

Editorial: Many Voices

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In February of this year, I was fortunate to attend Bodies in/and Asian Theatres, a regional conference of the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR, the scholarly organization with which this journal is affiliated). It was held at the University of the Philippines Diliman under the aegis of the IFTR Asian Theatre working group. Toward the end of a plenary panel on contemporary South East Asian dance on the final day, a debate arose over the work of one of the speakers, Eisa Jocson.¹ A dancer and choreographer, Jocson's work explores the aesthetics of local and transnational performative labour, and is often based on forms she learns from Filipinos working in the entertainment industry. For example, *Macho Dancer* (2013) is based on a distinctive style of erotic male nightclub performance, *Host* (2015) on the work of Filipinas in Japanese hostess clubs, and the *HAPPYLAND* series (2017) on the high number of Filipinos employed at the Hong Kong Disneyland. In response to her presentation on these and other works, some scholars from the Philippines asked Jocson, who mainly performs in Manila and on the international contemporary performance circuit, why she did not tour nationally. After all, they reasoned, since Jocson's performances are inspired by the work of entertainers who often come from regional cities and rural areas, is it not right to present the work 'back' to such a workforce and their communities? Such questions are, of course, complex and loaded. In so far as Jocson's performances address the exploitation of Filipino entertainers' affective labour, is there any risk that Jocson compounds that exploitation for her own benefit? And in so far as those performances explore the choreographies of entertainment capital and commodified desire, should Filipino audiences not be informed and perhaps educated about such things? Jocson countered that while wider local exposure for her work was desirable, it was wrong to presume that it could readily be presented in such circumstances. She makes her work within a specific critical and discursive context, she explained, and as part of a long-term thematic and aesthetic enquiry. To present it outside such contexts would benefit neither the audience, nor the artist, nor the work. If anything, she seemed to be suggesting, the work is not made for the producers of such performance forms, but for their consumers, and those who elsewhere participate in and benefit from such economies. She recounted making the 'mistake' of asking the owners of a 'macho dancer' nightclub if she could perform *Macho Dancer* there, as part of their regular line-up, late at night. They offered her an early slot, so as not to disrupt business as usual.

Aspects of the debate were, themselves, locally specific. The highly centralized place of Manila in the political, economic and cultural life of an otherwise diverse and sprawling archipelago lay in the background of the discussion. A long history of left-wing activist scholarship, explicitly invested in the struggles of the urban and rural poor,

here came up against an apparently metropolitan, cosmopolitan, even elitist perspective. The individual trajectory of a singular artist whose work is formally and conceptually distinctive was being held to account against an approach to performance that is more often collectivist, and built around a populist, representational aesthetics of advocacy. However, in the context of the conference, the debate also touched on themes whose significance outstrips those concerning artistic production in the Philippines – themes that are germane to the mission of this journal, and that play out in a variety of different ways in the articles contained in this issue.

One is the contribution that an international critical discourse can make to the practice and interpretation of performances. I imagine I am not alone in periodically wondering what good my research is. It was therefore heartening to hear Jocson underscore the contribution that complex ideas make both to the creation and to the reception of her work. Such contexts vary, of course, and it is tempting to presume that such discourses circulate much more readily through the rarefied air of contemporary performance festivals than elsewhere. But Samer Al-Saber provides an immediate corrective to this in his ‘Jerusalem’s *Roses and Jasmine*: A Resistant Ventriloquism against a Racialized Orientalism’. The starting point for Al-Saber’s detailed analysis of *Roses and Jasmine*, by the late French-Egyptian writer and director Adel Hakim (1953–2017), is the controversy it aroused when performed at the Palestinian National Theatre in Jerusalem in June 2015. A multi-generational tale stretching from the 1940s to the 1980s, the play controversially featured Arab actors playing a range of Jewish roles. Not for two decades, writes Al-Saber, ‘had a play stirred such controversy, layered public discourse, and opposing viewpoints in the Palestinian performing arts’, and his article presents a nuanced and sustained enquiry into the reasons. Moreover, as he proceeds through a discussion of the legacies of orientalist representations of Arabs, the difficult stakes in portraying Jewish characters, and the delicate politics of representing Jewish historical suffering on the Palestinian stage, there is no let-up in the debates. A co-production with a Paris theatre, the creative process was an international one that added further complexity to debates amongst the creative team over how to tell the story of the play, and what identifications to invite from their diverse audiences. Al-Saber himself offers both an analysis of the various positions adopted by artists, critics and audiences, and an interpretation of his own that emphasizes tension between the underlying aesthetic logic of the play and the conditions of its presentation. All in all, the article attests to the role of critical debate – and indeed dispute – in working through some of the complexities of theatrical representation and the challenges of empathy in fraught circumstances.

