the actor who played the king insisted that he had no comments, his crew (actors still in role), expressed their vision of the island, for example, it would have high-rise buildings made up of one attap-house placed upon another. Gradually, each actor began to lose his/her role and talked about his/her dream as a Singaporean individual living in Singapore today.

(\*) 'A vision for tomorrow' is a quote from one of our nation-building community songs (propaganda) which is often heard on radio and televised.

### **C. THE 1960s RACE RIOTS**

While the above scene went on, the other actors began disrobing, and with minimal physical blocking, the transition was made to the next scene which was a stylised montage of characters during the 1960 Race Riots (Plate 3). The chaos was physicalised by the quick change of characters at each beat of the 'kumpang' (a Malay drum) and the pace was gradually built-up by the overlapping images and voices. On the table-top, an actor in a wig walked to and fro in slow motion carrying a candle in one hand and a Smiley (a yellow smiling face, the icon used for our Courtesy Campaign) in the other.

Soon, there was a group of four characters taking refuge in a drain during the riot. On another side of the stage, a Malay man started praying, which provided the vocal background, whilst another actor became a reporter, trying to interview the group hiding in the drain. Trying desperately to keep the noise level down, a dispute erupted between

one member of the group and the interviewer. At this climax, the actor playing the reporter broke out of role; the light switched to a general wash, the scene was disrupted. The actor (interviewer) was desperate to know why the race riot happened, and if history would repeat itself. A Malay actress in the group shared that it was a dilemma for her whether to choose Malaysia or Singapore if there were a test of allegiance. She said:

It's easier for me to leave (Singapore for Malaysia).  
My loyalties...it's very difficult to explain. It's like  
your child and your parent are drowning...and  
you're asking me to only save one.

At the end of this 'soul sharing' sequence, the 'kumpang' was hit and the actors resumed their characters, building the riot to a climax. This was followed by a 45-second physical movement piece done in slow motion. The piece was created to communicate a sense of horror and loss.

**D. SITIMAT TELLS THE LEGEND OF LAKSAMANA BINTAN**  
(see Plate 3)

This episode was about a brother and sister acting troupe, who visited villages to re-tell the Legend of Laksamana Bintan. The story began with a warrior who had to leave his pregnant wife to fight for his land (Bintan - an Indonesian island). One day, his pregnant wife, yearning for a jackfruit pleaded with the king's gardener for one. Upon finding out what had happened, the king became furious because a subject had eaten the jackfruit before he had. When the woman pleaded with him, saying that it was her foetus who wanted a taste of the fruit, the king ordered the woman to be cut open. When the foetus was revealed, it was holding on to a jackfruit.

When the warrior came back, he learned about the tragedy and started plotting to avenge his wife's death. He confronted the king while he was on his way to the mosque for his prayers. After saying that he had lost respect for the king, who was supposed to symbolise the pinnacle of tradition, the warrior stabbed him. Before he died, the king laid a curse that all the sons of Bintan who dared set foot in Kota Tinggi (then the capital of the Malay kingdom) would vomit blood.

Whilst acting out the many characters in the story, the actor who played the king (the role was interchanged between the actor and the actress who were playing the brother and sister) would don the same crown which Sang Nila Utama also used. By association, this signified the two very different Malay kings - one who sacrificed his crown and one whose injured pride and royal arrogance had caused the death of a subject.

At the end of the segment, a voice-over came on suggesting that Mat had been arrested for subversive activities - re-telling the story to deconstruct the myth that had maintained that the warrior had committed treason against the king. Whilst the voice-over was playing, the image of a 1994 Straits Times article on Haresh Sharma and myself was projected on the wall. The headline of the article read: *Two Pioneers of Forum Theatre trained at Marxist Workshop*. But our faces, in the accompanied photograph, were replaced with Siti's and Mat's.

**E. THREE SISTERS (THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION - 1945)**

This episode was an account of 3 'peranakan' sisters and a Malay neighbour during the Japanese Occupation. The Japanese trusted the Malays and made them their allies but persecuted the Chinese.

To escape possible persecution and rape, the 'peranakan' women darkened their skins with a mixture of charcoal and powder, wore Malay customary clothes, spoke Malay (most of them could) and passed off as Malays. The 'peranakans' considered themselves Chinese but when confronted with a life-threatening situation, they were pragmatic enough to forgo integrity and reinvented/ reconstructed themselves.

This segment was disrupted by an actress, who played one of the Japanese soldiers (her voice then distorted by microphone effects), now began to interview the actress who was playing one of the three sisters. In the interview, the actress (one of the three sisters) revealed:

I cannot do anything about it. What else can I be? Besides human, what else can I be? Human can do a lot of things. But then...because they are very intelligent, because they can do a lot of things...then they...then they any old how do things. Then they distort the whole world. Because the animals are more stupid, you know...they don't have...they don't have...like words and language and intelligence...you know...they don't have computers and technologies...they are very naive...they are very simple...you know...They just hunt for food and just sleep and just reproduce. And you see the whole world is quite alright when...when...when human being is not so civilised. They do a lot of things to hurt...they can see right?...They can see...so how come they still do it. Why? [pause] I'm Chinese. But I can hate Chinese also. Every race also got fault. Yah, I'm very racist. I'm very racist against human race. People are distorted. I'm also distorted. But I think... I think there's still love...there's still hope. I believe in that. I hope I can believe in that. I will try to believe in that.

## ***F. THE COLLAGE EPISODE***

This episode had about five events going on all at the same time; overlapping in terms of setting up (e.g. putting on costume or playing out phrases of physical movements in repeated routine) and an event being played in full. The events were:

1. A quarrel between a Malay housewife and a Chinese woman (both done in cross-gender costume. See Plate 5). This took place at the table-top (stage-left). Much of the humour arose from the deliberate miscommunication or misreading of each other's language and the racist comments made at each other. However, this montage was presented as if the actors were rehearsing the scene. As the scene went on, the actors intermittently came out of role, trying to remember the lines whilst nudging each other to prompt. Then they returned into their respective roles and continued hurling disparaging remarks at each other. The 'palimpsest' scene allowed audiences to see the actors laughing at each others' and their own characters in terms of the ethnic groups they belong to, and at themselves for creating the ruckus. They were therefore acknowledging that ethnicity and sexuality were social constructs to be transcended. The cross-gender casting and the rehearsal framework had recontextualised the rather racist content.

2. A Malay actor in street-wear, through a slow-motion performance at the centre of the table-top, changed into a corporate suit. When he finished, he took off his wig (the head-dress of his previous character, a drug addict) and turned around. His text (adapted from a speech by a Malay minister and now delivered as a speech) was about how the Malays must upgrade themselves. Next to him was a Malay actress who closely prompted him throughout his speech. Sometimes both mouth the same words of the text at the same time (see Plate 6). When he had finished, he began to walk downstage.

3. Downstage left was a Chinese actress who played a Chinese woman married to a Malay man. When her scene began, she had finished putting on the Malay traditional dress. Her monologue dealt with the traditional role of mothers, the demands her traditional mother-in-law had made and the traditional perception of woman having to bear children - all these factors hindering her career advancement ambitions. At the end of the monologue, her physical actions/phrases developed into a mime routine that hinted at a climb of the corporate ladder. She performed this segment in the full traditional Malay garb.

4. Downstage right was a Chinese woman who had suffered several miscarriages. She was now pregnant and hoped this time it would be a success. Her monologue showed her world to revolve around her husband. She was interviewed by two actors sitting at the table top. The interviewers used hand-held mikes. The questions by the first interviewer were first done in Mandarin whilst she answered in English. As the segment continued, the Mandarin faded off as the second interviewer cross-faded into English. Whilst this segment was on, the projection showed a foetus at different stages of development. At a later point, a red transparency was placed over the foetus images.

5. At centrestage was a young girl who, when the scene began, performed wearing a piece of 'sarong' (Malay clothing). She had on a red-head wig and her face was coloured black. She was miked up. By the time her segment began, the Malay man in corporate suit from the table-top had reached her and begun caressing her. She loved and detested the attention. The Malay man began talking:

Chinese can eat everything. Malays are restricted to some things, like Malay cannot eat pork. Chinese can eat pork. Malays cannot touch the dog when their hands is wet. Chinese can touch. [Pause] If my wife is not a virgin, I don't think I want it. I always make sure that the girls I married must be a virgin. That is very important to me. Actually it's difficult to find. But somehow or other I know...somewhere, someplace in Singapore, there are many virgin. [pause] I don't sleep with strangers. I sleep with people I know. I'm international what. Just too bad. She want it. I give it.

