**Performing China on the Global Stage: Edinburgh 2012**

Tarryn Chun (Harvard University)

Having grown up on local amateur American theater and touring Broadway productions, my first true encounter with Chinese drama came when I cracked open the pages of Cao Yu’s *Sunrise* for an undergraduate literature course*.* That semester, I wrote my essays on Yu Dafu and Bai Xianyong, but Cao Yu stuck with me as I began to clarify my academic interests and work through the canon of Chinese spoken drama. *Thunderstorm, Sunrise, Wilderness, Peking Man, Home, Metamorphosis, Bright Skies:* the same plays that shaped generations of modern Chinese drama came to define my own understanding of it. This summer, I had the privilege and pleasure of seeing two productions that both confirmed and challenged this understanding: the Beijing People’s Art Theater 60th Anniversary Season revival of *Thunderstorm* and the Leeds Touring Stage production of *The Sun is Not for Us* at Edinburgh Fringe. Literally and figuratively worlds apart, these two productions nonetheless can be discussed together, and doing so not only reveals radically divergent paths in the afterlives of performance texts but also demonstrates the importance of a comparative perspective to comprehending twenty-first century international and intercultural performance and spectatorship.

 Cao Yu’s *Thunderstorm* is indisputably a classic of modern spoken drama and the BPAT version, along with its numerous revivals, the production standard. Exhibitions in the theater museum at Beijing’s Capital Theater testify to the production’s illustrious history, while the recordings sold in the theater gift shop encourage audience members to endlessly replay definitive productions in the comfort of their own homes. A cursory comparison of the cover of the 2005 *Thunderstorm* DVD to a nearly identical set in the 2012 live performance makes clear the primary characteristic of BPAT’s productions: fidelity to past performances. The furniture may be reupholstered and the cast refreshed with the latest stars, but the design and staging of the play remain largely unchanged. Thunder still booms ominously at climactic moments, and Sifeng still gives a long, melodramatic pause before revealing her pregnancy to her mother. Of all of Cao Yu’s plays, it is perhaps in *Thunderstorm* that a sense of predetermination most overshadows the lives of Cao Yu’s characters, and the way in which the play’s past lives determine its present and future performances makes it all the more uncannily faithful to the original play’s themes of fate, indebtedness, and legacy.

 If anything, the opposite is true of the Leeds production*. The Sun is Not for Us* not only breaks free of the mandate to perform Cao Yu in a very specific manner, but also throws off the shackles of several key themes that run throughout Cao Yu’s oeuvre. The sets and costumes are minimalist, and the challenge of communicating four different stories in only an hour leaves little time for BPAT-esque melodrama. Instead, the actors create vivid, emotionally rich snapshots that capture carefully chosen aspects of Cao Yu’s characters and plots: for example, the fraught love triangle between Sifeng, Ping, and Fanyi appears without the incest and pregnancy, and Chen Bailu’s manipulations of her suitors occur separate from the pathos of Xiaodongxi’s prostitution. To some, the omission of key elements may seem radical or even sacrilegious, but in place of the larger-than-life natural forces – storms, sunrises, and primitive wilderness – that metaphorically batter characters with the vindictiveness of the ancient Greek Furies, the Leeds production focuses instead on those social forces that just as tightly bind its characters. In this sense, it remains quite faithful to the social concern of the original author. At the same time, the emphasis is not solely on oppression: when Chen Bailu steps backward out of her apartment window, she seems more dignified and resolute than distraught or driven to distraction. Thus, foregrounding the theme of binding and restraint – directly indicated with the opening foot-binding scene and the use of prop ribbons throughout – paradoxically frees the production to restore some agency to the female characters and infuses them with a contemporary feminist inflection that the original plays lack.

The above comparative analysis and its attention to issues of fidelity and transformation raise another set of questions. Must an audience member be familiar with the production histories of Cao Yu’s plays and the BPAT performance tradition in order to appreciate the creativity and innovation of *The Sun is Not for Us*? Can an abbreviated adaptation and amalgamation of scenes from four of Cao Yu’s plays possibly make sense to an audience largely unfamiliar with his work? Or, one could just as easily reverse the question: is such a production intelligible to Chinese audience members, who after decades of BPAT directed performance standards have come to expect a very particular type of performance of Cao Yu’s texts? Exactly what kind of audience is anticipated by this unique production?

The reflections of the director, cast members, and production staff at the pre-performance workshop and post-performance seminar held at the Confucius Institute of Scotland revealed that these questions were very much at the fore of *Sun’*s creative process. The lead actresses repeatedly mentioned the extent to which the production had changed over its long rehearsal period, and would likely change again for its November tour to China. It seems somewhat easier to draw conventional boundaries with these other performances: at Leeds, British students performed scenes from Chinese plays for a British audience, and in Shanghai, British students will perform their interpretation of Cao Yu for a Chinese audience. However, at Edinburgh, they performed for a diverse, multi-cultural, and international audience, and the show seemed perfectly pitched to it. For example, no concerted effort was made to add stereotypical visual or aural markers of Chinese-ness (other than the footbinding), Chinese names were pronounced with the actors’ native British accents, and the selected scenes made little reference to specific times and places. The time restrictions forced the director and actors to distill the production to the most essential moments, and the resulting coherence of theme – aided by smooth transitions – brought the vignettes together with remarkable cohesion. At the same time, by excerpting and recombining the scenes, the production placed Cao Yu’s characters into a liminal world all their own, and, in turn, I believe was best apprehended by an audience that was itself in an interstitial, festival space.

From a more theoretical perspective, a significant contribution of the Leeds production can be found in the way it provides a model for intercultural performance that differs from prevailing theories on the two-way exchange of cultures, which include visualizations such as sands sifting together in an hour-glass up-ended or on its side (as Susan Daniels described in her summary of intercultural performance theories at our post-performance seminar). The Edinburgh production of *Sun* does bring together two national cultures, Chinese and British, but it does so through the mediationof a third, distinct Festival culture. Festival atmosphere overtakes Edinburgh in August; locals duck their heads (or open a B&B) while international visitors and performers of all stripes overrun the town. One can have a trio of British sketches for breakfast, the latest from the National Scottish Theater for lunch, Australian stand-up for dinner, and outdoor Polish Macbeth – with pyrotechnics, motorcycles, and stilts! – for a midnight snack. Reviewers and return festival goers encourage greater than average spontaneity by advising novices to leave time in their schedules to take chances on random show advertisements. Yet, revelry falls short of the anarchic energy of Bakhtin’s carnival – tickets are required for most performances, and late-comers not admitted. It is precisely this festival culture, which values openness and diversity, but insists upon specific theater etiquette with which *Sun* resonates. By successfully triangulating among this festival culture, the Chinese culture embedded in Cao Yu’s plays, and the British culture in which they are being educated, the student actors from the Leeds production have given us a unique example of a viable model for intercultural performance and spectatorship.