

Review of six shows presented in Tokyo Festival World Competition 2019

As one of the invitees to the Critics' Jury for the Tokyo Festival World Competition 2019, we were asked to derive a way of assessing six performing arts productions selected for the Festival with a set of criteria based on values which could be suitable for the 2030s.

For values for the performing arts in the 2030s

To prepare a set of values for the performing arts in the 2030s, a solid grasp of present conditions is necessary. From the outset, to judge the works selected for Tokyo Festival World Competition 2019, it is critical to not limit our thinking to geographical countries or even regions, but to recognise the dynamics and contexts of past and present colonialisms, nation-states and capitalist formations which have been dominant for roughly 300 years. Within this overarching frame, we can also be mindful of the stipulated categories of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals which include core challenges such as poverty, resources, shelter, education, employment, environmental protection and equality.

In the flow of modernity, it has been typically understood that humanity has sought control over nature and to actively engineer the Earth system so as to overcome a state of subjection to natural forces and cycles. The enormous systems engineered by humans have also helped to exceed existing planetary boundaries, however, which is now undeniably manifest in global warming and ongoing mass extinctions. In the intensifying impacts of these conditions, the following explores the kinds of meanings, perspectives and reflections which might be found in performing arts productions of the future.

By the 2030s, under intensifying pressure of the world economy amid the accelerating co-engineering of the present by humans and natural forces, the idea of 'the human' itself is changing considerably. Rather than a binary frame of 'universality/individualism' which underpins humanism, we might further extend our consciousness to include the productive recognition of our permanent and inseparable entanglement with the more-than-human. In our relative obliviousness to this relationship as we lurch from one crisis to another, a possibility remains in the many ways to blend social and public trans-local movements in the effort to shape the future. In the vein of such initiatives, artistic works which avoid the temptations of dogma while being grounded in a sense of historical and political responsibility, and which adopt a more consciously horizontal structure could provide the prototypical examples of stage productions which can support a new set of values for the performing arts in the 2030s.

Values and Scales of Artistic works

- a. Form and Style
- b. Structure and Composition
- c. Audience relationship – channel/impression/transformation
- d. Consciousness of social and historical issues facing the world (past/present/future).

Artistic Works

***Possibilities that disappear before a landscape* Spain**

With an anthropological perspective as its basis, the writer-director team for this production constructed a work comprising of a series of scenes which depict the pathetic (non-heroic) positionality of the contemporary human, focusing on the young urban European male in

particular. The central theme raised in a conference paper by the Spanish feminist novelist Sara Mesa – of global warming as a form of revenge against humans – seemed to inform the rest of the work. As opposed to a heroic or idealistic construction which promotes a utopian or ultimately triumphant narrative, it ably, if bitterly, portrayed unimpressive everyday banality in all of its human failings. While humorous, the degree to which the authors' intellectual gaze could commune with an audience in a time of acute crisis remained uncertain.

***Mea Culpa* Burkina Faso**

This was an outstanding work by director, designer and solo performer of *Mea Culpa*, Charles Nomwendé Tiendrebéogo from Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Deploying multiple skills of physical theatre including the manipulation of objects, character, dance, mask and text, the artist was able to invoke the lived conditions in contemporary society in Burkina Faso so that they could be viscerally experienced by the audience. Through the ordinary albeit highly abled functions of the human body, the protagonist transformed into a medium for the extraordinary. Using a half-mask, sound samples and various quotidian objects, rather than a nostalgic or fetishistic Grotowskian desire for spiritual transcendence, it seemed that the work conveyed how the body acts as a medium of political power in all of its corrupt realism. Demanding to know 'who gave him his independence' while sitting with us in the audience, Charles also reflexively invoked a deeper history of colonization. Although the choreography was at times hesitant, overall the audience was captivated by the work.

