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REORIENTING THE ORIENT:
AN EXAMINATION OF ASIAN INFLUENCE ON THE INTERCULTURAL THEATRE

LEAH WOHR

A DEPARTMENT HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE
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Reorienting the Orient:
An Examination of Asian Influence on the Intercultural Theatre

Leah Woehr

Introduction

Nestled within the hills of the province of Rieti, twenty-five miles outside of Rome is a small medieval town called Fara in Sabina. It is difficult to locate for the common traveler, requiring some investigation into the local bus system or the kindness of a resident who is willing to drive the steep winding roads leading up to its stone arches. Fara in Sabina is quiet, peaceful, and residentially sparse for the majority of the year, as many of its residents only live there during their vacation months. Yet once a year, Fara in Sabina comes alive with the energy of artists, actors, teachers, and students alike who in the mornings, walk the streets in a procession of song and at night, stay up dancing and drinking Peronis until four o'clock, later to wake up at eight and do it all again. Once a year, Fara in Sabina is home to Teatro Potlach's Festival Laboratorio Interculturale di Pratiche Teatrali (FLIPT) and transforms into an oasis for the Dionysian spirit.

FLIPT is a "pedagogical intercultural project" that started in 2000 and was organized by international theatre company, Teatro Potlach. FLIPT came into being through cooperation with Eugenio Barba's ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) and three universities in Rome: La Sapienza, Roma Tre, and Tor Vergata. Led by theatre artists Pino di Buduo, Daniela Regnoli, and Nathalie Mentha, Teatro Potlach's FLIPT is a two-week festival of workshops, performances, and classes taught by theatre masters from around the world. Its participants include a radically diverse international crew of theatre artists who all come together to expand their theatrical practice. The purpose of the festival is to create a cultural event that encourages collaboration amongst theatre artists from around the world by introducing new languages of theatrical performance. A large part of FLIPT is the creation of performance, which both

stimulates “international and local growth,” but also expands the minds of its audience, including the citizens of Fara Sabina, who Teatro Potlach is committed to serving.

I was a participant in the FLIPT Summer 2019 session, where I practiced and performed among artists from sixteen different countries. I was a representative from the ever-exotic state of Texas and collaborated with actors from places like Italy, Greenland, Iran, China, and India, among many others. While at FLIPT, I was able to learn what it means to create work that is truly intercultural by sharing amongst traditions. I saw the ways this happened organically, like when all of the participants stood outside one night with a guitar and shared songs from Greece, the United States, Italy, and Spain. Another fond memory was when the theatre company from India, Fanatika, performed a song and dance and invited everyone to join them; we all danced together in a circle and joyfully stumbled over our own feet.

While participating in FLIPT, I also learned what it looks like to graft a cultural tradition onto another. One of the performances at the festival was called *Il Filo Sospeso* or *Suspended Thread*, featuring Japanese kamagata-mai dancer Keinn Yoshimura and Swiss actress Nathalie Mentha. In this production, two different modes of performance blended together while accentuating each actors’ artistic backgrounds; the fluidity and musicality of Nathalie’s speech intertwined with Keinn’s deliberate, graceful movements. *Il Filo Sospeso* demonstrated the ways that artists from different cultural traditions can collaborate with one another and create a dynamic performance that inspires new possibilities for theatre.

FLIPT introduced me to the potentiality of the intercultural theatre and the enrichment an actor can find from expanding the bounds of their performance tradition. Sharing cultural traditions creates the opportunity for camaraderie, building relationships, and creating something new. Yet, an actor must be aware of the ways in which they are sharing cultures, as not to steal

or appropriate. It should be an organic process that honors and interweaves different traditions. Creating cross-cultural performance is similar to the agricultural process of root grafting, in which the roots of one plant are carefully grafted onto the roots of another to form a new entity. In the intercultural theatre, the tradition from one culture is joined with that of a different culture to create a compelling fusion of performance. In order for an actor to do this, they must understand their own roots first. Once the actor is grounded in their own cultural tradition, they can grow something new.

“Re-Orienting the Orient: An Examination of Asian Influence on the Intercultural Theatre” explores both grafting and rootedness. In the first chapter, I talk about the development of the intercultural theatre, and how its evolution was influenced by European directors’ engagement with Asian theatre traditions. I delve into questions about imperialism and displacement--harmful modes of engagement that perpetuate Euro-centric attitudes. Through the examination of European interactions with Asian theatre, I tease out how understanding intercultural theatre by way of root grafting may provide a promising avenue for theatrical practice.

In the second chapter, I explore cultural rootedness by looking at the Asian American theatre. I discuss how the Asian American theatre has used intercultural identity as an impetus for creating performance. I also look at the ways that this theatre has developed as a result of imperialist attitudes that were discussed in the first chapter, thus forging a connection between both parts of my thesis through histories of exoticism.

My experience at FLIPT allowed me to befriend and collaborate with a slew of artists that not only taught me what it means to create beyond my cultural bounds, but how I can grow my artistic practice by exploring my own roots. I hope that by engaging with the many facets of

the intercultural theatre--its rewards, pitfalls, and nuances--I will contribute to the continuous journey of creating art that connects people from all parts of the world.

**The Exotic, The Essential, The Embarrassing:
Western Encounters With Eastern Theatre**

Scholars have attributed “The Orient” as a major source of inspiration for theatre artists of the twentieth century. Western directors such as Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, and Eugenio Barba have praised Asian performance traditions for their ability to evoke an essentially theatrical ethos. Despite Western fascination with Asian theatre, examining the discourse of these intercultural encounters reveals an imperialistic relationship between these two spheres. In this chapter, I will examine the ways in which Western twentieth century theatre artists, such as Artaud, Brecht, and Barba, have adopted Asian theatre techniques into their practices. I will look at these encounters in relation to displacement and underlying Orientalist attitudes, while placing particular pressure on how Eugenio Barba has used encounters with the East to construct a new form of intercultural theatre that models a practice akin to root grafting. In assessing the dynamic between these Western twentieth-century theatre artists and “the Orient,” I strive to reimagine an intercultural theatre reflective of generosity and genuine exchange.

Beware of Orientalism

The history of Orientalism is one of asserted power. Orientalism operates by “othering” an Asian entity through exoticization and establishing a power disparity between normative Western culture and foreign Eastern culture. Edward Said’s acclaimed text, *Orientalism*, describes the West’s patronizing relationship with the East--the East as defined by societies and peoples living in North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Said’s conception of Orientalism derives from the events based on a “particular closeness” between Britain, France, and the Orient, which until the early nineteenth century meant India and the Bible lands (Said 4). Yet,

Said acknowledges that power differences between East and West have existed as far back as the Greeks, citing Aeschylus's *The Persians* and Euripides' *The Bacchae* as examples of Asian exoticism within Western consciousness. In *The Persians*, Aeschylus conveys the disaster felt by the Persians when they learned that their army--led by King Xerxes--was destroyed by the Greeks. The chorus sings:

Now all Asia's land
Moans in emptiness
Xerxes led forth, oh, oh!
Xerxes destroyed, woe woe!
Xerxes' plans have all miscarried
In ships of the seas.
Why did Darius then
Bring no harm to his men
When he led them into battle,
That beloved leader of men from Susa? (Aeschylus 73-4)

Aeschylus's text demonstrates how Asia speaks through European imagination, which is depicted as a defeated "other" land. Said notes, "To Asia are given the feelings of emptiness, loss, and disaster that seem thereafter to reward Oriental challenges to the West; and also, the lament that in some glorious past Asia fared better, was itself victorious over Europe" (56). The same thought is presented in *The Bacchae*, which Said describes as "the most Asiatic of all the Attic dramas." Dionysus is portrayed as strongly connected with his Asian origins and mysteries of the Orient, but Pentheus, king of Thebes, fails to recognize his power and is therefore punished. The play ends with recognition of the eccentric Dionysus's power (56). Euripides

contrasts the East and West through the sternness with which Pentheus rejects Dionysus. Said includes both *The Persians* and *The Bacchae* in his discussion of Orientalism in order to contextualize the historical divide between East and West, which existed long before British and French colonialism.

Yet Said claims that the term “Orientalism” is not about defining the qualities of the East; it is about Western dominance. Orientalist practice reinforces and is reinforced by the idea that Europe commands the majority of Earth’s surface. Because of the West’s innate geographic sovereignty, European subjectivity is deemed as not only as strong, but the default. In their position of normativity, Europeans have the authority to declare what lands under their realm are “other,” ascribe value to them and their cultural components, and dismiss aspects of these cultures that are believed to be strange or not profitable. Said states

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient--dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and have authority over the Orient (3).

Said describes the Western perspective of this phenomenon as a machine rooted in a seat of power that extends towards the East and extracts goods, knowledge, and “human material” to later be converted into power for the West (44). The Orientalist mentality feeds the affirmation of “Occidental” authority, whose military, intellectual, economic strength is championed over the weakness of Eastern civilization. This mindset has lent itself to colonial practices, in which Asia has been viewed as a bounty from which materials can be extracted and capitalized.

Viewing the East as a source of cultural goods presents a paradox within the relationship between the supposedly strong West and the weak East. Orientalist practice is based on the West both idealizing the Orient and looking upon it with condescension. In extracting materials from this exotic land, they recognize the value of these products. Yet the West regards these raw materials to be in need of processing--only taking what is commercially viable and leaving out the parts that do not meet Western standards. Cultural products from the East are dismembered; the items of value are isolated and taken from the whole. These practices of condescension and dismemberment can be seen in the development of the intercultural theatre as it grew alongside European-Asian exchange in the twentieth century.

Early Western Encounters With Asian Theatre

The first interactions between Western theatre artists and Asian theatre traditions were marked by misinterpretations and judgements tainted by a Western lens. The West first came into contact with Asian theatre in the first half of the 1700s by way of Chinese opera. Audiences that witnessed these performances reacted with scathing reviews. According to Min Tian's chapter, "From the Neo-Classical to the Early Avant-Garde," Voltaire went as far to describe this theatre as "primitive and barbarian," a judgement riddled with Orientalist ideology, whereby the Eastern culture is perceived as weak and uncivilized ("From the Neo-Classical" 20). Voltaire adds that the lengthy nature of the Chinese theatre does not meet his tastes, saying, "The action [of the Chinese play] lasts five and twenty years, as in some of the monstrous farces of Shakespeare and Lope de Vega, which are called tragedies, though they are nothing but a heap of incredible stories" (Voltaire 178). In examining Voltaire's experience with the Chinese theatre,

Min Tian argues that the artist had great respect for Chinese culture itself, but not its theatrical forms.