The caressing image began to look as if he were handling a dog. When he finished his monologue, he turned around and climbed the wall onto the table-top, signifying the current Malay consciousness of upgrading the economic status of their ethnic group. The actors at the table-top began to interview the girl with black face and red-head wig. The interview turned into a rigorous interrogation, all done in metaphorical language.

*G: Girl in 'black face'*

*A M: Interviewers*

A: Pain is

G: suffocating  
B: suffocation is  
G: when I can only hear my heartbeat  
C: what's in your heart  
G: pain  
D: what does it look like  
G: green phlegm  
E: what does it taste like  
G: very bitter  
F: what does it smell like  
G: smells sharp  
H: what does it feel like  
G: soft  
A: Once upon a time  
G: I was awkward and ugly  
B: And they lived  
G: happily ever after  
C: Until  
G: the funeral  
D: Of  
G: her husband  
E: and then  
G: she woke up  
H: and told herself  
G: the sun is still shining  
I: And for the first time  
G: the clouds cleared

J: And for the first time

G: she felt strong

K: And for the first time

G: [reply]

It was left to the actress to reply spontaneously, based on what and how she was feeling there and then.

L: And for the first time

G: [reply]

M: And for the first time

G: [reply]

N: And for the first time

G: [reply]

P: And for the last time

G: [reply]

Q: Questions must be

G: Questions must be answered

R: Answers must be

G: clear, intelligent...must be clear, must be very clear

This being the final segment of the episode, three actors (at the table-top) began to wrap themselves in 'sarong' to get ready for the next scene.

### **G.     *THREE VIRGINS BATHING AT A WELL*   (see Plate 7)**

This non-verbal scene opened with three young women clad in 'sarong'; two were holding a bamboo from which a huge basin (symbolising the well) was fixed. The third virgin carried a kerosene lamp. The backdrop was a 'batik' (Indonesian fabric print) work with a stylised bird motif projected onto the wall and cyclorama. The projection also fell onto the women's 'sarong' whilst they moved around the stage. The Malay actor who was previously (at stage-left table-top) the cross-dressed housewife, now with microphone, sang a Malay nursery rhyme about an injured bird.

The women giggled when they came on, splashing water at each other. Then after some time, one tentatively took off her 'sarong'. The other two looked at her, first judgementally, but later followed suit. One of them climbed to the top of the well. As she was looking into it, another caught hold of her. One virgin washed another who began to cry. All the while, the singer in the background sang, accentuating the emotional states of the three virgins. They then began to dress, carry the basin and walk off the stage to the back of the raised wall where the other actors rose to greet them.

#### **H. SMILE** (see Plate 8a)

This scene opened with a Chinese family having breakfast. The father, in a bad mood, scolded the daughter for staying out late. The mother, a submissive wife, tried to be the peacemaker. At the climax of the scene, the daughter hinted at the father's infidelity, after which the father shouted at her to leave the house. The scene stopped there and the other five actors in their various character costumes descended from the table-top, each carrying a 'Smiley'.

The scene was replayed and the characters of the father, mother and daughter were replaced in swift succession. Several permutations were played out when the roles were interchanged, making several points and giving rise to multiple voices and perspectives. At one point, Siti from the SitiMat duo replaced the wife, Sang Nila replaced the father whilst the corporate-suited Malay man replaced the daughter - portraying a Malay family handling the conflict at quite another level. Sang Nila stated that a wife must serve her husband, complaining about the loss of tradition (see Plate 8b). He was angry that although there was a Sir Stamford Raffles statue, there was no statue to commemorate his founding of Singapore. He wanted to 'find' the island again. The island was lost to his descendents. The roles were finally given back to the original Chinese family. The actors began to disrobe and lose their characters, discussing the problems the scene had thrown up.

The Chinese mother, still in role, appeared at the table-top, silenced the discussion and delivered the final monologue about her daughter and family. The monologue now had a stronger resonance to Singapore as a large family (see Plate 9).

#### **I. GOODBYE** (see Plate 10).

The actors continued disrobing and began to wave at the audience. This scene went on for about 5 minutes before the stage manager called the cue to fade the lights as the actors made their way offstage. There was no curtain call.

Press cuttings are not available in the digital version of this thesis

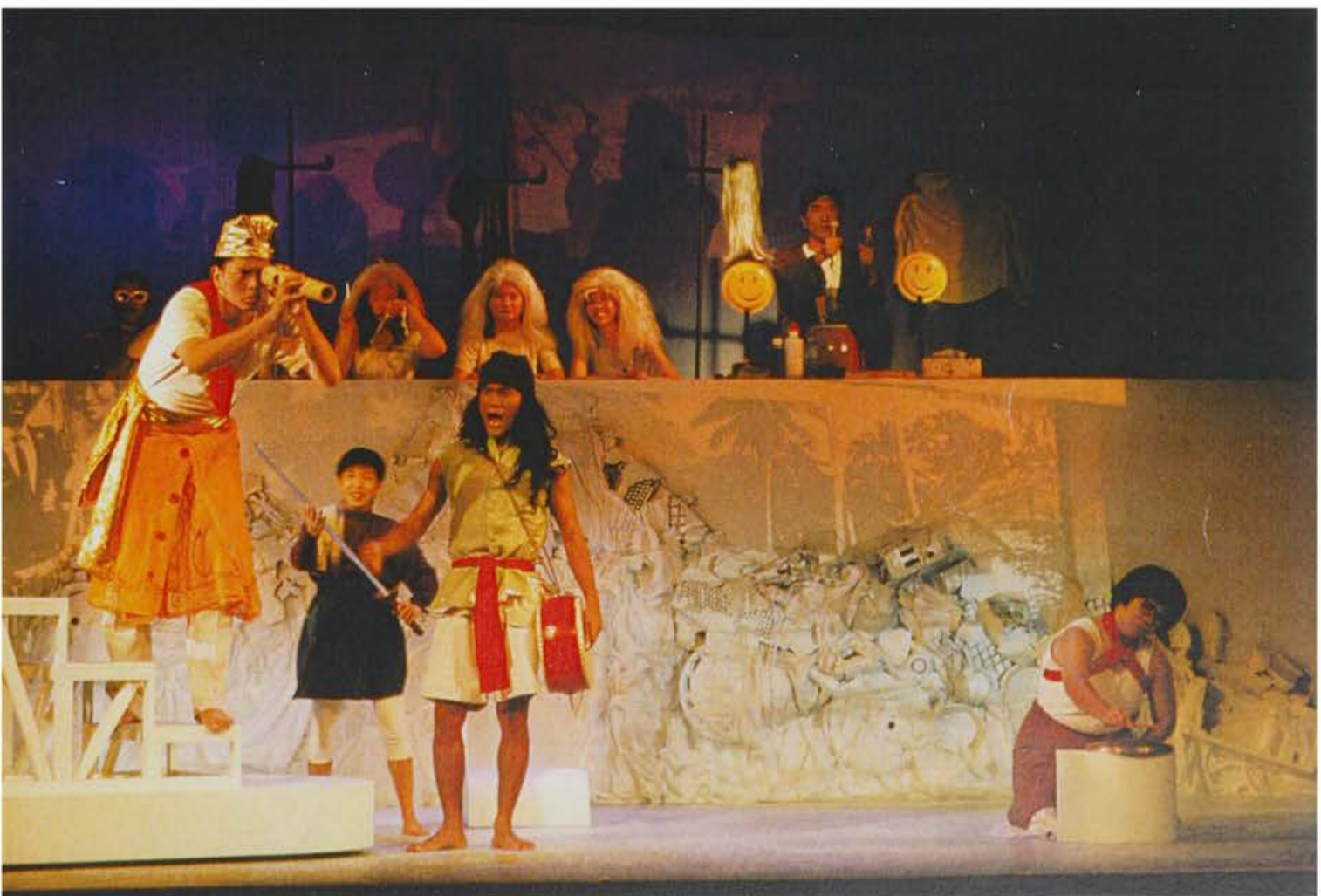
Production photos included with the permission of The Necessary Stage