***Howling Girls* Australia**

Emergent from the context of decades of experimental performance in Melbourne, as stated, this wordless 'new opera' explored the theme of 'trauma' in response to the attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001. As we sat for a long period of silence in a pre-show lighting state, a pair of hands could be seen conducting through a slot in the side wall of a white box which framed the stage. Gradually immersed in darkness, we could hear the sound of a performer's exhalation and inhalation which increased in length and volume over time. Incrementally we could discern the performer, an opera singer, lying on a bed over which swept a light like a scanner. Her vocalizing was accompanied by the tones of a theremin, to the point of vibrating our tympanic ear membranes. In a sudden shift from the aural to the visual, our pupils contracted as we were besieged with the shock of the bright, white frame. Five girls wearing brown with manes running down their spines (perhaps symptomatic of 'evil' or 'witches'), all Sydney-based community performers, were led by the opera performer in a vocal crescendo as they faced us in a line from the base of the frame. I recalled Jonathon Safran Foer's novel *Extremely loud and incredibly close* (2005). In the second half, as the performers continued variations of vocalized arias while shrouded in mist with a black velvet curtain split with orange light as a backdrop, it occurred to me that if an historically impactful event is to be approached while seeking to avoid its repetition in the next generation, then yet other voices might be needed in or outside of the frame. After all, 'There's a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in' (Leonard Cohen).

***Tú Amarás/You shall love* Chile**

The prologue of this production is set in colonial South America in the 16th Century. Two Spanish prison wardens are guarding an indigenous prisoner who is being punished for his unseemly loving relations with a cow. Having established the history of 'civilisation' thematic, we are brought to the present, in which a group of doctors are assembled to convene a conference for medical practitioners. An outsider in the group is mocked for having 'rabbit ears'. In a game similar to 'truth or dare', our sympathy for the outsider is

betrayed, however, as he confesses to having killed a taxi driver for having flirted with his brother (who is gay). When the doctors attempt to expel the outsider from the Association, he refuses to leave. The commencement of the conference is postponed ‘until the Association can feel comfortable’ – a typically ambiguous solution to a moral quandary in polite society. During the curtain call, the actors held up a sign: ‘Human rights are being violated in present-day Chile’. What the production by the young artistic team may have lacked in advancing theatrical form and design, despite its reliance on the dramatic tools of text, character and realism, it made up for in an acute historical and social consciousness for present-day conditions. One scene in particular, which presented a lecturer giving a powerpoint lecture on ‘animalisation in society’, demonstrated the powerful resonance of the Chilean experience of forty years ago with the contemporary.

Big Nothing (from the east) China

Director, designer and performer Dai Chenlian brought us a highly creative and beautiful shadow play. In a world that is wholly of his own construction, he enlarged and projected images of his grandmother and Lu Xun side by side for a prolonged duration. Employing a distinctive sense of time, Dai Chenlian managed to invoke a sense of lost memory through poetic silence. As he submerged his audience in the vanished world of mist-filled canals of his grandmother’s hometown, he created the aporetic melancholia of an im/possible return to a modern Chinese city under democratic rule. Beyond fetishising a particular period and location, Dai used his skills and deep concentration to invoke the qualities of specific objects in and of themselves and the sensory experience of his dream world for the viewer. As faint aural fragments of words and sound interrupted the material flow of objects and images in play to offer us glimpses of specific context, this piece was overflowing with feeling.

Sokonaizu Japan

This production conveyed in an ingenious way the story of two sisters who little by little withdraw from society. Based on a real story from Osaka, unemployed and impoverished, the sisters slowly starve as they lose all of their material possessions, piece by piece. Before they can receive social benefits from the local government, they must sell their house and property and relentlessly search for work. As an allegory for contemporary social relations, through this experience of a vertical, gendered hierarchy in contemporary neoliberal society in Japan, we witness how individual and social connections are being stretched to breaking point. The script and direction use minimalist sound interventions and drone-like poetic speech to powerful effect. The repetitious and chanted text of bureaucratic instructions reminded this viewer of the rhythmic patterns in *The Tale of Heike* and the oppressive political structure that underlay it. Despite the elegant dramatic resolve in the protagonists’ momentary acceptance that ‘reality is all there is’ before the final curtain, finding trans-local escape from Galapagos passivity may yet prove more powerful and well overdue.

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