Kate Elswit’s ‘Performing Anti-nationalism: Solidarity, Glitter and No-Borders Politics with the *Europa Europa* Cabaret’ also testifies to how critical concepts inform artistic creation. As Elswit explains, *Europa Europa* was conceived by its writer and director, Nasim Aghili, as an ‘anti-nationalist cabaret’ that began with a letter to the other collaborators – including well-known Swedish electronic music duo The Knife – that outlined a queer-feminist manifesto for political performance addressing migration policy in the European context. Elswit aligns this project with a growing interest among thinkers and artists in imagining – and agitating for – the dissolution of national boundaries. Elswit works through the aesthetics of *Europa Europa*, as well

as its presentation in a variety of contexts, to consider what kind of contribution such performances might make to foster what she calls ‘anti-national subjectivities’. From a scholarly perspective, this involves close analysis of specific moments of performance, an elaboration of the circumstances surrounding the work, and historicization of the longer European history of cabaret. Throughout, however, Elswit remains in dialogue with the artists themselves, based on conversations, interviews and a roundtable she organized with them at the Performance Studies international (PSi) conference in Hamburg in 2017.

A second theme arising from the debate over Jocson’s work at the IFTR conference in UP Diliman was somewhat in contrast to the first, and concerns the claims of the local in international contexts. This can work in any number of ways. In my own experience, the power of Jocson’s work derives from how closely it observes the apparently generic choreographies of affective labour and industrialized entertainment as they are enacted by Filipino bodies. In ‘Occupying Las Ramblas: Ocaña’s Political Performances in Spain’s Democratic Transition’, David Rodríguez-Solás considers the work of another artist, of an earlier generation, who placed the body at the centre of competing discourses over gender, sexuality and national identity. José Pérez Ocaña (1947–83) was a Spanish performer and provocateur whose interventions into a variety of public spaces, from the streets of Barcelona, to gay pride marches and anarchist music concerts, often led to ambivalent and conflicted responses from spectators. Rodríguez-Solás picks up on this ambivalence to reflect on how Ocaña has been remembered and interpreted in the decades following his death. He notes the significant role that a documentary by Ventura Pons, *Ocaña, retrat intermitent* (Ocaña, an Intermittent Portrait) (1977), has played in these accounts, and argues that closer attention to Ocaña’s performances reveals a different way of thinking about his legacy. In particular, Rodríguez-Solás is concerned with the ways Ocaña has been absorbed into a dominant narrative of transition from the Franco period to democracy. A reassessment of Ocaña’s work may be timely as a means of thinking differently about the past that has brought Spain to its recent democratic crises.