Plate 1



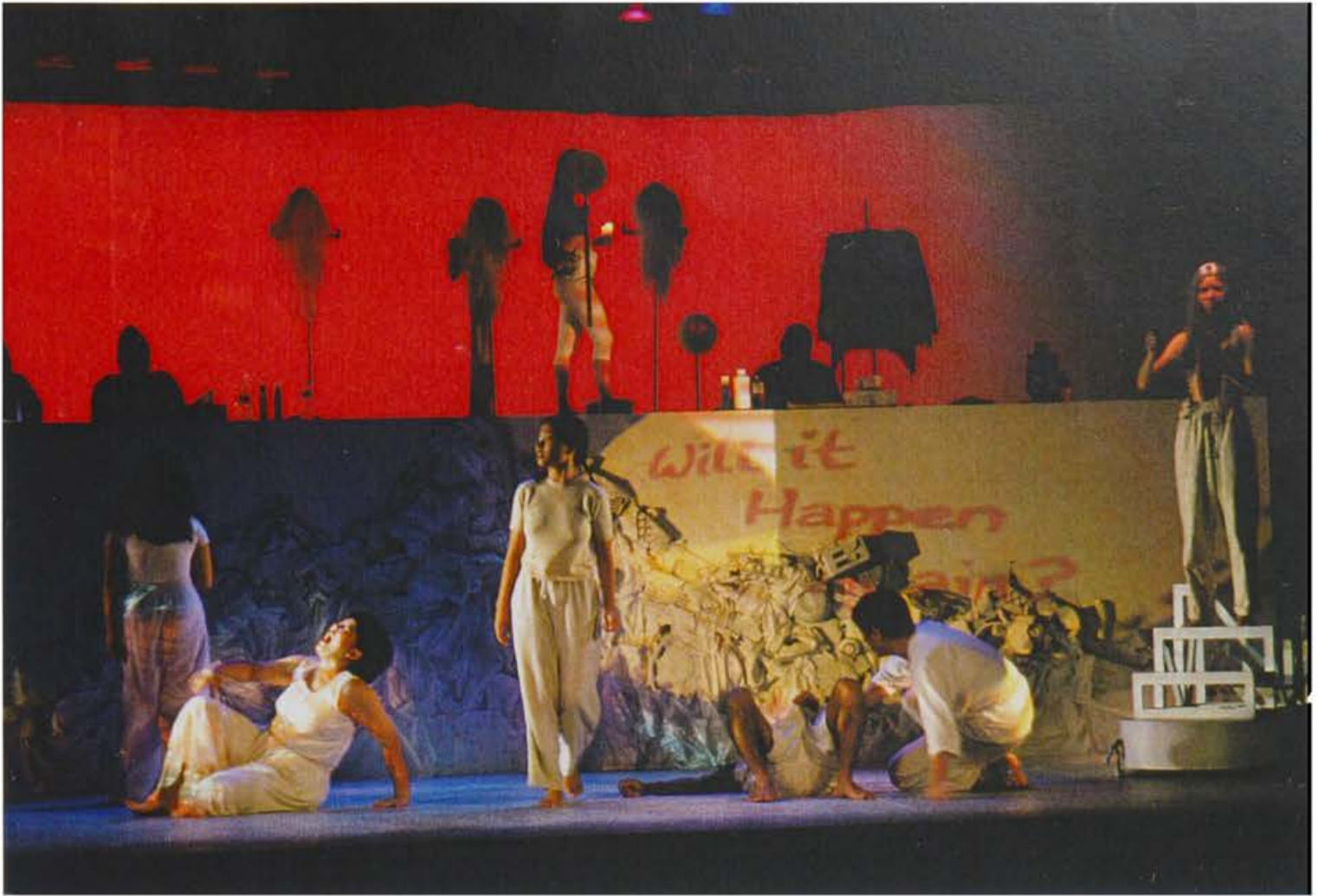
Prologue - Colonial perceptions comparing the Malays and Chinese.

Plate 2



Sang Nila Utama has a *Vision for Tomorrow*.

Plate 3



The 1960s Race Riots.

Plate 4



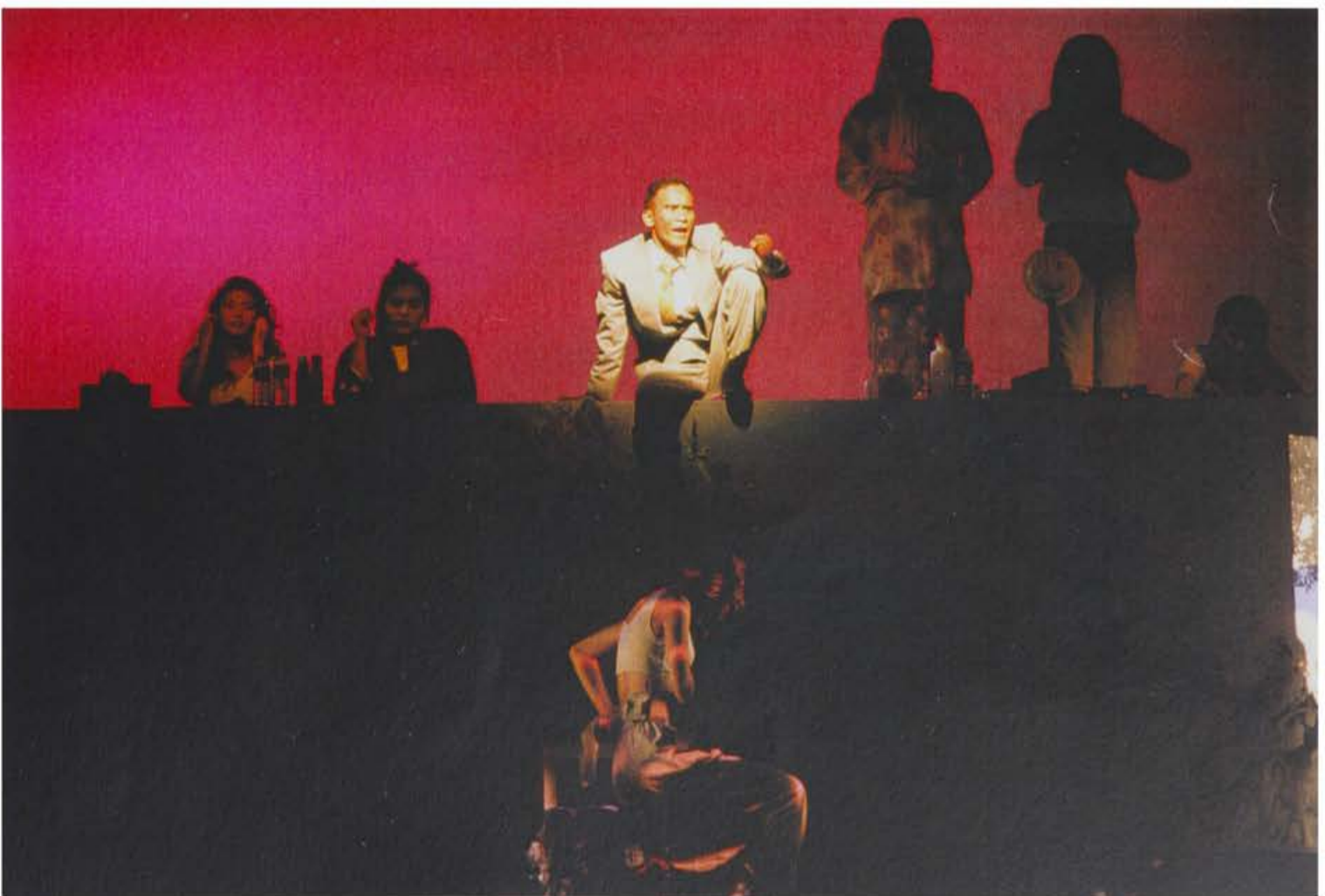
SitiMat tells the *Legend of Laksamana Bintan*.

