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## Presenter Interview プレゼンター・インタビュー

Seeking new context for communicating  
the multicultural contemporary Asian experience



Tang Fu Kuen

多文化な現代アジアを  
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From his Bangkok base, Tang Fu Kuen is active as a festival curator within Asia. Born and raised in Singapore, he began as an actor before working as a critic and dramaturg, travelling back and forth in the West. Free from organizational affiliation and active as an independent curator, Tang talks about his quest for new contexts for presenting the work of contemporary Asian performance-makers.

Interviewer: Kyoko Iwaki [Journalist]

You now work as an independent curator and dramaturg based in Bangkok, but you started your career in Singapore – your home country – as an actor in TheatreWorks, established in 1985. Can you explain how you became involved in theatre?

I should first explain my formative education. At age 17, I undertook pre-university studies as a pioneer theatre studies student and proceeded as the first class of graduates at the newly-established theatre department in the National University of Singapore. We were eclectically schooled: in the Western theatre canon, spanning Greek tragedy to modern drama; in Asian theatre aesthetics including Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Ming classics and Indonesian performance anthropology; in dramaturgy and critical theory, as well as in cultural policies and intellectual property law. The training was way too heavy. In parallel, I did a double major in English, reading from Chaucer to postcolonial literature, while actively pursuing the subjects of European and Asian cinema.

In the process of overdoing such desk studies, there naturally followed a desire to learn things through physical practice. This led me to participate in Ong Keng Sen's TheatreWorks as a performer. Fresh from activities in New York, Keng Sen experimented with postmodern aesthetics, coupling it with his intercultural perspective, to investigate the collective memory of the nation, historical identities and vernacular modalities. In 1996, several young people, including myself, were invited to participate in his Flying Circus Project (FCP).

FCP was a programme that 'explored the creative expressions in Asia and beyond, looking at individual practices.' It has since been exported to various other cities in Asia, including Ho Chi Minh in 2007 and Phnom Penh in 2009. You are saying that, at the outset, it was a domestic project only open to young Singaporeans.

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Keng Sen chiefly worked with local performers who met his criteria at that time - they were mostly young, agile and intelligent. In FCP, we studied numerous expressive forms. A guru of a certain folkloric or traditional form would be invited to lecture and teach. FCP was not about mimicking others, for after processing different art forms, we created tools to subjectivize the data. One resulting project was the collaboration with Rio Kishida.

It was *Lear* written by Rio Kishida and produced by The Japan Foundation Asia Centre?

Yes. In the initial year of FCP, Japan Foundation delegates came to observe. The next year, they commissioned *Lear*, written by Kishida, with a cast of performers from across Asia. I participated in this project as a core member. Other members included, for instance, Kee Hong Low, (who was later manager of the Singapore Arts Festival and now the West Kowloon Cultural District in Hong Kong).

Anyway, I had already decided that right after the last performance of *Lear*, I would leave Singapore. Between 1992 to 1999, despite intensive intellectual training at an early age, I grew skeptical about the cerebral nature of it all. Was it OK to comprehend the Suzuki Actors Method, purely in theory, from a professor who never saw a Suzuki production? No. And, so I had to venture abroad to London and New York to encounter first-hand the textbook data in my head. At this moment, my curiosity regarding the body and movement was immense.

As a backlash to the academy, your focus shifted to the body and its practice. Were there any specific forms of artistic expression that profoundly influenced you in London and New York?

In New York, I was excited to finally witness works by the Judson Church artists and experimental mavericks like Meredith Monk. And then I encountered Viewpoints (a technique developed by Mary Overlie in the 1970s which analyzes dance through six principles: space, story, time, emotion, movement and shape). This movement-generating system was very inspiring. For the first time, I could perceive abstract scenic elements - time and space, structure and kinesthesia - in full dynamism. Currents, instabilities and transfers – processes that permeate ‘vitalism’. Today I like viewing performances for their propositions on intensities and life-flow.

Were you already starting to work as a dramaturg and a curator at that time?