Reactions to Chinese theatre among European audiences were mixed; some dismissed it as unsophisticated while others found that Chinese theatre closely aligned with Aristotelian dramatic structure. French literary critic Ferdinand Brunetière held great disdain for this theatre form, writing, “Between our theatre and the Chinese theatre the only difference which I think real...is the difference between the babbling of an infant and the speech of a grown man” (Brunetière 219). Brunetière viewed the Chinese theatre with condescension, believing this form to be far less refined than that of European theatre. Other critics were pleasantly surprised by the Chinese theatre, because they recognized neo-classical structural elements within this form. In English writer Richard Hurd’s commentary on the Chinese play *Zhaoshi gu'er* (The Orphan of Zhao), Hurd finds that the Chinese tragedy observed the “essential” principles of unity and concentration and action with “a degree of exactness,” that “Aristotle himself demands.” Hurd recognizes the play’s “proper defects” while comparing it to Sophocles’s *Electra* yet states that, despite its minor faults, “...the poet was not unacquainted with what is most essential to dramatic method” (Hurd 221-32). The criticisms of Chinese theatre by Brunetière and Hurd are reflective of European ethnocentrism, whereby their conception of theatrical practice was thought to be the default. European audiences were not equipped to view performances that were outside their frame of reference. The “barbarism” of Chinese actors and the callowness of their performance served as justification for Chinese theatre to be dismissed and as a result, wholly misunderstood by Western audiences. Because of this ubiquitous misunderstanding of Chinese theatre and audiences’ stubborn Eurocentric attitudes, Asian performance traditions were met by othering and ambivalence among the West in the eighteenth century.

Attitudes towards the East improved in the twentieth century as a result of increased interaction between Asia, the United States, and Europe. Western nations began recognizing Asian countries as opportunities for intellectual and cultural enrichment, even viewing them as destinations for tourism. While colonialism still endured, the twentieth century marked a shift from attitudes of othering to attitudes of desire. According to James Brandon's article "A New World: Asian Theatre in the West Today," the world experienced an international regrouping following both world wars, yielding an increased interest in exploring cultures beyond one's sphere. While World War I peaked American interest in Europe, World War II expanded the West's cultural horizons to the East, primarily due to America's large-scale involvement in Asia (Brandon 25). This intermingling of nations was evidenced by the emergence of Fulbright exchanges, international teaching, and jet-set tourism that brought Asian cultures to the West. These new avenues for cultural exchange created a welcoming space for East-West theatre encounters, which experienced a major uptick in the 1920s and 30s. With a greater number of expatriates living and writing in Asia and the emergence of Asian troupes touring in the United States and Europe, audiences and theatre practitioners had the opportunity to experience Asian forms such as Chinese opera, Japanese kabuki, Cambodian classical dance, and Balinese dance drama (Brandon 30). Europe in particular experienced a revival of interest in Asian theatre forms, marking a positive development of attitudes towards theatre once regarded as "primitive and barbarian."

As the West turned their attention to the East, so continued the European trend for "all things Chinese and Japanese." Interest in Asian products in the twentieth century was reminiscent of the nineteenth century Euro-American mania for Japanese goods, known as *japonisme*. Christopher Bush's chapter "Unpacking the Present: The Floating World of French

Modernity” describes that this movement began in Paris, and was marked by the belief that Japan was a distillation of aesthetic purity and “the autochthonous, pre-industrial, pre-modern cultural expression of a *people*---and a rival source of commodities that might provide valuable lessons for how to become a successful modern *nation*” (Bush 54). Twentieth-century cross cultural exchange reflected a similar desire for Asian materials, thus creating a flourishing market of material and artistic exchange with goods such as woodblock prints, scroll paintings, porcelain, cloth, and other decorative items (Brandon 30-31). Though this international market placed Asian and European cultures in conversation with each other, the exchange was steeped in cultural commodification. Artistic and cultural materials coming from Asia were turned into products that were packaged and procured by European consumers--all in the name of trend.

Theatre artists Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht participated in the *japonisme*-esque frenzy through their experiences with the Asian theatre troupes that toured through Europe in the 1920s and 30s. These troupes were representative of how cultural products such as performance traditions were commodified by being packaged for transportation among European audiences. They brought traditions such as Chinese opera, Japanese kabuki, Cambodian classical dance, and Balinese dance drama to the European stage. Chinese actor Mei Lanfang was a particularly outstanding performer in this international tour of Asian performance. According to Brandon, Mei’s work so impressed artists like Eisenstein, Meyerhold, and Brecht that he became an icon of Asian performance for European theatre (Brandon 30). Mei Lanfang served as a link between Eastern and Western performance; the actor engaged with theatre artists like Brecht and was representative of the possibilities within Asian performance. Though touring Asian performance groups demonstrated the underlying cultural commodification within international exchange, they ultimately served as delegates for the Asian theatre. Fascination with this form marked a

shift from the scathing Eurocentric criticism of the eighteenth century to a new possibility for theatrical practice in Europe in the twentieth century.

For artists like Brecht and Artaud (and later Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba), Asian theatre was a major source of inspiration for developing their artistic practices. European theatre artists praised Asian performers' highly stylized speech and movement, the use of music and dance, and the liminality of space and time created in these performances. In his chapter "Repetition and Revolution: Theatre Anthropology after Brecht," Johannes Birringer describes the appeal of Asian performance traditions, saying:

The "boundedness" of highly developed visual codes and performance techniques (gesture, movement, dance, chant, declamation, song, rhythmic and emotional tonalities, focalization, narrative gestus, makeup, masking, costuming, etc.) in Asian theatre, for example, offers a particularly interesting point of departure from which formalism and realism, and the contextual reception of "the real" through codified abstractions, can be studied beyond the conventional Western perceptions of psychological realism in acting and the interpretive separation or opposition between text/narrative and its theatrical representation (Biringner 150-151).

European theatre professionals were also attracted to the emphasis on the performer, rather than the director or the playwright. In Asian theatre traditions such as Chinese opera, Kathakali, and Balinese dance, the codified movements as executed by the skillful performer serves as the organizing principle of the performance--a promising avenue for artists that rejected Western conventions of theatre-making. Tired of the staleness of trying to imitate reality, the technical

qualities of Asian theatre traditions were an attractive model for experimentation within twentieth-century European theatre.

Antonin Artaud and Balinese Dance

Antonin Artaud famously stated that “The theatre is Oriental” after viewing a performance of Balinese dance that profoundly impacted him. Artaud first came into contact with this tradition in 1931 when he witnessed a performance by a Balinese tour group at the Paris Colonial Exposition (Brandon 31). Nicola Savarese describes Artaud’s encounter with Balinese dance in his article “1931: Antonin Artaud Sees Balinese Theatre at the Paris Colonial Exposition,” noting that Artaud went to this exposition to see this particular performance. The event itself was intended to offer a series of “colonial entertainment,” including performances, festivals, parades, and processions. It took place during a time in which European colonialism started to crumble, yet promoted the riches of its colonies. Savarese describes the premise of the exposition:

With the construction of grandiose pavilions directly inspired by indigenous architecture in the colonies, the European powers sought to celebrate not only the scope of their colonial economies but also the charm and cultural attractions of distant lands, even if the wealth of the glorious colonial past had already become the subject of international notoriety (Savarese 54).

The exhibition of the “charm and cultural attractions of distant lands” has a colonialist, othering attitude at its core; England withdrew from the exhibition in order to avoid inflaming Gandhi’s campaign in India. Despite these disturbances and the growing anti-colonialist movement, the event was a huge success among urban masses (Savarese 54). With the Paris Colonial Exposition

as the backdrop from which Artaud viewed his beloved Balinese performance, it brings to question how this Euro-superior context informed his experience of this tradition.

The form of Balinese performance Artaud viewed (and that struck him) was *janger*, a recreational dance that is not the most sacred or ritualistic of Balinese performance. The performance presented at the exposition told the story of a father who reproaches his daughter for getting involved with a no-good (Savarese 74). Yet for Artaud, this performance embodied exactly what he sought in the theatre. Savarese notes, “It was this surprisingly simple story so skillfully performed by its actors which revealed to Artaud that the mastering and disciplining of energy do not kill either spontaneity or the actor’s grace, but on the contrary, are the source of the life of the theatre” (Savarese 58). Artaud desired a form of theatre that rejected not only Western conventions, but the “Occident” all together. He used the Balinese theatre to affirm his belief that theatre should have its own language--one that is not based on words, but the actor’s physicality.

Artaud was impressed by the power of the actors’ movement and the precision with which they used their bodies as a mode of communication. Through these focused gestures, he found that Balinese performance evoked a distillation of life that goes beyond imitation. Artaud states:

In a spectacle like that of the Balinese Theater there is something that eliminates entertainment, that quality of a pointless artificial game, an evening’s diversion, which is the distinguishing characteristic of our theater. Its productions are carved directly from matter, from life, from reality. They possess some of the ceremonial quality of a religious rite, in that they extirpate from the mind of the spectator any idea of pretense, of the grotesque imitation of reality (Artaud 239).

Artaud perceived the ritualistic aspects of Balinese dance as an expression of what lies beyond expectation and the everyday, which he describes to exist under the sign of “hallucination and of fear” (Artaud 235). Through the hallucinatory qualities of Balinese performance, Artaud found an experience akin to ecstasy. Ecstasy, from the Greek *ekstasis*, means ‘standing outside of one’s self,’ which is conducive to the practice of an actor, but also the theatrical experience of viewing something beyond normal life. Unabashedly Dionysian, theatre and ecstasy harmonize with one another in Balinese performance to create a moment that distills theatre’s essence. Artaud believed by incorporating these aesthetic qualities theatrical practice, it could be restored to its purest form.

Artaud was especially interested in the gestures of Balinese performance, interpreting them as living hieroglyphs. For Artaud, these highly codified movements presented an intriguing replacement for Western theatre’s proclivity for excessive speech. He states:

One of the reasons for our delight in this faultless performance lies precisely in the use these actors make of an exact quantity of specific gestures, of well-trying mime at a given point, and above all in the prevailing spiritual tone, the deep and subtle study that has presided at the elaboration of these plays of expression, these powerful signs which give us the impression that their power has not weakened during thousands of years (Artaud 31-32).

Despite his appreciation of the Balinese dance, Artaud misunderstood the exact function of these “powerful signs.” Artaud interpreted these highly codified hand movements as recreations of hieroglyphic signs, but in Balinese dance, they are ritual gestures that convey direct meanings--similar to sign language (Brandon 32). His misreading--though slight--is revelatory of shallow understanding in light of excitement.