Plate 5



**The Collage Episode : A quarrel between a Malay housewife and a Chinese woman.**

Plate 6



**The Collage Episode : A corporate-suited Malay delivers a speech on how Malays must upgrade themselves.**



**Three Virgins Bathing at a Well.**

Plate 8a



**Smile: A Chinese family dispute scene replays with different characters from previous episodes taking up the father, mother and daughter roles.**

Plate 8b



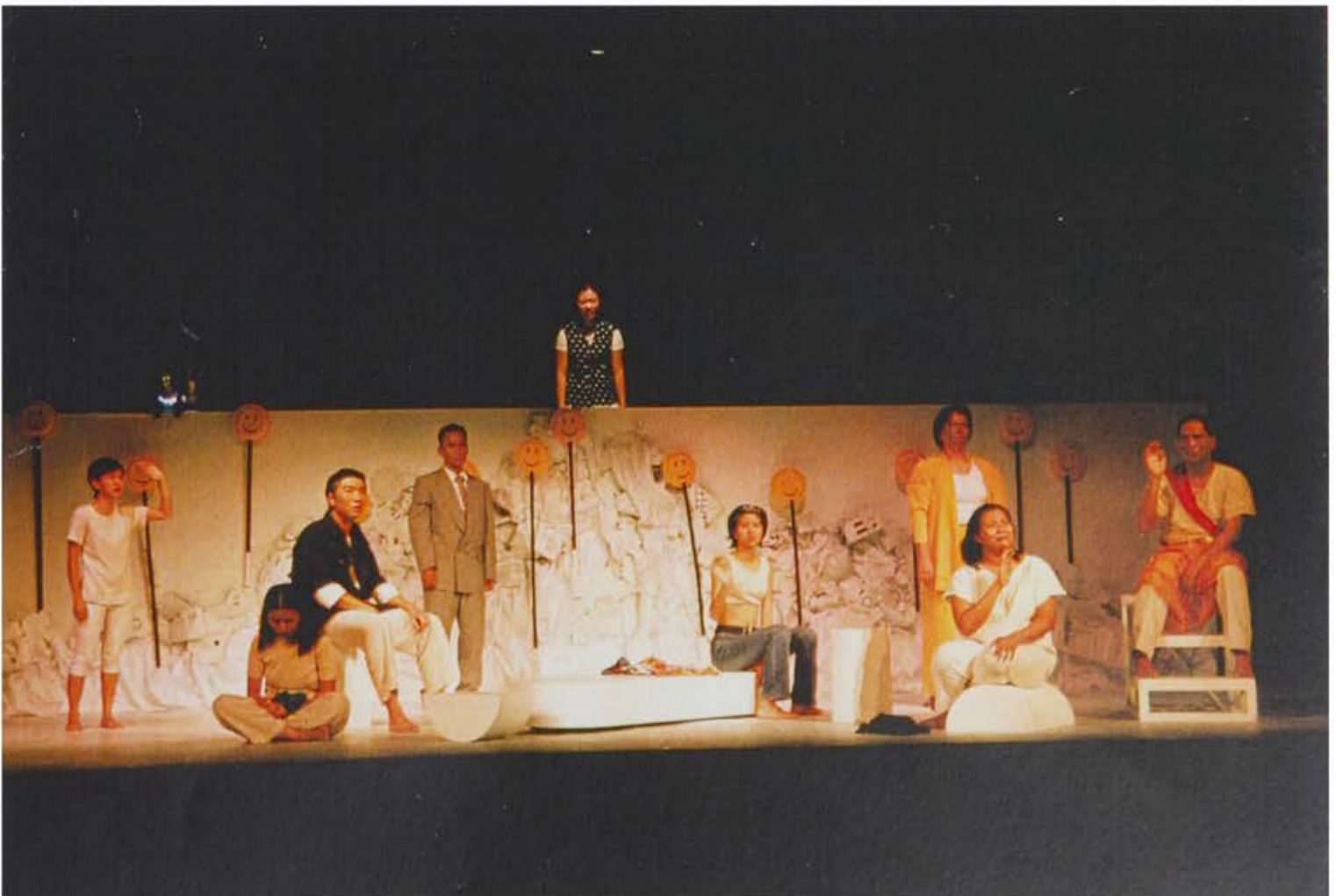
**As the different characters interchange, a Malay family gradually emerges, substituting the original Chinese family. Here Sang Nila Utama laments the erosion of Malay traditions, one of them being a wife's duty to serve her husband.**

## Plate 9



**Epilogue : The Chinese mother appears at the table-top.**

## Plate 10



Goodbye

## APPENDIX F

### ***GALILEO (I FEEL THE EARTH MOVE)***

There were 15 episodes in the whole play:

Prologue  
Galileo # 1 - Discovery  
Pak Noh And Leong Chee Meng  
Doreen And Tutik  
Galileo # 2a - Assertion  
Fly 1  
Grace And Robin  
Fly 2  
Andrew And Angela  
Fly 3  
Ah Geok And May + News Broadcaster  
Galileo # 2b - Assertion  
Interrogation - Transvestites + the other characters  
Recantation  
Epilogue

The three strands were:

**1. THE GALILEO NARRATIVE:** This narrative was contained in 3 independent episodes (see Plates 1 and 2). They were abstracted from the original Bertolt Brecht's *Life Of Galileo*.

**2. THE URBAN MYTHS NARRATIVE:** This narrative had 6 episodes; each introducing Singaporeans struggling against the ramifications of national policies. One example would be the policy that encourages and rewards marriage and penalises those who are single. Those who are single cannot purchase a public housing apartment unless s/he applies with his/her parent or sibling. Those who marry and have three children by the age of 30 will get tax incentives. These ramifications intrude into private lives. Stereotyped perceptions of singles have gradually been moulded/constructed by these policies. This places much social pressure on singles. The assumptions behind these national policies and campaigns have not been challenged officially, becoming Singapore's modern urban myths.

The episodes were:

- a. Pak Noh And Leong Chee Meng
- b. Doreen And Tutik
- c. Robin And Grace
- d. Andrew And Angela
- e. Ah Geok And Mei + News Broadcaster
- f. Transvestites

### **3. THE FLY NARRATIVE:**

*Fly One*, *Fly Two* and *Fly Three* (see Plates 3 and 4) were used to break the urban myth narrative. The ensemble, under the guide of the choreographer, physicalised the narrative of a group of workers waiting and preparing for the arrival of a VIP guest-of-honour. When a fly interrupted the preparations, the workers planned to solve the problem. They

created a huge machine to kill the fly. The job was done, and the guest-of-honour came and left. They were all exhausted.

The slide-texts projected were:

*Fly 1:* He is coming

*Fly 2:* The Unfortunate Fly

*Fly 3:* Awwwwwww!

For *Fly 2* there was an additional slide which showed the dictionary definitions of **fly**:

1. A **fly** is a small insect with two wings. There are many kinds of flies, and the most common are black in colour.
2. If you say that someone wouldn't **hurt a fly** or wouldn't harm a fly, you are emphasizing that they are very kind and gentle. Ray wouldn't hurt a fly...a lovely girl, who would not have harmed a fly.
3. If you **let fly**, you attack someone, either physically by hitting them, or with words by insulting them. A simmering row ended with her letting fly with a stream of obscenities.

## THE URBAN MYTHS

There were slides used concurrent to the episodes being played on stage. The slides with words showed dictionary (Collins) definitions of equality, democracy, peace, progress and justice; values represented by the five stars on the Singapore flag.

### A. ***THE PAK NOH AND LEONG CHEE MENG EPISODE*** (see Plates 5,6 and 7)

The slide-texts projected before the scene began:

Slide # 1

#### EQUALITY

The same status, rights and responsibilities for  
all the members of a society, group or family.

Slide # 2

The rag-and-bone man propositions Pak Noh for his walking stick.

"I cannot Manage On 500 Scudi."  
*Life Of Galileo*, Brecht, Sc.1

Pak Noh is an old Malay widower who moans the loss of his wife and the mosque he used to frequent, destroyed in the wake of modern Singapore. He meets Leong Chee Meng, a rag and bone man. Chee Meng is interested in Pak Noh's walking stick as it would make a good buy. The negotiation ends with Pak Noh giving away his stick as he is waiting for his death to join his beloved wife. The presentation is accompanied by a montage of the voices of Pak Noh and Chee Meng as the audio text. The audio text sets the structure against which two actors compose, with the help of the choreographer, a

piece of physicalised performance. This performance run concurrently with the slide and video texts projected against the cyclorama.

The slide-texts projected during the scene were:

1. stills on the Hock Lee Bus riots; which happened in the 1950s in Singapore
2. a quote:

In Germany they came first for the Communists,  
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist.  
Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.  
Then they came for the trade unionists,  
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.  
Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant.  
Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up.

*Martin Niemoeller (1892 - 1984) - A Holocaust Survivor*

3. a video image of a close-up face of the actor playing Pak Noh with tears in his eyes.