While Rodríguez-Solás focuses on the diverse local investments in the body and memory of an artist within a national frame, Margaret Litvin and Johanna Sellman explore the complexities of *self*-positioning when what comprises the local is marked by an international sensibility born of displacement. In ‘An Icy Heaven: Arab Migration on Contemporary Nordic Stages’, Litvin and Sellman consider how a number of playwrights – Jonas Hassen Khemiri, Karim Rashed, Hassan Blasim and Anders Lustgarten – have responded to the theme of migration in plays staged mainly in Sweden and Finland. In part, the range of work produced reflects the diverse experiences of the authors themselves: Lustgarten is British, Khemiri is Swedish and Rashed and Blasim are Iraqi migrants to Sweden and Finland respectively. As such, Litvin and Sellman demonstrate how the resulting work addresses, as they put it, ‘a politics of representing migration that is at once European, Arab, global and particular to Swedish and Finnish spheres of culture’. In order to manage such a multifaceted enterprise, the authors focus on how Rashed and Blasim’s work negotiates three traps that migrant writers, particularly of Arab origin, can easily fall foul of: ‘the audience expectations of

biographical voyeurism, orientalism and the allegory of collective worthiness'. Litvin and Sellman range widely in their discussion across the details of the plays, and also questions of production, including casting and even the positions and attitudes of commissioning venues. In so doing, they demonstrate that the 'traps' that await migrant writers may lie as much outside the theatres as onstage, and that avoiding them requires no little ingenuity, but that the results when successful are fascinating and provocative.

A third and final issue arising from the debate over Jocson's work in Manila concerns the relationship between locally engaged scholarly activism and international address. As the scope of representation in the IFTR regional symposium, and indeed in the pages of this journal, demonstrates, performance scholarship often circulates through international networks, even when the work discussed speaks of, from and to the locality in which it is practised. But the questions about Jocson's transnational practice arose out of circumstances where the situation is reversed: they came from scholars with powerful local commitments. In Jazmin Llana's 'Sugar Overflows and Teatro Obrero's Escalante Story' we find a similar dynamic at work. The context of the enquiry is distinctively local. Every year, Teatro Obrero, a worker's theatre company, restages a massacre that took place in the sugar cane town of Escalante, on the Philippine island of Negros, in 1985 under the Marcos regime. Drawing on a distinctive agit-prop aesthetic that can look, to the outside eye, quite dated, the re-enactment gathers workers from the surrounding sugar cane plantations, and provides an opportunity to reaffirm their revolutionary political commitments. Llana's paper is an expression of her own perplexity in the face of this event. She shares many of those commitments, her own political consciousness having been forged in the ferment of the 1970s and 1980s out of which Teatro Obrero emerged. As an activist, she has, herself, brought other Filipino artists to participate in the re-enactment. Yet, as a theatre scholar, she is challenged to articulate the political efficacy of a performance that might otherwise be written off as a museum piece. Ultimately, she finds its value precisely in its militant commitment to staying the same. Llana recounts her own observations of the performance over the past three years, as the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte has changed from one that many workers saw as promising to one where the spectre of a return to the Marcos years looms large. She finds in it a testament to the long history of exploitation by the sugar barons of Negros, and a resource for assessing the current political state of play in the country.

The distinctive aesthetics of Jocson's work and the local conditions and performance practices described in Llana's article appear a world apart. Yet they are centrally concerned with the same theme: what Jocson bluntly describes as 'the economic body', particularly in a Philippine context. There is no reason why the kind of work Jocson does cannot broaden its address. The more interesting question is what would need to change, both in the practice and in the conditions of its performance and reception, for that to happen with integrity. The picture that emerges in this issue of *Theatre Research International* of how practices and ideas circulate and inform each other evinces the possibilities and challenges of such a project. This is a particularly voluble issue of the journal. Reading it through, we hear many voices: they are raised in anger and indignation; they speak of vastly complex histories and personal experiences; they debate and deliberate. And

through it all, we hear the voices of our authors: marshalling, facilitating, reflecting and interpreting; speaking to you, so you might now, as a pop act of my youth once sang, add your voice to the sound of the crowd.

NOTE

- 1 My sincere thanks to Sir Anril Tiatco and his colleagues at UP Diliman for organizing the event, and for providing a written summary of the discussion.