Artaud was so impressed by Balinese performance that he went so far to claim that “The theatre is Oriental,” which attributes the East as an all-knowing paragon of theatrical excellence. This idea was shared among other theatre artists in his time and was particularly influential to practitioners like Ariane Mnouchkine who claims, “I know what he meant. From Asia comes what is specific to theatre, which is the perpetual metaphor which the actors produce--when they are capable of producing it” (Mnouchkine 97). Yet Artaud did not fully understand the performance tradition that led to the claim of the theatre being essentially “Oriental.” Though he took inspiration from the Balinese theatre, this was based on limited contact. His response is conducive to a Euro-centric practice of exoticization without genuine engagement. James Brandon critiques Artaud’s response to this performance, saying, “...he had no way of knowing details of Balinese performance. Artaud projects onto the Balinese performance his own powerful beliefs and expectations. Disentangling observation from subjective conjecture in his writing is not easy, but he drew many wrong conclusions” (Brandon 32). Artaud saw something that was different from his tradition, affirmed his theories of anti-naturalistic theatre, and could be used as a way to rethink the essence of theatre. At the same time, Artaud did not fully understand what he was viewing. Amidst the backdrop of a colonial exhibition, Artaud displaced a Balinese tradition while seated in European superiority, where he was able to assign meaning and value to a subject that is other. While his reflections on Asian theatre were deeply influential and accepted among other theatre artists, his misinterpretation of the Balinese performance tradition is part of a larger trend among twentieth-century theatre artists participating in cross-cultural exchange: that of misunderstanding as a result of limited engagement.

Bertolt Brecht and the Chinese Theatre

Like Artaud, Bertolt Brecht misinterpreted the Asian theatre tradition he witnessed. Yet Brecht surpassed Artaud's misreading and grossly displaced, projected, and reinterpreted the performance of Chinese theatre he experienced in order to affirm his own ideas. In 1935, Brecht viewed a demonstration from Peking opera actor Mei Lanfang as part of a six-day tour in Moscow Music Hall. Brecht's encounter with Mei Lanfang was revolutionary for this European theatre maker, as Brecht believed this performance demonstrated his alienation effect (or *Verfremdungseffekt*) that Brecht was formulating at the time. Brecht's alienation effect is the employment of theatrical techniques in order to estrange the audience from the action onstage, thus revealing the artificiality of performance. Brecht found that Mei Lanfang exhibited these techniques by distancing himself both from the audience and the character he was playing. He claims that the Chinese actor "observes himself" in order "to appear strange and even surprising to the audience. He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work. As a result, everything has a touch of the amazing" (Brecht 92). While Brecht saw Mei's self observation as a mode of estrangement, in actuality the Chinese performance tradition requires the actor to be deeply connected to the character. Mei states, "Everyone says that some excellent performer can become the very image of any character he is impersonating. This means that not only his appearance, but also his singing, reciting, movements, spirit, and feelings must become so closely identical with the status of the character that it is as if he is really that character" ("The Effect of Displacement" 54). Brecht took this performance out of its context and drew conclusions based on something that was not really there. He found that the supposed estrangement created by the Chinese performer raised "everyday things" above the "obvious and automatic" (Brecht 92). In Min Tian's "The Effect of Displacement: Brecht's Concept of the 'Alienation Effect' and Traditional Chinese Theatre," he states that Brecht's observation "...is

correct only in the sense that in Chinese acting everyday things are artistically selected, condensed, sublimated, typified, idealized, beautified, and transformed into a work of art. It is undoubtedly far-fetched, however, to assume that this process is done to appear strange to the audience” (“The Effect of Displacement” 47). Like Artaud, Brecht was influenced by a limited interaction with Asian theatre and had no inclination to further investigate Mei Lanfang’s performance techniques. In his exchange with Mei, Brecht operated from a Euro-centric standpoint; he believed he understood the Asian tradition due to his supposedly superior European intellect. More than this, he used this performance to legitimize his own theories. Brecht’s displacement of Mei’s presentation robbed him of the possibility to learn outside of his theoretical cosmology. He was too concerned with validating his alienation effect to see that Mei Lanfang was concerning himself with something essential to theatre.

While Brecht’s interaction with Mei Lanfang illustrates the kind of cultural extraction that existed in Eastern and Western exchange in the twentieth century, this moment indicates that the East gained cultural products and ideas from the West, as well. As a result of this exchange, Chinese theatre was introduced to the realist aesthetics of Western theatre. According to Carol Martin’s article “Brecht, Feminism, and Chinese Theatre,” Mei Lanfang was a bridge for bringing Western realism to traditional Chinese acting. Martin says, “While Brecht was enamored with Chinese acting, theatre practitioners in China (and Japan) were enamored with appropriating Western acting and playwriting to modernize their theatre” (79). The reformation of theatre techniques was accompanied by an increased interest in female performers or *xin nuxing*, meaning new woman (81). The encounter between Brecht and Mei Lanfang was part of a greater movement within the Chinese theatre to reinvent itself and create a space for female performance.

In addition to the reformation of Chinese acting traditions, Brecht's interaction with Mei Lanfang allowed him to cement his alienation effect, which later became influential in feminist theatre. The act of observing oneself lent itself to feminist performers, as they were able to reclaim the male gaze and employ "looking-at-being-looked-at-ness" (Martin 82). The alienation effect presented distance between the actor, character, and spectator and an interruption of narratives, all techniques that allowed feminist theatre practitioners to create feminist work (Martin 83). Even though Brecht's misinterpretation of Mei Lanfang's demonstration yielded major developments for their respective theatre traditions, it is not productive to scrutinize the pros and cons of Brecht's encounter. Rather, it is important to think about the *manner* in which Brecht took inspiration from the Chinese theatre and how this operates within a mode of displacement. When working within the intercultural theatre, practitioners must reject a Brechtian displacement of tradition and be reflective on the power dynamics that underlie exchange. Otherwise, artists will be ignorant to truth and fall victim to fantasy.

Eugenio Barba: Can he save the intercultural theatre?

Eugenio Barba is one of the first Western theatre artists to consistently and extensively study the Asian theatre tradition. Barba's approach to incorporating Asian theatre techniques into practice is distinct from Artaud and Brecht's problematic interactions. In interacting with Balinese dance and Chinese theatre, Artaud and Brecht dismember what they deem as valuable from these traditions and replace it with their own ideas. Barba, on the other hand, makes an attempt to fully understand the whole, paying particular attention to what lies at the heart of the performance. Reflecting on how these theatre artists were influenced by the Asian theatre in his book *The Paper Canoe*, Barba says, "To be inspired by such results often leads to

misunderstandings. These misunderstandings can be fertile; it suffices to think of what Bali meant to Artaud, China to Brecht and English theatre to Kawagami. But the knowledge which lies behind those results, the hidden technique and the vision of the craft which bring them alive, continue to be ignored” (*The Paper Canoe* 14). Rather than looking at the surface of Asian performance and displacing those practices with European thought, Barba calls for greater attention to the pre-expressive principles that underlie Asian performance tradition.

Barba was first introduced to this form by studying Kathakali dance in India with his master, Jerzy Grotowski. His experience working in India informed his belief that actors cannot fully understand different cultural techniques without connecting with the people and environment of that culture. Throughout his time working with his Denmark-based theatre company, Odin Teatret, he maintained relationships with various theatre masters trained in Noh, Kathakali, Topeng, and Odissi dance. For Barba, it was important to experience Asian theatre in its context, so he would often travel to various Asian countries to observe their respective performance traditions. Barba describes the experience of being an audience member to Asian theatre:

...there is nothing more suggestive than a traditional Asian performance *seen in its context*, often in the open tropical air, with a large and reactive audience, with a constant musical accompaniment which captures the nervous system, with sumptuous costumes which delight the eye, and with performers who embody the unity of the actor-dancer-singer-storyteller (*The Paper Canoe* 5).

Unlike Brecht and Artaud, Eugenio Barba experienced a version of Asian theatre that was not packaged to travel amongst European audiences. By viewing these performances amidst their intended backdrops, he was able to understand the environment, cultural background, and

audience reactions that influenced these traditions. Engaging in this manner also gave Barba the opportunity to learn directly from Asian performers and directors.

When Barba viewed these Asian theatre performances, he would often focus on the details of actor movement. During one of these performances, he noticed a technique familiar to him. Barba says, “I attempted to concentrate tenaciously on and follow just one detail of a performer: the fingers of one hand, a foot, a shoulder, an eye. This tactic against monotony made me aware of a strange coincidence: Asian performers performed with their knees bent, *exactly like the Odin Teatret actors*” (*The Paper Canoe* 6). The bent knees Barba observed is an Odin technique referred to as “sats.” This is an impulse, a movement of precarious balance in the body in which the performer prevents the audience from expecting what’s going to come next. Barba drew a connection between his familiar sats and the reciprocal movement in the Chinese theatre, “liangxing,” which is when the Chinese actor strikes a pose at the end of a series of movements (*Mei Lanfang and the Twentieth-Century* 168). The commonality between these two balance and rhythm-oriented physical techniques were used as a point of departure for Barba to learn more about Asian theatre traditions and the ways in which they can be integrated into his practice.

Barba and the Possibilities of Asian Theatre

Barba’s primary approach to incorporating Asian theatre techniques is learning how to engage the body in such a way that it transcends everyday movement. Ian Watson’s article “Eastern and Western Influences on Performer Training at Eugenio Barba's Odin Teatret” describes that Barba found Asian performers to possess a powerful presence, and that he strove to discover its source as he continued to work and learn from Asian theatre masters (“Eastern and Western Influences” 54). Barba describes this presence as a pre-expressive mode of behavior,

which is comprised of a series of tensions that “generate an extra-daily energy quality which renders the body theatrically ‘decided’, ‘alive’, ‘believable’, thereby enabling the performer’s ‘presence’ or scenic *bios* to attract the spectator’s attention *before* any message is transmitted” (*The Paper Canoe* 9). This quality of movement became an ideal for Odin training, as it yields a fully embodied performance, rather than a lifeless one.

While Barba drew a lot of influence from Asian theatre, he rejected imitation of these forms. He argued that theatre training for forms like Noh, Odissi, Topeng, and Kathakali take a lifetime of study, and any kind of reproduction would be a poor version of the original (“Eastern and Western Influences” 54). Rather than appropriating these techniques, he maintained relationships with Asian directors and performers, learned from them, and used these influences in actor training. Yet Barba did not want the exploration of new techniques to solely live within the walls of Odin Teatret. In 1978, he encouraged his actors to travel to different countries and train directly with masters of various theatre traditions. In this way, Odin actors learned these performance techniques in the contexts from which they originated. Those who traveled to Struer learned tango, Viennese waltz, the foxtrot, and quickstep. The actors in Bali learned *baris* and *legong*. India provided Odin actors with training in *kathakali* and Brazil taught *capoeira* and *candomble* dances (*The Paper Canoe* 6). By studying performance practices within their cultural contexts, Odin actors rejected the packaged cultural consumerism practiced by Artaud and Brecht. Instead, they delved into these various traditions, forming relationships with their teachers and sharpening their skill set.