#### **B. DOREEN AND TUTIK EPISODE** (see Plate 8)

The slide-texts projected before the scene began:

Slide # 1

### **DEMOCRACY**

Democracy is a system of government in which people  
choose their rulers by voting for them in elections.

Democracy is a system of running organisations, businesses,  
and groups in which each member is entitled to  
vote and participate in decisions.

Slide # 2

Doreen needs money from sister Penny.  
Penny wants Doreen's daughter Li Kuan.  
Tutik, the maid, advises Doreen.

"Authority Grows Feeble From Being Abused."  
*Life Of Galileo, Brecht, Sc.7*

Doreen, a rich business woman, is a widow bringing up a teenage daughter. Her sister Penny, who is based in Paris as a successful fashion consultant, wants to train Doreen's daughter to take over her business as she is suffering from a terminal disease. During their youth, Penny had eloped with Doreen's boyfriend to Paris, of which Doreen has not forgiven her. However, now Doreen is near bankrupt and needs to borrow some money from Penny. This is the backstory.

The scene begins with Doreen anxious about her sister's visit and is being consoled by her Indonesian maid, Tutik. Tutik is played by an actor who cross-dresses with a black-laced bra and oranges as breasts. The scene shows the maid vacillating from willingly giving 'herself' up to being punished by Doreen to taking on a firm stand and challenging 'her' employer to get out of her emotional doldrums and getting her act together. As much as Penny has the economic power to jeopardise the mother-daughter relationship, Tutik is also at the mercy of Doreen. Yet only when Tutik functions outside the role of the maid can she be effective in becoming Doreen's true friend. The role-reversal satirises and brings across the point of economic poession and determinism of human relationships. The slide of the ASEAN logo opens the domestic scene up to the regional political and economic sphere, throwing up the question who is the colonialist/imperialist in South East Asia today.

The slide-texts projected during the scene:

- a. An archival photograph of a rickshaw rider with a white man sitting in the passenger seat of the rickshaw.
- b. The ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) logo.
- c. A picture of Mars

The scene ends with Tutik cajoling Doreen to stop indulging in self-pity and inviting her to join 'her' at the National Day Parade celebrations the next day. As Tutik sings *Somewhere Over The Rainbow*, the video footage of the National Day Parade goings-on (This year's parade has a huge rainbow structure as a motif. The parade had taken place a week before the performance's opening) is projected on the backdrop.

### C. **ROBIN AND GRACE EPISODE**

The slide-texts projected before the scene began:

Slide # 1

#### **PEACE**

If there is peace in a country or in the world,  
there are no wars or violent conflicts going on.

If you hold or keep your peace, you do not speak, even  
though there is something that you want or ought to say.

Slide # 2

Grace is a 32 year old mortician. While waiting for  
her boyfriend, she meets Robin, a fugitive.

“And I Ask You, Where Is God In Your Universe?”  
*Life Of Galileo*, Brecht, Sc.3

Robin is a working-class character. He has burnt a motorcycle (a Harley Davidson) out of foolish envy and is now hounded by the police. His act coincides with a few motorcycles being destroyed at the same time by another hoodlum.

Grace is a mortician who is taking care of her old grandmother. She is under pressure to get married soon, at least before her grandmother passes on. Out of desperation, she has constructed an imaginary friend whom she uses to spin stories to appease both her grandmother's and her anxieties.

Robin meets Grace and wants her to disguise him with her cosmetic skills. Knowing that Singapore is a country where one cannot afford to make a single mistake without jeopardising one's future, Robin has already planned to leave Singapore for Johore. Robin has an ulterior motive to befriend Grace but she has misconstrued his intentions which tragically has led to self-delusion. The scene ends as it begins, with her alone.

The slide-text projected during the scene is a New Paper (Singapore's only English tabloid) article entitled *Young Miss or Old Maid* is accompanied with an optical illusion graphic design image: at an angle one sees a young girl and at another, an old maid.

The video text is a video clip (self-constructed using the same actress who has done the original televised version for the national campaign) promoting marriage among single Singaporeans. The video sequences show an elderly woman sitting listlessly in a rocking chair with no one next to her during her old age because she has opted to remain single. This video clip is played twice throughout the scene. Intermittently, the slide-text mentioned above is projected.

#### **D.     ANDREW AND ANGELA EPISODE**

The slide-texts projected before the scene began:

Slide # 1

### **PROGRESS**

Progress is the process of gradually improving or getting nearer to achieving or completing something.

To progress means to move over a period of time to a stronger, more advanced or more desirable state.

Slide # 2

S.N.A.G.     +     90's woman     =     DYNAMITE!

"The Cities Are Narrow And So Are Men's Minds."  
*Life Of Galileo*, Brecht, Sc.7

Andrew is the Sensitive New Age Guy, or at least he thinks he is. He is always over anxious as to whether he is doing the right thing. He considers all his moves with great calculation but always ends up misreading events. He is an insurance salesman.

Angela is a successful marketing officer whose mind is everywhere all at once. Not that she is distracted but that she multi-tasks which explains where she is today. There is only one problem. There is no time for love because that can and must wait. Out of lust she performed oral sex on Andrew once and is today paying for that 'crime' as Andrew has fallen in love.

They go to a holiday resort; Andrew for a holiday but Angela for work. They decide to bungee jump to celebrate Andrew's birthday. During the jump, which becomes metaphorical, Andrew professes his love and Angela, her rejection of his love. Andrew is traumatised and shouts. The rope 'snaps' and the scene ends, leaving the audience to wonder if there had been a real or metaphorical death. Throughout the scene an image of a cross-section of a head with people working on a human brain, is projected.

## **E. AH GEOK AND AH MEI EPISODE**

The slide-texts projected before the scene began:

Slide # 1

### **JUSTICE**

Justice is fairness in the way that people are treated.

The justice of a cause or claim is its quality  
of being reasonable, justifiable or right.

Slide # 2

Ah Geok, a hokkien mee seller pleads with Mei,  
a karaoke hostess, to stop seeing her husband.

"Truth Is The Child Of Time, Not Of Authority."  
*Life Of Galileo*, Brecht, sc. 4

This episode is filmed and presented as video footage. Ah Mei is a karaoke songstress. Ah Geok is a hawker whose husband frequents the karaoke bar where Ah Mei works. In this video presentation, Ah Geok visits Ah Mei and begs her to stop seeing her husband. She offers Ah Mei money which Ah Mei refuses. The next visit, Ah Geok persists in persuading Ah Mei. Ah Mei tells Ah Geok of her wish to migrate. She is saving up so that she is able to leave Singapore and her job for good, implying that she cannot accept Ah Geok's meagre monetary offer. Her job is dependent on people who have no conscience and she has to exploit that in order to get herself out of such a world. Since everything looks futile, Ah Geok throws boiling oil on Ah Mei's face and the video cuts. When the credits finally end, the last frame shows the image of TNS in similar colours, font and design as the TCS (Television Corporation of Singapore) logo. The logo reconstruction is held on the screen for awhile. This video footage is filmed by co-director Kok Heng Leun.

The video is presented in two segments. The first segment is played for the audience to get a gist of the story. The dialogue is a mix of Chinese dialect and Mandarin. The subtitles are in 'Singlish', or a more direct and literal English translation of the Chinese dialect and language, to keep the cultural essence. This is not allowed on TCS produced melodramas.

The second segment is played in a lower volume. On stage left, an actress (miked up) in the role of a news broadcaster reads the news with accompanied slide projections which consists of graphs on Singapore's economic position regionally and internationally (see Plates 9, 10 and 11).

## **F. THE TRANSVESTITES (INTERROGATION) EPISODE**

The interrogation and recantation scenes brings all the actors (and selected characters from the preceding episodes on stage). We have created a video footage of our actors doing a 'drag' routine to the song *We Are Family*. This video footage is projected for a minute without the sound, whilst the actors (not in 'drag') assembles to watch themselves. Then the screen goes blank and shows a colour test transmission accompanied by a sound, suggesting censorship. A slide-image of a monkey which is undergoing a brain-scan experiment is projected.

The 'Recantation' scene begins with Galileo who quotes from Brecht's *Life Of Galileo*. Then all the marginalised personas or characters from preceding scenes come forward to confess their 'crimes'. One example is Pak Noh:

I, Mohammed Noh 0617893A, hereby apologise for my belief and my action. Please punish me for treasuring my past, for not being supportive of change, for not thinking of progress, for being unproductive.