No. From 1999 to 2004, I was mainly functioning as a critic. After reviewing Xavier Le Roy's *Self-Unfinished*, I began engaging in criticism, processing information and reading performance through the eyes of a critic, making sense of what I saw and conveying the experience to the public. But gradually, awakening to the structures of creation and the conditions of presentation, I got interested in the practice of the dramaturg and curator.

Observing performances in London, New York and subsequently in Berlin, I soon noted the recurring presentation of a select group of Asian ‘contemporary’ artists: Sankai Juku, Cloud Gate Dance Theatre and Dumb Type. I started to question this tendency: ‘Why?’ And what omissions are created? What can one do to fill in the gaps?’ Then

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a foreigner residing in Berlin, I was challenged by these questions to propose a difference through action. I was led into expanding my function as a dramaturg who integrates practice and theory, and also as a curator who produces and presents new practices from and within the region.

At the same time, my empathy for vanishing traditions, developed through my tertiary studies and experiences in TheatreWorks pushed me into the field of heritage conservation and finally the opportunity to work in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage office in Paris.

Because I engage in a wide range of activities and interests, many people find it hard to categorize me into a single box - they cannot read my stakes and goals. If I were a cultural purist, I would focus only on conservation. If I were keen only in new experiments, I would bypass heritage and dive into innovation. But my creed is that meanings from the past, significant to the present, form the future. There is no point in being categorical but to embrace expression and temporality, all seeming polarities that cannot be reconciled, to keep trying. How did I become so? Perhaps it is from my experience growing up in Singapore, from an identity woven through tensions between both old and new worlds.

You were born in 1972, seven years after Singapore gained its independence away from the Federation of Malaysia. Lee Kwan Yew served as the first Prime Minister for over three decades, during which he extolled multiculturalism and meritocracy, yet sometimes implementing eugenics-based policies that favored people with certain education and background. It must have been confusing for you growing up in a drastically changing country, in which everything old was thrust into the new.

Pre-independent Singapore was very unstable. Throughout the fifties and sixties, there were racial riots, colonial struggles, communist insurgency, and all. For my grandparents and parents who experienced horrific events like the Japanese occupation, they just wanted to move on by putting a lid on the past. I was born as a child of a fortunate generation – we did not have to worry about all that mess.

I was able to experience the remnants of the old world before the new government physically transformed the city. I grew up in the streets of Chinatown until I was twelve, unlike the younger generation raised in sanitized public housing. The rapid urbanization in the eighties destroyed many human values of the old world that I was a part of. At the same time, being bred in an environment that promised a better life, I was thrown into the sea of aspirations. Saddled between two worlds as a child, I am today fixated with the dialectics of old versus new.

You understood the virtues of the new and prosperous Singapore, but you were also suffocated by the fact that a cookie-cut identity was coerced on the people by the state. And so you decided to leave to work as an independent curator, rather than being affiliated to national institutions?

With the National Arts Council established in 1991, the role of art production in Singapore was to contribute to the nation-building narrative. Artistic expression, as I understand, is the voice of the individual, nurtured through critique. But, the Media

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Development Authority (MDA) continues to censor artistic expression. And through its funding policies, the state finds benign ways to control individual perspective and agency. As such, artistic creations in Singapore tend to be meek.

As playwright and former associate director of TheatreWorks, Chong Tze Chien presented *Charged* in 2010. Because the play brought into relief the covert racial conflicts that exist behind the image of a harmonious and multicultural Singapore, it received an R18 rating for 'mature content and coarse language'. Do you think the worst taboo in Singapore now is the issue of dealing with race?

I think that the biggest taboo is paternalism; that is, speaking critically about our founding father Lee Kwan Yew. Over the last 50 years of post-Independence, people who have attempted to criticize his leadership and power have been expunged from the state. The fear first cultivated through the draconian rule, then internalized within the citizens, has given rise to unique pathological syndromes in Singapore. So, what will become of the children after Daddy's death? Will they be fighting, crying, or finding ways to overrule one another? There could be days of soap opera ahead.