Barba noticed that when these actors returned to Denmark, their quality of movement underwent a transformation. He says, “I began to notice that when my actors did a Balinese dance, they put on another skeleton/skin which conditioned the way of standing, moving, and

becoming “expressive”” (*The Paper Canoe* 6). Barba also noted that when they returned back to their “Odin” skeleton, there was a shift in expressivity, but an application of similar principles in both expressive bodies (*The Paper Canoe* 6). The life that remained consistent in the transition between performance traditions became the crux for thinking about the commonalities among actors of different cultures. As a result, Barba became interested in the anthropological capacity of theatre, which takes form in his conception of Eurasian Theatre and Theatre Anthropology .

“Eurasian Theatre” and Theatre Anthropology

Barba’s engagement with Asian theatrical practice largely informed his theoretical imagining of Eurasian Theatre and Theatre Anthropology; through Asian theatre, he saw a new mode of performance that was not only pre-expressive, but also transcended cultural boundaries. The conception of Eurasian Theatre and Theatre Anthropology demonstrates a transition from examining the Orientalist practices in the twentieth century to a greater discussion about intercultural theatre. Barba is not concerned with what can be extracted from Eastern traditions but rather how different cultures can share amongst each other. Barba first examines this through the concept of ‘Eurasian Theatre,’ which is defined as the commonalities of pre-expressive principles of European and Asian theatre. The Eurasian Theatre is concerned with the invisible quality of performance that transcends all forms (“Eurasian Theatre” 217). Barba states, “...beneath the luminous and seductive epidermises, I discern the organs which keep them alive, and the poles of comparison blend into a single profile, without limits or fissures. Yet again, Eurasian theatre” (*The Paper Canoe* 42). Eurasian Theatre is a conceptualization of what is at the core of theatre, no matter what cultural form it takes. Barba alludes to the idea that there is something within theatre’s core that is universally essential for humans to partake in, making it a

distinctly anthropological practice. Through the exchanges that take place within the intercultural theatre, it positions itself to connect people from different parts of the globe.

With Eurasian Theatre as the basis for understanding the invisible similarities among theatre traditions, Barba dug further into theatre's anthropological capacity in his conceptualization of Theatre Anthropology. He says, "Theatre Anthropology is the study of the pre-expressive scenic behaviour upon which different genres, styles, roles and personal or collective traditions are all based" ("Traditions, Differences, and Displacements" 97). It looks at the ways in which the pre-expressive principles of Eurasian Theatre work within intercultural exchange. It is not an application of cultural anthropology to theatre and dance, but rather finding the connections between different performing techniques and aesthetics. Barba states, "On the one hand this is a utopia. On the other, it is another way of saying, with different words, *learning to learn*" (*The Paper Canoe* 10). Through Theatre Anthropology, actors acknowledge their own sensibility as a performer and the tradition in which they practice, but also look to other forms as inspiration.

Barba created a space that encourages exchange of performance traditions through ISTA, The International School of Theatre Anthropology. According to Ian Watson's book, *Negotiating Cultures: Eugenio Barba and the Intercultural Debate*, ISTA is both a conference and an institution comprised of sessions with lectures/demonstrations, classes with various master performers, seminars, and workshops/rehearsals that explore the creation of intercultural performance texts (*Negotiating Cultures* 21). It is a space where actors can meet and exchange performance traditions in the form of a barter. A barter is an event in which actions are currency. Songs, dances, training exercises, and fragments of plays are turned into commodities and exchanged among actors of different cultures (*Negotiating Cultures* 94). ISTA is an institution

for performers to learn from other traditions and expand their abilities. By creating this space for cultural exchange, Barba reimagines an intercultural theatre in which traditions can be exchanged, rather than consumed or extracted as exhibited in previous Orientalist-driven histories.

Root Grafting in Barba's Intercultural Theatre

Barba's approach to the intercultural theatre is reflective of the process of root grafting that occurs in agricultural cultivation. Within this practice, the roots of one plant are attached to the roots of another to form a stronger, more fruitful plant. Intercultural exchange is an organic process and requires the same care, intention, and attention of root grafting. Both processes, though, are reliant on acknowledging the importance of one's roots. Barba emphasizes the value of actors connecting with their cultural roots, describing, "Here the term "roots" becomes paradoxical: it does not imply a bond which ties us to a place, but an ethos which permits us to change places; or better, it represents a force which causes us to change our horizons precisely because it roots us to a center" ("Eurasian Theatre" 220). Barba argues that one must be grounded in their roots, but also be open to the idea of expanding their worldview and performance tradition. In the intercultural theatre, a performer acknowledges their own cultural origins, explores techniques from other cultures, and grafts them onto their roots, creating a new kind of performance style. Barba maintains that one's body is their country, in that people carry with them the traditions of their root culture. He encourages performers to embark on a *Wanderlehre*, or 'learning journey', in which actors can push the knowledge of this art form deeper and wider (*The Paper Canoe* 46-47). In this way, they can transcend the boundaries of the theatre-as-country and view their own 'country' in a different light.

The exchanges within Barba's intercultural theatre may yield potential for cultural appropriation and displacement--practices of extraction that were demonstrated by East-West relations in the age of Brecht and Artaud. However, Barba does not believe that grafting upon one's roots is equivalent with appropriation. In the summer of 2019, I was given the opportunity to work with Eugenio Barba at Teatro Potlach's Festival Laboratorio Interculturale di Pratiche Teatrali (FLIPT). I participated in his acting workshop and was an audience member when he was interviewed by Anna Bandettini. At this interview, I asked Barba how we can carve out a space in intercultural theatre in which we do not appropriate or assert imperial will, but share amongst cultures. To my surprise, he answered with a metaphor about cannibalism. He said that there is a Brazilian manifesto that makes a distinction between the cannibal and the *antropofago*. The cannibal eats for a lack or hunger, but the antropofago only takes the important parts--the heart, the liver--and leaves out all the rest. Barba argues that the same is true for intercultural theatre. The goal is not to consume one's culture or even to dismember parts from the whole for their singular utility. Barba aims to evoke what is at the heart of one's performance, the organ that pumps life into the whole body. By approaching intercultural performance through an understanding of both the whole and the essential, Barba forms a promising direction for intercultural practice.

Criticisms of Eugenio Barba

While Barba has paved a path for rethinking intercultural theatre practices, his theories have been subject to critical assessment. Scholars have criticized Barba for overessentializing the techniques that he has observed and reinterpreting them in his own poetic, mystified language. Phillip Zarilli's article "For Whom is the 'Invisible' Not Visible?" looks at the ways in which

Barba mystifies Asian practices that are commonplace in their cultural contexts. Zarilli says, “Many specific cultural terms (Sanskrit prana, Chinese ch’i, Japanese ki) from which Barba extracts his generic terms (energy/presence/invisible) might be thought of as commonplace “facts of daily life” available both to the performer and to the inquisitive outsider who asks what it is the performer is doing” (Zarilli 102). Zarilli criticizes Barba for using language demonstrative of exoticism and calls for examination of Barba’s over-essentialized teachings.

Scholar Rustom Bharucha’s critique of Barba echoes Zarilli’s accusations of exoticism within Barba’s practice. Bharucha warns against “othering” in the intercultural theatre and is skeptical of its positive potential; he still finds traces of colonialism embedded in its fabric. Bharucha states, “...as much as one would like to accept the seeming openness of Euro-American interculturalists to other cultures, the large economic and political domination of the West has clearly constrained, if not neglected, the possibilities of genuine exchange” (Bharucha 196). Barba’s exoticized language may be indicative of his Western ideology, although his biography suggests that he may have a complicated relationship with “othering.” Barba faced a great deal of discrimination when he immigrated from Gallipoli to Norway and was cast off within this notoriously homogenous culture. While Barba’s history does not implicitly compensate for his fanciful language, it does muddle accusations of “othering” in Barba’s theatre. Even so, Zarilli and Bharucha’s call for greater reflexivity on the exoticisation in the intercultural theatre is essential for the development of this form.

Zarilli also claims that Barba ignores the sociocultural or historical contexts of the practices he introduces in Odin training. Zarilli states:

There is little sense of the processual labors of a particular performer’s movement toward specific acts of embodiment. Nor does Barba acknowledge that even in those traditions

where he finds his inspiration there are a great number of performers who fail to achieve the high level of “presencing” with which Barba is so fascinated. Nor is there any attempt to articulate precisely how the native performer perceives what Barba receives as “presence” (Zarrilli 101-102).

Barba first came into contact with Asian theatre by viewing performances in their socio-historical contexts, so Barba is likely aware of the processes that shape performer movement. His lack of providing context for performances Zarilli witnessed was likely reflective of Barba’s concern with the essence, rather than cultural details deemed as inessential. However, Barba could improve his pedagogy through clearer communication of the somewhat invisible “presencing” he strives for.

Barba is cognizant of the context of the cultural traditions he employs in his directing, but as Patric Pavis and Loren Kruger note in “Dancing with ‘Faust’: A Semiotician's Reflections on Barba's Intercultural Mise-En-Scene,” this theatre practitioner may be guilty of tainting intercultural performances with Western bias. Pavis and Kruger’s work in question, *Faust*, featured odissi dancer Sanjukta Panigrahi and buyo dancer Katsuko Azuma. While intended to be a rich cross-cultural event, Pavis and Kruger argue the primary departure of this performance as “...a Western vision conveyed by Eastern traditions reworked by a Western director ending up with a sketch which bears all the distinguishing features of Western mise-en-scene” (Pavis & Kruger 52-53). Barba was operating within a strictly Western framework, despite the Eastern performance traditions of these two actors. Recognizing the relationship between the actors and the director, as well as the dynamic between the culture backgrounds at hand develops a practice in which the grafting of cultures speaks for itself. For the intercultural theatre to thrive, practitioners like Barba must not interfere with opportunities for authenticity.

Finding Footing within Intercultural Theatre

In an increasingly globalized world, intercultural exchange is paramount. It requires constant reconsideration, particularly within the theatre, where representation is key. Johannes Birringer believes that the intercultural theatre is still trying to find its footing, stating:

This emphasis on the reinterpretation of cultures, practices and bodily performance techniques coincides with larger political and cultural reorientations in Western societies toward recognizing the built-in ethnocentrism of the Euro-American educational systems and ideological values, and toward acknowledging the Asian, African, and Latin-American traditions as independent sources of knowledge and techniques in their own terms (Birringer 149-150).

This reorientation from Eurocentrism to looking outwards at different cultural traditions is constructive for expanding people's world view and forging connections among different populations. Even Artaud and Brecht's flawed encounters were part of this movement from European narcissism. Yet as the intercultural theatre continues to progress in the contemporary world, theatre artists must be cognizant of how they are interacting with different cultures.