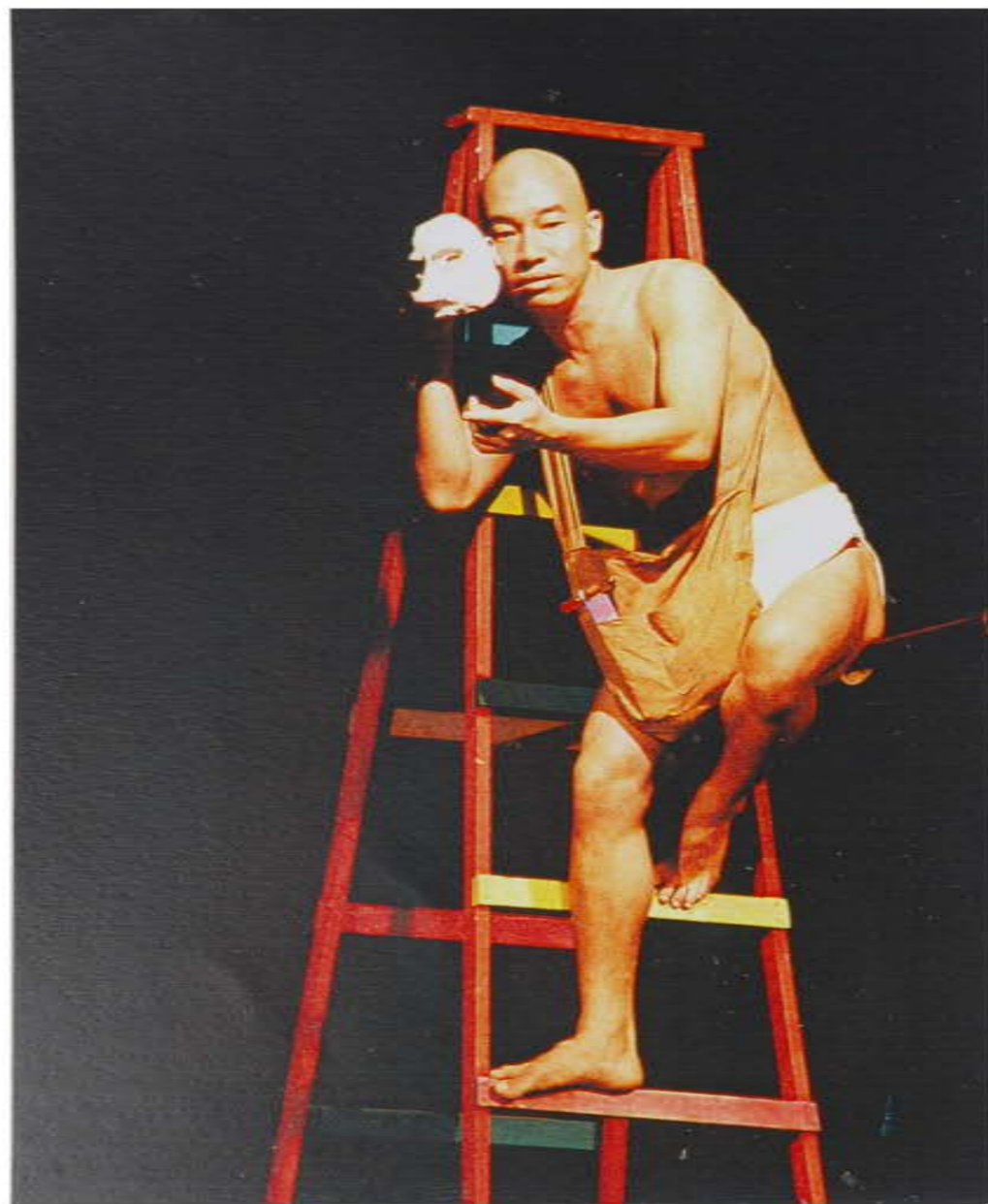
## **G. EPILOGUE (see Plate 12)**

The epilogue shows the ensemble caning a platform furiously. The image then dissolves; the actors perform in slow-motion the impact of the cane hitting their bodies. As the lights dim, the ensemble freezes in a tableau. An actress begins to dance to the samba version of *Brazil* (the soundtrack from the movie which was used for transitions between scenes throughout the play) against the backdrop of a fireworks display (video footage) at Singapore's National Day Parade.