Your breakthrough work as a curator was *Pichet Klunchun and Myself (2005)* by Pichet Klunchun and Jérôme Bêl. This production was commissioned by you and premiered at the Bangkok Fringe Festival – a festival that you worked with then. Can you explain, firstly, why after residing in the West, you decided to move to Bangkok? Secondly, why did you pair up the two choreographers?

As mentioned, I was critical of the fact that only a select few Asian artists were presented to the public in the West. Why was this happening? Was it because other artists were not properly groomed or not yet discovered? Or, perhaps their presence was deliberately suppressed or overlooked? To find an answer to the riddle, I returned to Asia. Back first in Singapore, where I realized after six months that I could not apply my function as dramaturg, I then packed up for Bangkok.

Bangkok was an obvious option: it is close to Singapore; it is the gateway to the neighboring countries of Indochina; and it saves me two hours of flight time to Europe [laughs]. In addition, I took a full-time job in research and development at SEAMEO-SPAFA, an inter-governmental agency for regional conservation. Here, I continued my work in the heritage sector - which I had begun at UNESCO in Paris - and made good grounding in the area studies of Southeast Asia. I was quite happy but I had to give it up at a certain point, as I needed to be mobile again, not sitting in the office from nine to five.

During that time, I involved myself in the Bangkok Fringe Festival, and when I heard that Jérôme (whom I had met in Berlin) was coming to Singapore, I jumped at the opportunity and invited him to detour to Bangkok, with the offer of a carte blanche. As the rise of so-called 'non-dance' or 'conceptual dance' in Europe was not yet introduced within Asia, I was eager for Jérôme to share his logic and practice at this platform. He asked to work with a classical dancer and I immediately identified Pichet as his spar. The result of this experiment was a performance of two artists onstage in an earnest dialogue, a sparkling work realized under truly bare conditions.

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Why did it have to be Jérôme Bêl and Pichet Klunchun, and not anyone else? Were you interested in the fact that one was an extremely conceptual choreographer and the other, by contrast, was a choreographer based in traditional corporeality? What was the artistic necessity behind this matchmaking?

Jérôme is not only a contemporary choreographer; he had formal training in Angers as a dancer. Precisely because he understood the weight of the classics, he critically distanced himself from it to find a new commentary. His skepticism towards essentialism is a starting point of his practice. Pichet was also classically-trained (in Khon mask-dance drama) and had begun to question the value of blindly guarding the tradition. While Jérôme and Pichet appear to be polar opposites, they are actually connected in their critical impulse towards the idea of 'foundation'. This is a reason why the project worked so well.

As far as I know, many contemporary Asian dance pieces now being created do not necessarily base their vocabularies on traditional Asian dance forms; but rather, they construct their works mainly on the basis of Western dance knowledge. Do you wish to develop a contemporary Asian dance that bases itself on Asian bodies separate from these syncretic forms, or are you open to any form?

I am open to anything. Note, however, that dance historians would pick on what you described as 'syncretic' forms. Influences from the East played a part in the formation of early modern dance in the West, hence terms like 'Western dance knowledge' are not wholly legitimate. Conversely, cultural identities and vernacular practices in Asia, subjected under colonial intervention, have become potent constellations. Discourse on the politics of hybridity is a huge project and scholars are still mapping out and unpacking the genealogies. I caution that we cannot return to a 'nativist' point of view, an anthropological naivete that fetishizes the notion of 'origins'.

Ours is a complex world of dichotomies: old/new, past/present, East/West and local/global are conflated. To locate a trajectory within this vast spectrum is the work of the individual artist. What is sieved and what is omitted from these dense histories – the singular artist who is capable of reflexively conducting this procedure, using acute intuition and rationale, is an important artist with a position.

Put differently: an artist is strong precisely because s/he possesses a stake. A stake that you cannot live without, that underpins your core existence. A stake that enables oneself to stand strongly on stage. In contemporary life without a stake, you can get lost in layers of multi-hyphenated realities and wander vaguely with no aim or end.

You have worked with various festivals in Asia, such as the Indonesian Dance Festival, Bangkok Fringe Festival, Colombo Dance Platform and Tokyo Performing Arts Platform (TPAM). After working with these diverse institutions as a curator, would you conclude that strong contemporary Asian artistic expression can only emerge from independent artists, without any institutional baggage?