Continuing to reject imperialist practices and assertions of power in exchange for genuine connection will allow the intercultural theatre to prosper. This flourishing can only be practiced by forging relationships with artists who possess different practices and learning from them beyond shallow engagement. Authentic exchange also requires the recognition of history and context, such as acknowledging Europe's domination of intercultural theatre discourse. Imperialist attitudes may still run rampant, but the intercultural theatre can transcend this by rejecting appropriation, encouraging authentic representation of cultures, and adapting a practice of

cultural exchange reflective of root grafting. In this way, the intercultural theatre can do what it does best: find a common thread amongst all people.

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‘My Body is my Country’: Asian American Theatre and the Liminality of Identity

The Asian American theatre provides a rich lens from which to explore the intercultural, as its actors, designers, and texts straddle both Asian and American spheres. This theatre community is rooted within the context of a “melting pot” that claims to champion racial and cultural difference, yet marginalizes minority populations. The Asian American theatre formed out of a necessity for artists of color to band together and create work on their own terms. It is incredibly diverse, dynamic, and committed to its mission of providing a space for Asian American theatre artists to explore what it means to be situated between worlds. Patrice Pavis’ definition of the intercultural theatre reflects this cultural in-betweenness, describing it as “...hybrid forms drawing upon a more or less conscious and voluntary mixing of performance traditions traceable to distinct cultural areas” (Pavis 8). Interculturalism is inextricably linked to both the Asian American experience and its respective theatre community as American culture is grafted onto Asian roots and vice versa. For this reason, I examine the Asian American theatre in order to illuminate how this theatre community both contributes to and is informed by the intercultural. By placing emphasis on the Asian American body in theatrical space, I explore how the intersection of cultural in-betweenness and representation shape the actor’s performance of subjective experience.

The exploration of hybrid identity is essential to understanding the core of the Asian American theatre. Josephine Lee describes being Asian American as a hyphenated identity, which draws attention to its own “incompleteness as a category” (Lee 22). It is a liminal identity that is determined by the individual--X parts Asian and X parts American--and the worlds they inhabit. While it may seem that Asian Americans have the ability to dip into neat categories of Asian and American, this hybrid identity is much more complex--subject to variance according

to factors such as national origin, sex, class, etc. There is a diverse range of nationalities under the umbrella of Asian America, described by Victor Bascara as an “...archipelago with insular ‘islands’ differing not only in location, but also in historical circumstance and, therefore, differing in cultural/political concerns” (Bascara 6). It is short-sighted to reduce this community to generalizations given its mixed bag of cultures, ethnicities, and experiences. Yet, my discussion of the Asian American theatre is primarily based on plays, playwrights, and events that draw from Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese nationalities. Narrowing the scope of my paper in this way is not intended to exclude other sects of Asian American culture, but is rather a consequence of the histories and works I have chosen to focus on. My analysis of the Asian American actor, though, is inclusive of all nationalities.

Asians in America

The term “Asian American” was not conceptualized until the 1960s when the Asian American Movement rejected the dominantly used term “oriental” as racist and imperialist. Inspired by the momentum of the black civil rights movement, the Asian American movement promoted pride in ethnic identity and advocated for social justice issues such as educational access, workers’ rights, and public health. They demanded greater equality for their community, which had limited access to opportunity (Hsu 106). The Asian American Movement was a call for Asian American inclusivity, a population hardly considered American for the majority of their existence in the U.S. From their mass arrival during the Gold Rush leading up to the mid-twentieth century, they were aliens--Asians living in America--subject to othering and exclusion from American society. The history of Asian America is a journey of discovering what it means to be American while ascribing to a cultural identity outside of normative white culture. Through

the negotiation of Asian and American culture within the hegemonic structures of the United States, this community has strived for cultural citizenship.

Similar to the relationship between European theatre directors and Asian actors previously discussed in this paper, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, European Americans perceived Asians living in the United States as an exotic other. The othering of the Asian subject was exemplified by exhibitionist performances that placed “orientals” on a platform to be gawked at by white audiences. “Chineseness” was performed in circuses of the 1880s and 1890s, including Barnum and London shows, where people were placed in freak shows and labeled as “curiosities.” James S. Moy argues that exoticizing the Asian other in this manner places the spectator in a “serial” gaze, stating, “The popular form of the serial, or survey, offered amusements which brought together apparently authoritative series and collocations of objects to create the *potential* for meaning” (Moy 8). Rather than ascribing value to the Asian subject--as Europe often did with Asian cultural products--the serial gaze assigns very little intellectual or economic value to the person on display. Often taking the form of museum displays, vaudeville, circuses, travelogues, and melodrama, in this spectatorial position, the onlooker has what Moy describes as a “godlike option” to either examine or dismiss the performance at hand (Moy 8). The exchange between the spectator and oriental other is one that displaces the Asian body from geography and time, leaving them with no choice but to be products for Western consumption.

In the late nineteenth to mid twentieth century, attitudes towards Asians living in the United States were expressed through a series of discriminatory laws intended to eliminate this population from infiltrating American society. One such example was the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 which effectively prevented all Chinese people from both immigrating

and obtaining citizenship in an attempt to solve the “Chinese question.” Prejudice against people of Asian descent continued into the twentieth century with the Immigration Act of 1924, which ceased Japanese immigration, as well. Esther Kim Lee describes the effect of this act, saying, “It was as if the Immigration Act of 1924 erased Asian Americans from the national domestic imagination” (*A History* 13). These “alien residents” were thought of as “The Yellow Peril”—a threat to American citizens that were fighting for the few jobs available in the early twentieth century.

Widely spread negative attitudes towards Asians living in the U.S. were expressed through a slew of stereotypical depictions in the media. The Yellow Peril mentality labeled Asians as sneaky, inscrutable, and untrustworthy, embodied by stereotypes such as Fu Manchu and his daughter, “The Dragon Lady.” Fu Manchu originated from the television series *Flash Gordon*, played by yellow-face-donning Sax Rohmer. Both Fu Manchu and The Dragon Lady were portrayed as being bent on political and economic domination--the female counterpart portrayed as equally villainous, yet seductive in her vampy guise.

The next development in Asian American stereotyping was that of the geisha, a product of fantasy and desire based on stories from U.S. servicemen returning from overseas. They would recount favors offered by Asian women, who were perceived as quiet, yet sexually available individuals whose only desire was to cater to the wants of men. While Asian women were subjected to sexualization by the Western imagination, their male counterparts experienced emasculation. Asian men were thought to be weak, sexless, and effeminate, all characteristics that were expressed by the stereotype-ridden Charlie Chan character. His appearance in films from 1931 to 1939 served as a touch point among white audiences for understanding Asianness. Historically played by a white actor, Charlie Chan delivered “Confucian,” fortune-cookie

wisdom and perpetuated the idea that Asian men were devoid of sexual appeal (“Getting the Message” 190-193).

The model minority stereotype of the 1960s marked a deceptively positive change in attitudes towards Asian Americans. No longer was this group subject to villainization and being perceived as “sneaky and inscrutable,” but rather, an example of what all minorities in the United States should strive for. As a result of this stereotype, Asian Americans were perceived to be loyal, hardworking, and have strong family values. The model minority was thought to have “made it” in American society due to impeccable academic achievement and success. Asian American acceptance into society, however, was contingent on their ability to assimilate into Western culture and to shed or hide parts of their heritage that were too strange for white culture (“Getting the Message” 192-193). The idea of Asian Americans as the model minority has continued into the twenty-first century, yet this perspective carries microaggressive racist implications. Because of this stereotype, Asian Americans are held to a high standard of success; violation of this standard results in reversion to marginalization. Asians must assimilate and achieve, lest they perish.

Asian American stereotypes donned both the stage and the screen, forming the bulk of Asian American representation in the twentieth century. The relationship between audiences and these characters is based on what Moy refers to as the “voyeuristic gaze.” Moy states, “The voyeuristic gaze, generally associated with the emergent self-conscious literary elite of mid-nineteenth-century narrative realism, served to affirm the authority of the looker, generally at the expense of the object--which in turn was often reduced to stereotype” (Moy 8). The voyeuristic spectatorial position feeds on fetishized “realistic” visions of everyday life that amuse the intellectually savvy. The audience member takes pleasure in prying into and trying to understand

the lives of Asian Americans; they acknowledge the differences that exist among their cultures and relish in the opportunity to peek into a different, exotic world.

The development of Asian performance in the United States is exemplary of how theatre often becomes a reflection of the world. Changes in the portrayal of Asians in the theatre coincided with the evolution of attitudes towards Asian Americans--prejudice reflected prejudice and revolution reflected revolution. The alignment of art and society was evidenced by the corresponding emergence of both the Asian American Movement in the 1960s and the creation of the first Asian American theatre company, East West Players. Even though the negative history of marginalization and projected narratives haunted the Asian American community in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, it provided an apt foundation for change. Enter: the Asian American theatre.

The start of the Asian American theatre was marked by the founding of East West Players in 1965. According to Esther Kim Lee, this theatre company introduced the concept of the "Asian American theatre" into the consciousness of artists, actors, intellectuals, and leaders alike. Lee defines the Asian American theatre in relation to theatre companies, performance spaces, meeting and protest locations, and geographical areas. She claims that anyone who is associated with these spaces is part of Asian American theatre history (*A History* 1-5). The development of the Asian American theatre as a mode of social change is linked to Mao Tse-Tung's model for establishing Asian American culture. Tse-Tung argues that art must first meet a political requirement, then it can devote attention to aesthetic desires. The political approach is grounded in the Asian American artist's moral responsibility and social purpose. Once this responsibility has been tended to, the artist can explore style, technique, and "art for art's sake." At this point, the artistic product becomes more universal in its reach and messaging, speaking to

broader concerns (Mao 80). The history of the Asian American theatre from the 1960s to the present has reflected this political first, aesthetic second model. The work of the Asian American theatre began with the mission of providing opportunities for Asian American artists and granting witness to the experiences of their communities, thus working to establish cultural citizenship. While committed to this mission, the Asian American theatre has continued to explore its artistic sensibility and aesthetic.

A Brief History of Asian American Theatre

The Asian American theatre can be traced to theatre companies primarily based in the cities of Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York City, and Seattle, as these are locations that historically have had thriving Asian American communities. These companies were formed to serve the actor, who have largely propelled Asian American theatre in their commitment to activism and actor-centric work. The first four theatre companies--East West Players, the Asian American Theatre Company, the Northwest Asian American Theatre, and Pan Asian Repertory Theatre--supported this mission by providing a space for its actors to create work and explore their heritage. Without these four companies laying the groundwork for Asian American theatre, it would not have developed into the institution it is today (*A History* 43).