Press cuttings are not available in the digital version of this thesis

Production photos included with the permission of The Necessary Stage

Plate 2



Galileo

Plate 1



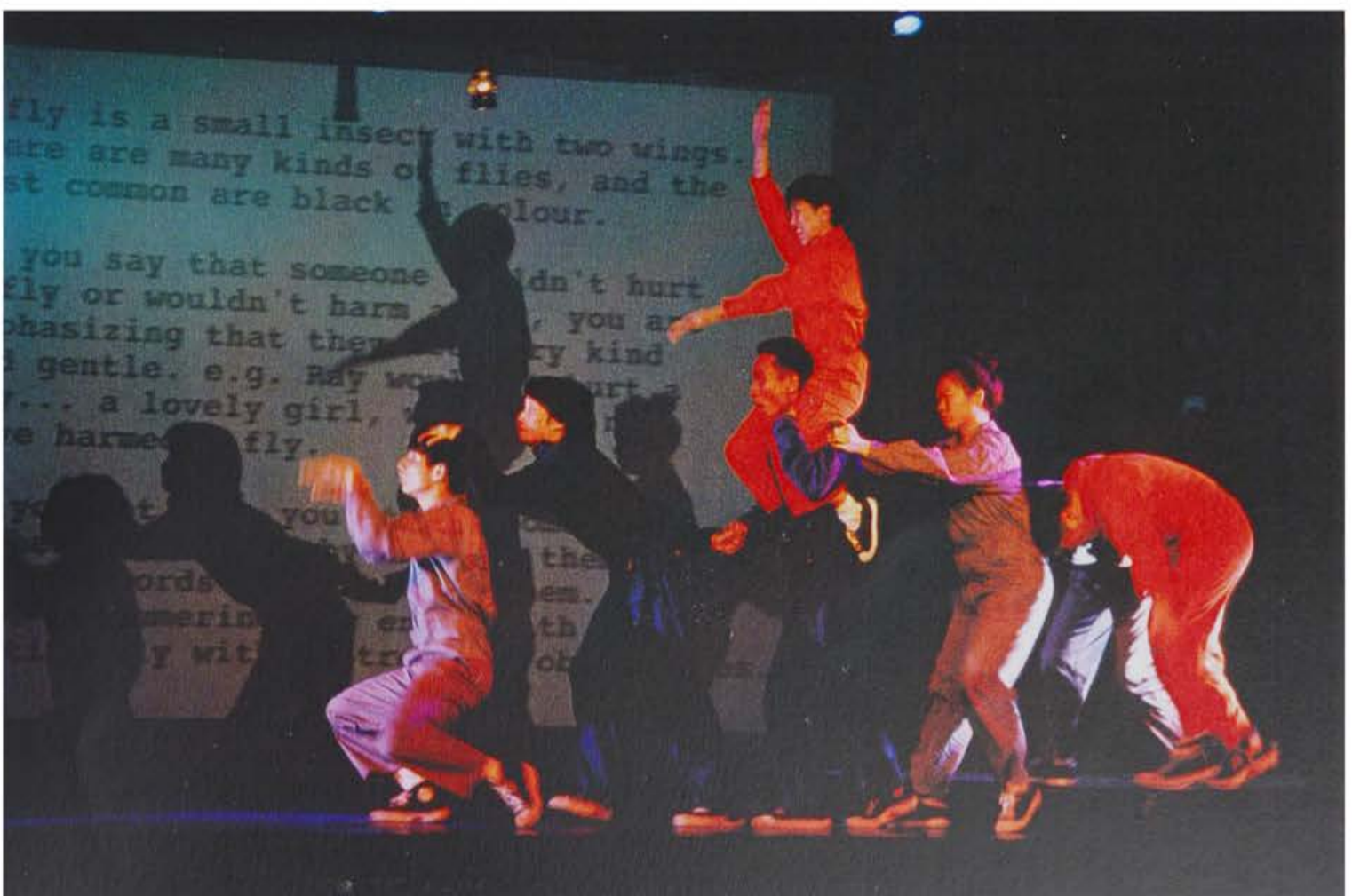
Galileo

Plate 3



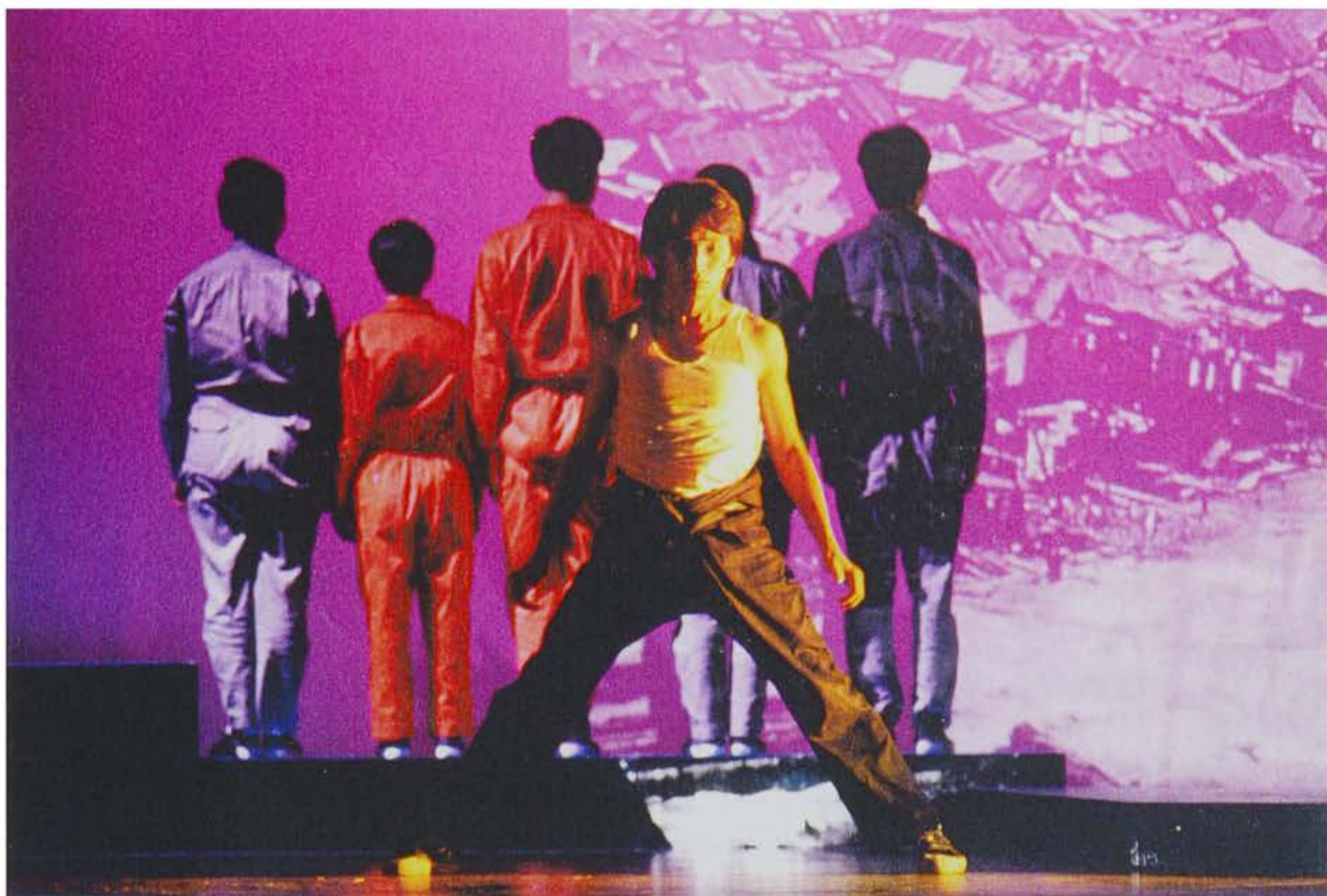
The Fly narrative : episode 1

Plate 4



The Fly narrative : episode 2

Plate 5



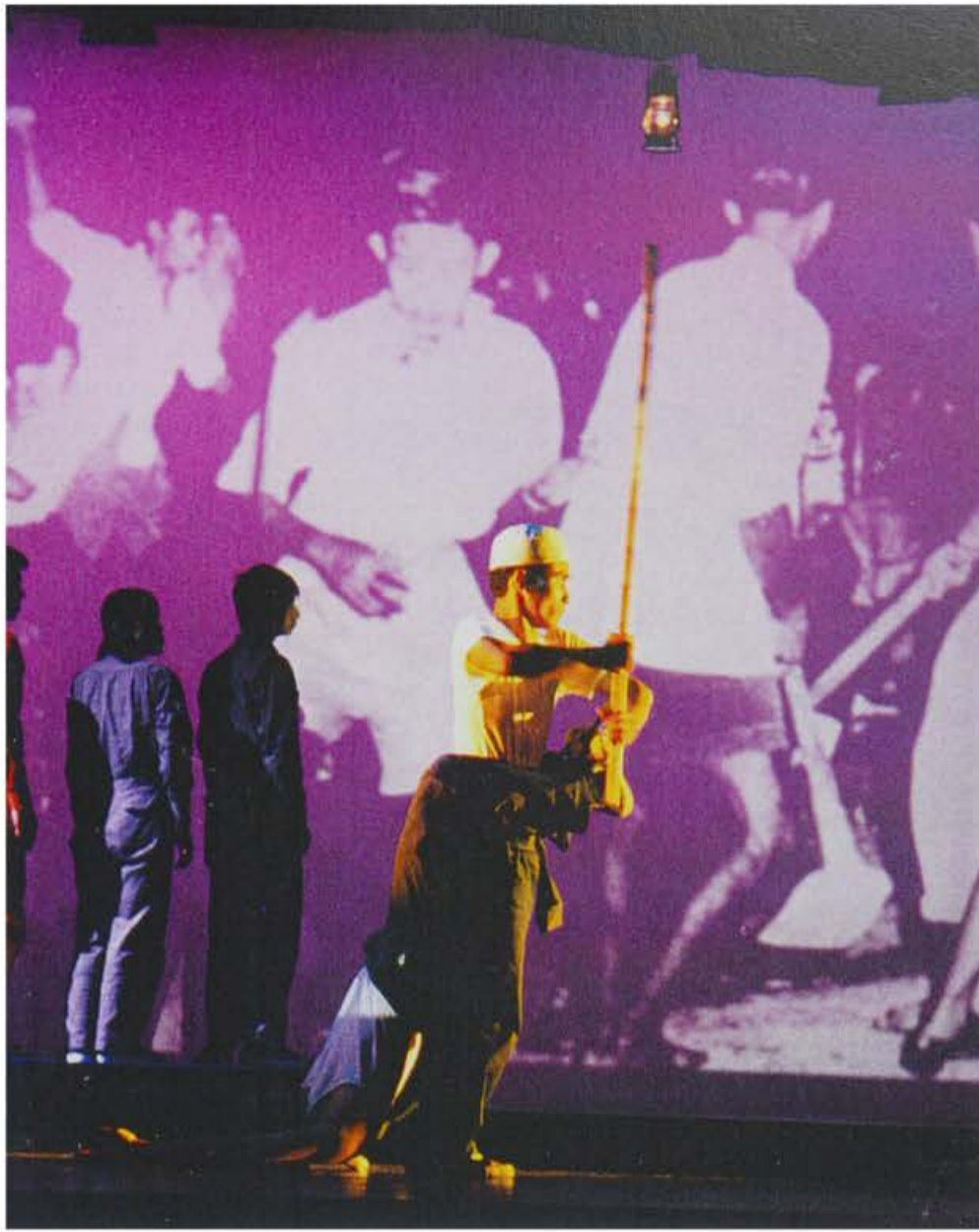
Pak Noh and Leong Chee Meng episode

Plate 6



Pak Noh and Leong Chee Meng episode

Plate 7



Pak Noh and Leong Chee Meng episode

Plate 8



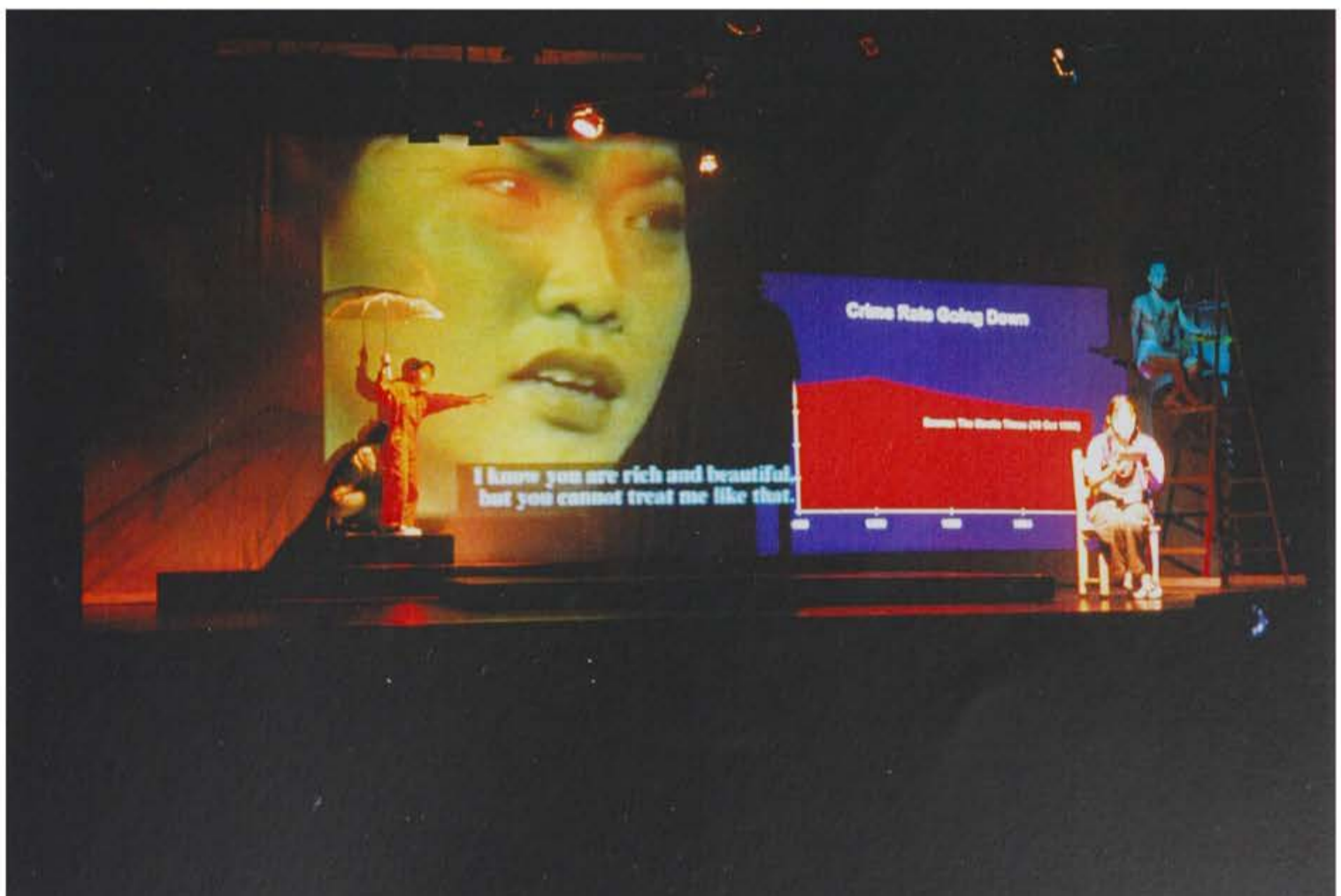
Doreen and Tutik episode

Plate 9



Ah Geok and Ah Mei episode

Plate 10



Ah Geok and Ah Mei episode

Plate 11



Ah Geok and Ah Mei episode

Plate 12



The Epilogue

**APPENDIX G**  
**NAC LETTER: EXEMPTION FROM SUBMISSION OF SCRIPTS**

Correspondence not available in the digital version of this thesis

## APPENDIX H

### SOURCE TEXTS USED IN THE WOOSTER GROUP'S *SAINT. ANTONY*

An example of the amount of source-texts used in a production is quoted here in full from Susan Cole's *Directors In Rehearsal*. It is drawn from a first-hand account of observations made on TWG's collective process of creating Frank Dell's *The Temptation of Saint Antony* (Cole, 1992:94-96). Almost all of these materials find their way into the final version of *Saint Antony*. Critic Elinor Fuchs describes *Saint Antony* to be "the most extreme experiment in intertextuality ever mounted by TWG" (Fuchs, 1988:17).

The source-texts, or "pretexts," used in the construction of *Saint Antony* proliferate throughout rehearsal and include the following materials:

(1) the story line and certain characters as well as excerpts from the dialogue of Ingmar Bergman's film, *The Magician*;

(2) Gustave Flaubert's nineteenth-century epic drama, *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*, as translated by Kitty Mrosovsky, along with selected passages from Flaubert's letters, edited by Francis Steegmuller;

(3) passages from Geraldine Cummins's book, *The Road to Immortality: Being a Description of the Life Hereafter, With Evidence of the Survival of Human Personality* (1932), in which Cummins establishes contact, through trance, with a deceased nineteenth-century writer and founder of The Society for Psychical Research;

(4) recordings and films of performances of Lenny Bruce (Frank Dell is an early pseudonym used by Lenny Bruce); excerpts from journalistic accounts of the last days of Bruce's life in the late summer of 1966;

(5) "Channel J" videotapes of the nude company improvising lines in response to an off-camera reading of Flaubert's *Saint Antony* by actress Nancy Reilly (Cable Channel J in New York featured late-night nude talks shows);

(6) Ken Kobland's film, *Flaubert Dreams of Travel But the Illness of His Mother Prevents It*, made in conjunction with TWG and inserted as a kind of interactive text in the evolving theatre piece;

(7) distillations of the Flaubert text into a series of dances choreographed by Peter Sellars and rehearsed with the actors while LeCompte, by prearrangement, was not present;

