

Editorial Notes

Flowing Histories of People's Theater in the Inter-Asian Context

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For what is a mode of production? We provided an answer to this question, following Marx: it is a particular “combination” of elements. [...] The elements do not exist in history so that a mode of production may exist, they exist in history in a “floating” state prior to their “accumulation” and “combination,” each being the product of its own history, and none being the teleological product of the others or their history. (Althusser 2006 [1982-83])

This volume is derived from papers presented during “Where the People Are... Workshop on People's Theater in Inter-Asian Societies” held by International Center for Cultural Studies, National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University on 13-15 December 2018 in Hsinchu, Taiwan. The workshop offered a wider comparative and transnational perspective of more than 40 participants from Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Hong Kong, China, South Korea, Japan, Australia, Germany, Mozambique, and Taiwan. With the focus on advancing the praxis of people's theater in the context of inter-Asian and third-world societies, the participants comprising directors, performers, artists, and researchers are problematizing and interrogating the two-pronged conundrums, in situating the ever-evolving notion of “people” and how it continues to mutate and manifest in the form of theatrical engagement and production.

Indeed, it is almost impossible not to be drawn to the canonical text and praxis of Theater of the Oppressed initiated by Brazilian theater practitioner Augusto Boal in the 1970s in dissecting the emerging form of people's theater. The evolution of such novel theatrical forms gained critical exposure and quickly spread out to multiple geographical locations, from Latin America to Europe as

well as to Southeast Asia—all with their unique specificities and multidimensional approaches which continue to manifest beyond the crisscrossed nation-state landscape. With that, the praxis of people's theater not only limits itself merely as an aesthetic possibility but finds its way of articulating dissenting forces adopted by intergenerational activists and political actors across the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand, amongst many others.

Living under such a turbulent time of dictatorship, the praxis of Theater of the Oppressed has been strategized and explored as a means of local community mobilizations and grassroots social movement. Central to the theater praxis is to engage with solidarity actions with the local community, propagating the methods of self-learning and the empowerment of the governed. The manifestation of these combinations is prevalent, particularly in the context of PETA and Makhampom with the intertwining practice of folklore culture and community tradition as illustrated further in the book chapter.

Since the 1980s, multiple people's theater workshops organized by PETA and other groups have been fundamental in promoting the transregional collaboration and network among theater groups and activists in different localities. This dense network, which has involved participants from the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, etc., not only explores how global connections were possible beyond the nation state's framework, but is also instrumental in developing and exchanging local and global points of view in facing the tumultuous changes amidst the democratization waves.

Extending the spirit of such workshops, it is pertinent to highlight one of the most influential thematic workshops entitled "People's Theater—the Training and Trainer Cultural Workers" as mentioned by Muhammad Febriansyah and Chung Chiao in the book, is significant in galvanizing the praxis of people's theater in the region. Here, the theater troupes and activists from different backgrounds and languages were given the possibility of collaboration to facilitate their social envisions through theatrical methods. In the application process, the main inspiration is to provoke and inspire people's theater practitioners to engage in the relational departure between actors and audiences, or, the black box of theater and the real world. As quipped by Boal and resonating with other contributors in this book, people's theater is nothing but "a rehearsal for a revolution" which indicates the surge of radical imagination that continues to motivate the production and praxis of people's theater.

This book is divided into three main parts. Each part analyses a key aspect of people's theater's socio-historical formation and critical reflections within the different geographical milieu of the third world. The first part focuses on the specific localities and regional context of Southeast Asia and Japan to establish multidirectional dialogues and networking of people's theater troupes that are engaging in the democratic movement, community empowerment and leftist political struggle. Juggling between the questions of radical representations and modes of theatrical productions within the regional context, the compiled papers established the historical leitmotif of each theater group in grappling with their praxis. The second part of the book concentrates on people's theater development within Taiwan. Some specific questions are raised within the Taiwanese context to discuss the particular form of documentary theater by leftists, the aftermath of the White Terror regime and the Cold-war ideology that still dominates Taiwanese people till now, the aesthetic exploration inspired by indigenous worship culture to create a broader praxis of theater, and its entanglement as well as the possibilities of empowerment in the attempts to be applied to the community theaters in Taiwan.

Moving further in interrogating the praxis of people's theater beyond the established groups and individuals in the field, it is also one of our objectives to highlight the emergence of small-scale theater troupes in reflecting their stories and current works. Zooming in through the writings of Theater Playground SHIIM from Busan, Grass Stage from Shanghai, and independent Chinese artist Wang Chu-yu, it captures the nuances of the contemporary issues of labor, the masses, and the freedom of artistic expression in their societies. Through the text by Oz Theatre Company based in Taipei, the members introduce us to their daily efforts in theater-making and actor training methods that concern the subjectivity of participants in the theater. Apart from that, by designing the text as a self-reflective dialogue, an African theater troupe by the name of Teatro em Casa shares its experience of working with the community in the suburbs of Maputo, Mozambique.

Indeed, apart from unraveling the nuances of people's theater praxis across East Asian, Southeast Asian, and Sub-Saharan African regions, it is also our intention to document the scattered histories and reflections of those who are very much engaged in the process. By saying histories, we follow Louis Althusser's definition in his late works: "every mode of production comprises elements that are independent from each other, each resulting from its own specific history"

(Althusser, 2006). Althusser goes beyond “the [Marxist] accomplished fact” that predestines the combination of elements and reproduces them into a given structure. Rather, he examines the prime encounter of diverse “floating” elements within specific histories. The materialist history, according to this insightful philosophical thinking, should be understood upon the aleatory nature of the encounter.

Building upon the above statement, it is critical to note that it is almost impossible for any groups and practitioners in the people’s theater field to work in a silo. The vast and dense experience of each group, particularly in its forms of cooperation, negotiation and solidarity building, ultimately can be derived from its encounter with different societal strata. “The encounter may not take place, just as it may take place,” Althusser wrote. What we attempt to grasp in this book are histories full of encounters: elements that meet each other, of how people gather, which inevitably leads the happening of something.

On a practical dimension, the production of people’s theater in itself revolves around the question of resources, funding, labor, space, and audiences. However, distinct from ordinary art activities, people’s theater works also have their own critical trajectories in exploring the possibility of social and livelihood transformation, the questions from the margins to confronting the reality of unequal societies. In relation to this, how are the questions of ethics and survival being grappled with in the making of people’s theater? Here, what we attempt to illuminate is the tension that exists within “the mode of production,” particularly in the realm of people’s theater.

According to multiple articles in the book, readers might be challenged to explore the definition of people’s theater as we refuse to reduce it to any given forms and static paradigms of people’s theater. Here, it could transgress between any sorts of names; be it either in the forms of community theater, theater-in-education, forum theater, documentary theater, tent theater, or improvisational theater.... To a certain extent, even people’s theater practitioners such as Wang Molin, Wang Chu-yu, Langasan Theatre, and Theater Playground SHIIM themselves, have dabbled around and “encountered” performance art to explore further the form and aesthetics of people’s theater. Being the “poorest” form of art expression, the discipline of performance art itself requires nothing but man’s physical body with any given space they exist in completing a theatrical production. In this sense, the openness for encounters in the realms of people’s theater galvanizes the