The first Asian American theatre company, East West Players, was initially created in order to provide opportunities for “oriental” actors who were denied work by Hollywood producers. It later formed into an Asian American regional theatre company, the only one of its kind in the country (*A History* 26). Based in Los Angeles, EWP flaunted its interculturalism and took advantage of theatre traditions from both Eastern and Western cultures. This company emphasized three stylistic categories of performance: intercultural interpretations of popular

Western plays in Eastern or Western settings, traditional Japanese plays translated in English, and original plays by Asian American actors. East West Players put Asian heritage at the forefront of performance, where this identity was considered an asset, rather than a drawback. They relished in the hypervisibility of the actor and created “new narratives of belonging” that shaped Asian American subject formation (“East West Players”). By experimenting with the many facets of Asian and American experience, East West Players worked to distill and champion the Asian American identity.

After East West Players was established as a cultural lighthouse for the Asian American theatre, it was not long before other companies emerged. The Asian American Theatre Company was founded by activist Frank Chin in San Francisco in 1973. With its high Asian American population composed of fourth and fifth generation Chinese Americans and descendents of first-wave Chinese laborers from the mid-nineteenth century, San Francisco proved to be the perfect stage for this theatre company. AATC’s initial purpose was to create a laboratory for playwrights, but its founders soon realized that they would need actors for workshops. This led to a substantial program for actor training and largely contributed to the actor-focused mission of the Asian American theatre (*A History* 57). Following the Asian American Theatre Company, the Northwest West Asian American Theatre of Seattle developed as a community-serving, student-started institution committed to providing a space to explore Asian heritage. Its performances focused on the community’s painful history and the racism that is still experienced within contemporary society. Though it closed in 2004, The Northwest Asian American Theatre company is still regarded as a flagship Asian American theatre company and the first of its kind in the Pacific Northwest (*A History* 81).

The Asian American Theatre Company and the Northwest Asian American Theatre Company were largely committed to creating cultural centers for Asian American actors, designers, directors, and writers alike. The fourth major company, Pan Asian Repertory Theatre, provides a return to the exploration of Eastern and Western cultures within the Asian American identity. Founded by Tisa Chang, the Pan Asian Repertory Theatre exhibits Chang's desire to present a blend of Eastern and Western theatre styles. Chang imagined an intercultural theatre that was inclusive of all Asian traditions, choosing to refer to her company as "Pan-Asian," which encapsulates not only East Asia, but also the Philippines, India, Southeast Asia, and Hawaii. The intercultural theatre, in Chang's view, was performed by actors who brought the whole spectrum of Asian heritage to the stage, encompassing not only Asian Americans but Asians around the world (*A History* 87). The first four Asian American theatre companies provided a foundation for the development of this cultural institution. They grappled with fundamental questions of what the Asian American theatre would look like, who it would serve, and what its ultimate goal would be for its future advancement. The beginnings of the Asian American theatre addressed the needs of a larger movement towards attaining cultural citizenship within American society.

After the introduction of the first four theatre companies, the Asian American theatre underwent major changes in regards to its approach to being part of the mainstream theatre. The second wave artists of the 1980s worked towards mainstreaming Asian American theatre with optimism, aimed at boosting its popularity among a wider range of audiences. The desire to be part of mainstream American theatre was expressed by many second wave artists leaving the comfort of their group and joining more well-known production companies (*A History* 128). During the 1980s, multiculturalism was becoming more popular, and Asian American actors

took advantage of the increase in opportunities for performance in the mainstream theatre. While some worried that this “talent drain” would negatively impact the Asian American theatre, others argued that it allowed the theatre to find its niche. A large part of this group’s development was dealing with conflict and controversies that prompted artists and members of the Asian American community to band together and fight against injustice.

The *Miss Saigon* Controversy

It is impossible to talk about the history of Asian American theatre without discussing the infamous *Miss Saigon* controversy, which was a defining moment for this community. *Miss Saigon*, created by British and French duo Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil, had its first performance in 1989 on the West End. The West End performance had its own charming twist, though: the use of yellow face. This production of *Miss Saigon* not only had a white actor (Jonathan Pryce) in the lead role of the Engineer, but the majority of the cast was made up in prosthetics and dark makeup in order to appear Asian (*A History* 177). A few months after its premiere in London, producer Cameron Mackintosh announced that *Miss Saigon* would be brought to Broadway with original stars Jonathan Pryce and Lea Salonga. While it is not uncommon to keep the original cast for maximum ticket sales, Mackintosh was willing to recast some characters. Yet his one exception was that Jonathan Pryce would remain in the role, as he believed this actor was integral to the show’s success (*A History* 183). This production decision sparked a slew of protests among the Asian American community--people were dismayed by the idea of a white actor in yellow face, in addition to the show being ridden with stereotypical depictions of Asians. Esther Kim Lee describes the effects of this controversy, stating, “...for the Asian American theatre community as a whole, the musical presented a major setback not only

in terms of casting and stereotypes but also in terms of how the economic power of mainstream theatre has utterly dictated minority theatres” (*A History* 178). After months of protests, debate, and letters to Actors’ Equity Association (AEA), AEA formally declined Mackintosh’s request to put Jonathan Pryce in the role of the Engineer. What seemed like a victory led to even more dispute between Cameron Mackintosh and the AEA, as Mackintosh threatened to cancel the production entirely. More back-and-forth arguments and protests ensued, and the final decision was not the satisfying moral response many were hoping for. A week after Mackintosh’s announcement to cancel the show, the AEA rescinded its decision and allowed Jonathan Pryce to play the role of the Engineer on the condition that Mackintosh would seek Asian actors as replacements or understudies for the Broadway production (*A History* 190). This decision led to more disgruntlement among Asian American actors, and they continued to protest and educate the public about the history of yellowface and racism by writing to the press and organizing protests. While the casting battle was well-fought, the Asian American community was defeated by larger capitalistic endeavors.

The *Miss Saigon* controversy produced questions about content and narratives that are allowed to persist within Western consciousness. This musical resuscitated the Orientalist story of *Madame Butterfly*, a well-known narrative of Western superiority over the East: White man goes to Asian country and falls in love with Asian woman. White man leaves, Asian woman has his child, and kills herself in a moment of sacrifice at the end. The content issue of *Miss Saigon* was especially upsetting considering that *M. Butterfly*, a play that deconstructs the Orientalist narrative of *Madame Butterfly*, had just ended its run on Broadway. *Miss Saigon* reintroduced representations of Asians that were supposedly dismantled, indicating that the theatre is still dominated by Western thought. Cameron Mackintosh was privy to the casting discontent among

Asian American actors, yet he never understood why the musical was offensive, stating, “It is particularly sad and ironic that this controversy should surround a piece of theatre such as *Miss Saigon*, a tragic love story in which a young woman sacrifices her life to ensure that her Amerasian son may find a better life in America” (Behr & Steyn, 186). Mackintosh fails to understand that by partaking in this production, actors are perpetuating a story of imperialism that misrepresents Asian people and culture. Yet again, the West asserts its dominance over the East and the trope of the Asian woman sacrificing herself for the white man persists.

An additional issue of *Miss Saigon* is that it presents a slew of Asian stereotypes old and new. Esther Kim Lee describes how this play approaches Asian representation, saying, “The same stereotypes that Asian American theatre artists had been fighting against for decades not only reappeared but also overwhelmed them with a multi-billion dollar Broadway production that included helicopters and the glitzy spectacle of a virtual Saigon” (*A History* 193). *Miss Saigon* poses a challenge for Asian American actors--on the one hand, it provides an opportunity for Asian Americans to perform in a mainstream, high budget production in which they are not tokenized, but rather, Asia serves as the backdrop for the play. On the other hand, playing these roles perpetuates stereotypes and narratives that the Asian American theatre has worked hard to erase. To present an extreme circumstance, if Asian Americans refuse to participate in *Miss Saigon* entirely, this could risk the same casting controversy of non-Asian actors performing in Asian roles. Esther Kim Lee argues that even though the *Miss Saigon* controversy was a tough cultural battle with a dissatisfying outcome, it unified the Asian American community and educated mainstream critics, media, and audiences on Asian American representation (*A History* 199). It also provided an opportunity for the Asian American theatre to flex its activist muscles and distill its overall mission. *Miss Saigon* proposes questions that the Asian American theatre

must constantly grapple with: How can the Asian American theatre advance representation? What is the price of perpetuating stereotypes? What does it look like to make change in the theatre?

Body Politics in the Asian American Theatre

The development of the Asian American theatre was a necessary response to larger social and political factors that implicated actors of color. East West Players was originally founded as a way to provide opportunity to Asian American actors who were not able to find work in the mainstream theatre. Casting is an arbitrary process for white actors, but actors of color maintain a heightened awareness of how being a minority affects what opportunities are allotted to them. They express a mode of self perception reflective of what W.E.B. Du Bois calls “double consciousness.” In his groundbreaking work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois states, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois 45). Du Bois conceived double consciousness as part of his discussion of the black American experience, yet this is underscored by a contention between whiteness and those that are considered “other.” Within white America, people of color are forced to look at themselves through the lens of a white hegemonic society. They grapple with living in a world which largely does not want them there. Double consciousness as understood by the Asian American actor plays a major role within the casting process. Casting is largely based on the appearance of the actor and whether or not they fit within the director’s

imagination of the play. It sharpens the dualistic perception of identity and the larger power structures at work, as it is impossible to separate casting practices from contemporary political and social developments. The Asian American theatre challenges these racialized conventions, as they assert that minority representation is necessary for pushing against dominant societal structures that disregard and cast off people of color.

The Asian American theatre community developed during a time where there was a greater push to change the complexions of American theatre institutions through the implementation of non-traditional casting. Angela Chia-yi Pao describes these efforts in her book *No Safe Spaces: Re-Casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater*, saying, “The primary impetus for changing not just casting but hiring practices in regional and commercial theaters was the desire to achieve racial integration in all social, political, educational, and cultural institutions in the United States” (Pao 3). Non-traditional casting has a relationship with obsolescence, as its continuous use makes the “non-traditional” irrelevant in light of a new tradition being forged. The efforts to create a multi-cultural theatre, along with the activism of the Asian American theatre work to promote racially diverse alternatives to whiteness. Pao qualifies these ideals, stating, “...this means not just superficially using the visible racial characteristics of actors, often in ways that inadvertently promote stereotypes or essentializing models of difference, but having artists of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds actively and assertively contribute to the creative process” (Pao 3). Angela Chia-yi Pao and the Asian American theatre community share a similar goal of creating performance that is marked by collaboration among diverse groups of artists.