(8) such eclectic visual "texts" as a still photograph of French film-maker Georges Méliès as Satan; reproductions of Kurt Schwitters' collages and a Hieronymous Bosch painting of St. Antony flying on a frog; a book entitled *Ghosts in Photographs*, brought to rehearsal by actor Jeff Webster; eventually a reproduction of a production still showing Willem Dafoe as Jesus in Martin Scorsese's highly controversial *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which, by a remarkable coincidence, was being filmed during the latter stages of the development of TWG's *Temptation*;

(9) Georges Méliès' film, *The Devil and the Statue* (1902);

(10) a videotape of a young actress, Ursula Easton, reading lines from Flaubert's *Saint Antony*, several months before her death;

- (11) a plot-line continued from TWG's (...*Just the High Points...*) in which Frank Dell and his theatre troupe impersonate a dance company, Donna Sierra and the Del Fuegos;
- (12) TWG's own videotapes and audio tapes of the company in rehearsal as they construct, rehearse, and analyse the script (Since the actors view or listen to these tapes intermittently throughout rehearsal, the tapes become additional "source-texts" in the collaborative creation of *Temptation.*);
- (13) texts written by playwright Jim Strahs in workshop with TWG as well as excerpts from Strahs' *North Atlantic*, first performed by the company in 1984;
- (14) dialogue excerpted not from any written text but from rehearsal improvisations.

## APPENDIX I

### “ZONES” IN THE WOOSTER GROUP’S *BRACE UP!*

Below is the description of the “zones” for TWG’s *Brace Up!*, a reworking of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*. This segment is quoted from LeCompte’s writings which appeared under “POST-LITERATE” in *FELIX*, a journal of Media Arts and Communication. Volume 1. Number 3. Page 55.

Zone 1: The stage performers speak to the audience or to a “false audience” beyond the real audience. The TV performers are framed in extreme close up with at least one major feature out of frame. The TVs are occasionally placed diagonals on the stage.

Zone 2: Stage performers orient themselves on diagonals and parallels according to different floor patterns and in relationship to different props and objects (*not* according to where the audience is). The props, TV wires, and performers are periodically reorganised. The performers on TV “follow” the actions on stage with their eyes.

*“Displaying everything condemns CINEMA to cliché, obliges it to display things as everyone is in the habit of seeing them. Failing which, they would appear false or sham.”*

Zone 3: Employs the conceits of “Naturalism.” Small gestures. Performers speak “to” each other. Much of their dialogue is “overheard” or “partially obscured.” Performers are far away (the microphones have a different place.) The performers on TV are framed “full face.”

Zone 4: Upstage “live TV” corners, stage right and stage left. TVs move on tracks upstage and downstage. They swivel from side to side.

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