Being affiliated to a certain institution, one can get caught up in political rhetoric that belongs to others but not oneself. Agencies like the Goethe Institut and L'institut Français support many arts activities in Asia, not without the mission to propagate their canon and ideology in our midst. The Japan Foundation is a similar engine for cultural

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soft power - there is nothing wrong in that. But as long as I can, I prefer to speak only in my own autonomy, rather than for any institution, and work only with artists who share similar visions. Understand that I do not begrudge any cultural institution. In fact, we have to keep collaborating, negotiating and failing in order to become better and wiser. Institutional and independent workers need each other.

Why did you decide to work as a curator for the inaugural Colombo Dance Platform (2010) in Sri Lanka, which was organized by the Goethe Institut?

I was quite hesitant when the offer came. Why did the Germans choose me, a Singaporean, who had never been to Sri Lanka? Is there something I could do, which the Germans could not? I figured that perhaps because of my shape-shifting identity, I could best function as a mediator, a channel of empathy with and for Sri Lankan artists, to connect the local to the local and then to the world.

My task at hand was evident: to survey the Sri Lankan dance situation by first mapping the scene. A simple enough mission which I thought – instead of formulating conceptual frameworks or focusing on specific genres - was the necessary procedure for a pilot platform. I travelled to studios to meet various performance and folkloric practitioners from established companies, as well as independent practitioners who were involved not only in dance but also other forms of physical expression. Eventually, I identified practices that were mature enough to stand by themselves to face the public. Keng Sen curated the following edition with a more thematic approach, and in the third edition, Anna Wagner (current dance curator of Mousonturm) proposed yet a different perspective.

Following what you have said, is it correct to say that your primary criteria as a curator lies in the aesthetic level of the artwork, whether or not the work has reached a certain maturity?

No. My criterion is whether the production can be relativized into different contexts. When I am hired as a curator, I ask: What are the expectations from the organizers? What are the urgent issues in the host country? What happens to a work when it is dislocated? What are the politics behind the 'act of looking'? These and many other questions influence how I select the artists. In the case of Colombo Dance Platform, for instance, I decided to choose some artists who were still rough on the edges. The platform challenged them to the next level of achievement, and that was the push that the local scene needed.

As a curator, I always seek lines of relations. I draw up a draft of lines and discern a web of meanings that could fit into the context and location of the festival. Sometimes the meanings are proposed by the artists whose practice I admire. Sometimes nothing matches but the lines may bring us into another definition and positive risk. Often the lines are misinterpreted by the spectators – but it is my role to draw the lines clearly enough to protect the integrity of the artist and the art work. This, to me, is a key obligation.

For TPAM held in February 2015, you have chosen three performance artists: Eko Supriyanto (Indonesia), Melati Suryodarmo (Indonesia/Germany) and Eisa Jocson

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(Philippines). Can you explain the rationale underpinning the selections?

All three performance-makers have a vested belief in the power of the body for affecting spectatorship. They consciously develop a relation with the audience through a moving body whose interiority exudes 'rasa'. Here, flesh is not a merely conceptual vessel: it transmits 'sentiments' both felt and lived. In their ontological questioning, notions of 'spirituality' for self-realization are not altogether abandoned.

More specifically, working performatively on corporeality and presence, Eisa and Melati propose to disrupt gendered embodiments and cultural distinctions. Turning on 'macho dance', typically performed by men for both men and women in Filipino night-clubs, Eisa uses her body as a primary medium to destabilize the making and gaze of masculinity and femininity that are economically classed. Melati exposes her history of acquiring cross-cultural embodiments, in which her physical body has become a container of many selves and memories, a 'borrowed' entity that is as good as what it can recall.

Just like you are now living a multifarious reality, travelling between cities?

Involving constant change, the identity and identifications of 'contemporary Asian' will not be vertically accumulated but horizontally spread. I guess you could say I am a 'contemporary subject' - my itinerant life is a sum of contemporary Asian selfhood. This is a conclusion for now [laughs]. I should also add that I am also always a work-in-progress.