The diversification of performance as a result of non-traditional casting practices or the ethnic-based texts of the Asian American theatre create what Pao refers to as a “cross-racial

corporeal encounter” (Pao 23). The theatre is based on a triangular relationship between character, actor, and audience. Yet, it is also dependent on the phenomenon that (in naturalistic and realistic acting traditions) the character and actor inhabit the same body. When the actor’s identity does not match that of the character as originally imagined, the dynamic of the character, actor, audience trio is subject to change. Racialized non-traditional casting introduces a non-white body into a predominately white space and imagination, thus creating this cross-racial corporeal encounter. Pao states, “...nontraditional casting revises the most critical relationship in dramatic traditions--that which exists between the actor and the character--prompting the spectator to exercise new modes of perception and learn new protocols of reception” (Pao 27). At the heart of the theatrical performance is an encounter, requiring one body to confront another. When the body of the actor is inscribed with a history linked to discrimination on the basis of race, the corporeal encounter between audience and colored body becomes a subversion to the dominant exchange between white actor and spectator. Mimetic representation is at the core of the theatre, and the decision to place a *particular* body onstage drastically affects how the audience perceives not only that character, but the world once they leave the theatre.

In thinking about the effect of race on the dynamic between audience, actor, and character, it is necessary to look at the role semantics plays on the perception of the body. Angela Chia-yi Pao continues her discussion of the implications of corporeal presencing, noting, “More than any other single element, the actor’s physical presence on stage controls the production of meaning as his or her body becomes the most arresting point of intersection for visual, auditory, sociocultural, and ideological codes” (Pao 27). Much of the pleasure of viewing theatre is the presence of the actor--their liveness and ability to impart meaning simply by standing on stage. While the emphasis on the actor’s body inadvertently objectifies the actor, the

exploration of the messaging that occurs as a result of the actor's body onstage speaks to the dynamics of perception within the theatrical space. The body cannot be viewed as neutral, because it is inlaid with signifiers that communicate meaning to the audience. In Josephine Lee's *Performing Asian America*, Lee argues that the Asian American body in particular is a signifier of larger social histories. Lee states:

It seems clear that the physical body is at the center of both the violent disputes and the conceptual fuzziness surrounding the terms ethnicity and race. These terms intersect in the complicated ways in which the physical body is inscribed with meaning, whether that meaning is chosen consciously and voluntarily or is imposed from without, through social and historical factors (Lee 189).

Placing an Asian American body onstage forces the audience to confront what this particular subject signifies, whether it's history, the exotic, familiarity, etc. By examining how the Asian American body bears significance in relation to historical and societal circumstances, we can understand the actor's power to change audience perception of theatrical practice and the world outside the theater.

While the Asian American body is inlaid with histories that make it efficacious at confronting normative performance practices, it has also been used to create stereotypes. This subject is often fragmented in order to serve the formation of stereotypes, which can be understood as products of a subject's relation to hegemony. Josephine Lee describes this process, saying, "Stereotypes in popular culture and art enact a violent dismemberment that focuses attention on particular body parts and features (in the case of Asians, eyes, noses, and hair, as well as skin) by highlighting or visually severing them from the rest of the body. This dismemberment preserves the fantasy of the oppressor's self as unified, coherent, orderly, and

rational” (Lee 89). By fragmenting the Asian American body into parts, the oppressor asserts that unlike *that* body, they are whole. The graphic manner in which Lee describes fragmentation is reminiscent of butchering meat-- parts of the body are cut off from the whole in order to be sold individually at a higher price. Different parts of the Asian body are assigned value based on how exotic, wise, or silly they appear, then are offered to white audiences for consumption.

This practice is reminiscent of the ways that Europe would extract materials from Asian countries and only take what they deemed as valuable. It is based on the Orientalist mindset that the superior West has the power to assign value to Eastern products and steal them for their own gain. The Asian American actor bears the brunt of this extraction by encountering the white theatrical imagination. The idea of double consciousness comes into play here, as the Asian actor cannot ignore how their eyes, nose, hair, and skin are severed by spectators and used as signifiers for one that is “other.” These physical signs then prompt the white audience member to attach certain stereotypes to this Asian American body.

Contemporary Depictions of Asian Stereotypes

It is easy to dismiss Asian American stereotypes as negative, offensive, and simply a representation that the Asian American theatre should avoid completely. In practice, though, it is much more complicated. These stereotypes have become so much a part of the Asian American and Western consciousness that they are difficult to erase entirely. Josephine Lee argues that Asian American stereotypes exhibit an almost seductive quality about them, saying, “Stereotypes of Asian Americans are no longer simply the seductive images of the Orient rendered for consumption by white audiences. Instead, they have become woven into complex fantasies Asian Americans have about identity, community, and gender” (Lee 90-91). Whether Asian Americans

like it or not, these stereotypes are part of their history and serve as the primary basis for performance opportunities. *Miss Saigon* was a controversial production, yet it is one of the only Broadway shows with a large Asian cast. Activist Yoko Yoshikawa describes her participation in the *Miss Saigon* controversy protests in her chapter “The Heat Is on *Miss Saigon* Coalition.”

Yoshikawa details her response to watching *Miss Saigon*:

The opening number was dazzling--and loud. The musical opens in a brothel in Saigon, where prostitutes vie for the title, *Miss Saigon*. U.S. soldiers buy raffle tickets; Miss Saigon will be the prize. But I was not following the songs--this lusty dance of glistening legs and dark breasts, of ogling eyes and lathered lips in uniform mesmerized me. It pulled me in, as soft porn will (Yoshikawa 277).

Yet Yoshikawa adds, “But I also felt sickened and alienated,” she says, “...the show was designed to seduce, flooding the sense with a 3-D fantasy” (Yoshikawa 277). *Miss Saigon* is certainly effective at seducing the audience member, an experience that I was able to witness first-hand. Being both an Asian American actress and scholar, I jumped at the opportunity to see this performance, approaching it as a kind of “birth right.” Sure, I was aware of its Orientalist narrative and its unapologetic presentation of Asian stereotypes, but *Miss Saigon* is one of the only productions I have seen with a primarily Asian American cast. I felt obligated to support it. While walking around in the lobby of the theater, I saw other Asian American patrons and noticed that they, too, were excited to watch a performance in which they would see themselves represented onstage.

When the curtain opened, I was instantly drawn in by the high-energy opening number that cries, “The heat is on in Saigon.” I saw all of these beautiful Asian actresses doing splits, singing, and flirting with handsome American men, and secretly wished I could be up there

performing, as well. *Miss Saigon* is truly seductive with its flashy lights, music, and impressive helicopter-landing scene. I viewed this performance with prior knowledge about Asian American stereotypes, but I put this aside for two hours and forty minutes and enjoyed the performance I had paid for. I knew the majority of the songs and left the theatre in tears, dismayed by the tragic ending. Am I perpetuating the negative portrayals of the Asian community that I claim to support? Or am I biting at a morsel of bait that the white-dominated theatrical community is offering to me? My experience with *Miss Saigon* illustrates the challenges faced by both the Asian American community and Asian American theatre in thinking about representation and the ways in which stereotypes dominate Western thought.

The Search for Authenticity

Asian American stereotypes have historically been used to marginalize and other those of Asian descent, yet playwrights like David Henry Hwang and Phillip Kan Gotanda have worked to reclaim these characters. Hwang's *M. Butterfly* and Gotanda's *Yankee Dawg You Die* illustrate the ways in which playwrights can utilize stereotypes, rather than ignoring their theatrical power (Lee 92). David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* twists the Orientalist narrative that is played out in both *Madame Butterfly* and *Miss Saigon*. The story of an epic love affair between French diplomat Rene Gallimard and Chinese opera singer Song Liling is reenacted through the lens of Gallimard's imagination. Gallimard yearns for a different ending--one in which his "butterfly" returns to him and his honor is reestablished. Josephine Lee describes how Hwang parodies Asian stereotypes in this play, arguing, "The stereotypes of the play are self-consciously enacted by each of the characters; moreover, the entire play is structured as a reenactment in Gallimard's imagination rather than a "true event," thus ensuring that perspective is even further mediated"

(Lee 107). *M. Butterfly* contains Brechtian distancing in order to separate the narrator from the action, thus mitigating the risk of presenting stereotypical characters and narratives as acceptable.

Phillip Kan Gotanda's play, *Yankee Dawg You Die*, illustrates the internal battle of every Asian American actor: Do I give in to the stereotype? *Yankee Dawg You Die* represents two opposing views within the Asian American actor community as expressed by characters Vincent Chang and Bradley Yamashita. Chang is a Japanese American actor who changed his name to sound less Japanese and more Asian-ambiguous during the anti-Japanese sentiment of World War II. He has made a career of playing Asian caricatures, but believes that he brings authenticity to these roles, thus dismantling the system from the inside. Yamashita is a young Asian American actor who arrives in Hollywood in hopes to play complex characters unlike the stereotypes he grew up watching. Inevitably, the two crash and suss out what it means to change dominant culture. *Yankee Dawg You Die* suggests that stereotypes can be reappropriated in order to seek revenge on larger powers, but they can never be separated from their historical racism (Lee 104). The play dispels the fallacy that actors can live in the world of pure art and ignore larger political issues.

David Henry Hwang and Phillip Kan Gotanda implement similar strategies in order to subvert Asian stereotypes. Lee states:

Hwang and Gotanda create versions of stereotypes with undiminished powers. They reproduce them in all their ugliness, anxiety, and seductiveness. But they also register an intensification of anxiety as the stereotype is performed by the Asian body. Rather than simply do violence to the stereotype, these plays expose what is already inherently violent in the performance of stereotype (Lee 98).

In Hwang and Gotanda's plays, the actor must confront stereotypical characters with a "necessary evil" attitude: although painful, it must be done in order to subvert historicized ideas about the Asian Americans. Lee describes the strategies employed by *M. Butterfly* and *Yankee Dawg You Die* in relation to examining these stereotypes: First, they reveal the stereotype as a social construct. In this way, the stereotype becomes an enactment, rather than a state of being. The characters are simply actors, fully aware of their participation within the stereotypical depiction. Second, these plays take advantage of the stereotype's inability to fully contain the Asian American body by overplaying the stereotype. Finally, they both acknowledge the possibility of Asian American audiences and play to the fact that they may find identification with stereotypical characters (Lee 98). David Henry Hwang and Phillip Kan Gotanda resist stereotypes by taking hold of them and asserting agency over how Asian American actors will be portrayed.

Despite David Henry Hwang and Phillip Kan Gotanda's well-intentioned attempt at subverting Asian stereotypes and bringing authenticity to the Asian American stage, some scholars have argued that the American theatre is so steeped in white dominance that any effort to change the norm is immediately disregarded. James Moy's *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America* argues against the subversive effectiveness of *M. Butterfly* and *Yankee Dawg You Die*, as well as the notion of 'authenticity' that these two playwrights claim to promote. Moy believes that David Henry Hwang and Phillip Kan Gotanda struggle between "the Anglo-American audiences' desire to see authenticated stereotypes on the stage and the writers' desire to creat "real" representations that are commercially viable" (Moy 20). He argues that these two playwrights surrendered to consumer desire, which led to impotent attacks and the creation of a "new order of authenticated stereotype." Moy envisions a bleak future for the Asian American

theatre, as he asserts that Asian American artists will always fall victim to paying Anglo-American audiences. Offering a cynical, capitalistic view of the theatre, Moy does not see much hope for the insurgence of Asian American theatre if it continues catering to the mainstream.

Moy makes a recommendation for the future of the Asian American theatre, stating

Asian American must use the representational apparatus to produce material that can convince its own “masses” that they are worthy of more than a mere moment in a freak show, the displacing panoptic of the white American dream. For only then will the representational projects of Asian America begin the difficult task of dismantling Asian American invisibility for the Anglo community as well (Moy 141).

Moy believes the Asian American theatre’s first priority should be to build up a sense of pride and a sense of self among the Asian American community. His thought is very much in line with the idea of attaining cultural citizenship. There is certainly room to be critical of such “authentic plays” as *M. Butterfly* and *Yankee Dawg You Die* and while slightly hostile, Moy uses these two plays as an example of what happens when Asian American playwrights feel pressured to fight for their seat at the table. Moy asserts that the Asian American theatre needs to stop trying to work within mainstream sensibilities and establish itself as its own cultural institution. In this way, the Asian American theatre can be respected on its own merit, not by the validation of the mainstream.

A Return to the Actor

During the avant-garde period of European theatrical development, directors such as Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba grew tired of text-based works and turned their attention to

actor training. Grotowski's actor-centered practices largely informed the work of Eugenio Barba and in turn, Barba's actor training culminated to what we now know of as Theatre Anthropology, a form of theatre that emphasizes the innate pre-expressive principles that exist among actors of different cultures. Grotowski and Barba acknowledged the power of the actor, because the theatre does not exist without this entity. A similar line of thinking can be seen within the Asian American theatre, which is keen on placing the Asian American actor at the center of the theatrical experience. The Asian American theatre has certainly been marked by a slew of texts that have worked to define this community's sensibility, yet it must recognize the power of placing an Asian American body onstage and allowing its presence to speak for itself. Rooted in a biological present and inlaid with a subjective and community history, the Asian American actor has the power to deconstruct symbolic orders and assert its own intercultural, hybrid identity. Emphasis on the Asian American actor and their individual experience is a facet of the Asian American theatre that has yet to be explored: that of the solo performer.

Asian American Solo Performance

The form of solo performance is a departure from the theatrical conventions of pre-existing texts, casting, and structures dictated by playwright and director. Through this performance style, the artist becomes the agent of their own production; they have the power to determine how the story unfolds and how they are going to tell it. Solo performance offers an poignant avenue for the Asian American theatre, as it allows the actor to express the nuances within the Asian American experience and distill what it personally means for an artist to be culturally steeped between two worlds. Esther Kim Lee explains the development of solo performance as a sect of the Asian American theatre, saying, "Asian faces and bodies, along with

the stereotype of Asian Americans as the perpetual foreigner and stranger, demanded explanation of the obvious: where they were from and what they were doing in America” (“Between the Personal” 161). This form allowed the Asian American to answer these questions directly, yet put their own twist on the tale. Lee cites Rosemarie Garland Thompson (a disabled performance artist) in her discussion in order to explain how solo performance is a platform for explaining the Asian American experience. Garland Thompson states:

The meaning of the body, thus the meaning of self, emerges through social relations. We learn who we are by the responses we elicit from others. In social relations, disabled bodies prompt the question, ‘What happened to you?’ The disabled body demands a narrative, requires an apologia that accounts for its difference from unexceptional bodies. In this sense, disability identity is constituted by the story of why my body is different from your body (Thompson 334).

Esther Kim Lee argues that similar to the disabled body, the Asian American body demands an explanation of why it is different. Solo performance provides actors with the opportunity to address common inquiries on their prerogative. Within this form, the Asian American body is both “culturally specific and historically determined,” working to explore a hybrid identity that crosses borders (“Between the Personal” 126). For the Asian American solo performer, this style allows for the actor to explore their interculturalism and place it at the center of their work.

Solo performance also gives the Asian American actor agency over the voyeuristic gaze that has plagued Asian performance by othering the Asian subject for the spectator’s delight. The solo performer not only invites the voyeur into their life, but has control over what the spectator is able to see. The solo performer often writes and performs their own work, reclaiming Asian

American representation by speaking for themselves, rather than through the words of a playwright. Lee goes on to further explain Asian American solo performance:

Stories from Asian American solo performances are deeply and sometimes disturbingly personal, and audiences sometimes become voyeurs to the performer's private thoughts. Without the conventional medium of theatrical representation (e.g. an actor enacting a character written by a playwright) filtering the "truthfulness," solo performers are as "authentic" as they can be onstage ("Between the Personal" 176).

Solo performance reflects the spirit of European theatre artists like Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski, and Eugenio Barba by emphasizing the creativity of the actor, rather than playing a part within another artist's imagination. It presents a different approach to authenticity.

Playwrights such as David Henry Hwang and Phillip Kan Gotanda supposedly gave an "authentic" look at the Asian experience, but much like an art piece or an artifact, labeling something as "authentic" yields examination to confirm it as such. With solo performance--especially one that is autobiographical--the claim of authenticity is uncontested, as it peppered with undeniable personal facts. The Asian American solo performer can go onstage and say, "This is my truth."

Asian American solo performance reveals the solo performer's dualistic relationship between singularity and multiplicity. Dan Kwong, the creator of his solo performance entitled "Everything You Wanted to Know About Asian Men (but didn't give enough of a \$##*@! To Ask)," describes his approach to making solo work, stating "Telling one's story on one's own terms is an act of self-empowerment and validation, as an individual and as a member of a group. It says, 'I am here and my experience, our experience in this culture, matters'" ("Between the

Personal” 290). Kwong highlights the singular experience of the Asian American solo performer. By the nature of this form, there is only one point of focus: that of the actor. As a result, the audience has no choice but to direct their attention to this solo body and the story they tell.

Yet, as Kwong mentions, there is not just one Asian American experience. The motto of the United States is *E pluribus unum*, out of many, one. The solo performer recognizes that they are one piece of a larger community, which points to their relationship with multiplicity. The experiences expressed by the actor are personal, but may very well resonate with other members of the Asian American community. The solo performer represents themselves, but their connection to Asian America at large also turns them into a kind of representative for the Asian American experience. They also reflect multiplicity by demonstrating that the Asian American is not just one thing. They are not one stereotype, one experience, one nationality, or one face. The ethos of Asian American solo performance is embodied by the words of Walt Whitman: “I contain multitudes.”

The Legacy of the Asian American Theatre

The Asian American theatre also has a dual relationship with singularity and multiplicity. It is singular in that it encapsulates a community with the shared goal of providing opportunities for Asian American artists and working to establish cultural citizenship. The Asian American theatre arose from a shared experience of marginalization within American society. Yet it is submerged in multiplicity through the diverse nature of Asian America and the variety of stories that are told through the Asian American theatre. This community is whole and all-embracing, yet champions and gives voice to the individual.

Shaped by singularity and multiplicity, the Asian American theatre provides a lens to look at the sociological forces at play within performance. It is revelatory of the constructive nature of race and how theatre both perpetuates and challenges these societal structures under the veil of representation and the performance of identity. The Asian American theatre also explores what it means to be intercultural within a supposedly inclusive, yet predominantly white society. The Asian American actor is presented with the experience of being caught between two worlds, which proves challenging, particularly when they are denied the opportunity to decide how they are going to tell their story. Despite the challenges that the Asian American theatre has faced, its development has shown that possessing an intercultural identity is incredibly bountiful in artistic possibility and has the power to change the way people think about the world. This theatre community encourages people to look beyond their comfortable bubble of the norm and seek new modes of perception. The Asian American actor has grafted challenge, exploration, and expressivity onto their roots. From there, they have the chance to grow something new.

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Afterword

The Asian American Theatre and the practices of European theatre artists in the twentieth century have a throughline of engaging with cultural traditions that stand outside of white hegemonic society. They share a history of exoticizing an Asian body that is considered other, yet both use the differences between two cultures in order to create an exciting mode of theatrical practice. Through the interactions between Asia, Europe, and the United States, theatre artists discovered the possibilities of intercultural theatre, which connects cultural spheres to form a new language of performance.

The first chapter explores the intercultural through an anthropological standpoint. Artaud and Brecht viewed Asian culture as strange, yet fascinating. They lacked a desire to investigate traditions outside of their own, always holding Balinese dance or Chinese theatre at a distance.. Barba, on the other hand, aimed to understand Asian performance traditions by engaging with the artist and tradition's original context. In doing this, the theatre artist recognized the similarities between actors from different cultural traditions. Barba delved into the idea of the human body as a canvas inlaid with histories from their cultural backgrounds, using the intercultural as a lens from which to explore the potentiality of the actor. He saw theatre as a distinctly anthropological art form, making the intercultural theatre a utopia of connection amongst all artists.

The second chapter grafts the anthropological findings of the twentieth century theatre onto the distinctly sociological performance ground of the Asian American Theatre. This theatre form engages with interculturality by exploring what it means to exist between worlds. Here, the intercultural becomes a point of contention within a predominantly white society, as Asian American actors fight for representation and the chance to tell their own story. Rather than

looking at the dynamics of intercultural practice, the Asian American theatre wears the intercultural on its sleeve. This theatre community provides a focused attention on the nature of roots and the implications of living in a world in which these roots are unwanted.

Through studying the intercultural by way of the Asian American theatre and European-Asian theatrical exchange, we can discover the threads that connect seemingly disparate people. Theatre is distinct in its liveness and ability to put people in confrontation with one another. Some scholars have said that this art form is dangerous in this way. Yet, we live in a world in which one culture--whiteness-- is thought to be the default. The confrontational aspect of theatre is often mediated by placing a body which is thought to be the norm in front of another body. The intercultural theatre subverts this staleness by demonstrating that people from different cultures can come together and use the differences between them to create art that defies the norm. It “ups-the-ante” of theatre’s dangerous quality by joining people that are structurally kept apart.

Whether the intercultural is practiced by grafting one cultural tradition onto another or by promoting authentic representation of an often marginalized experience, it must persist in order to challenge conventions of theatre that promote one face, one history, or one experience. By asking questions, pushing beyond the boundaries of our world view, and promoting genuine engagement, we can create a prosperous direction for the intercultural theatre and continue to reorient our understanding of the global community of which we all belong.