**Intercultural Symposium Edinburgh 2012 Postgraduates’ Presentation**

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First of all, a big thank you to Li Ruru, the Leeds University students and the Nanjing University students for bringing us to Edinburgh this week and giving us two well performed and thought provoking plays to discuss today.

One of the questions that we found ourselves asking one another about these two plays is whether or not the pairing of the *Sun* and the *Moon* titles was purposeful. We suspect it is a coincidence, but nonetheless, we found it to be a powerful metaphor for the power of juxtaposition to throw into relief correlations and connections between otherwise unrelated theatrical works. In this case, for us, we found ourselves – perhaps thanks to Dr. Li’s prompting – considering the similarities between the two performances and the ways in which they could be watched as examples of intercultural theater.

In fact, the juxtaposition of the two performances opens up a debate about the very definition and meaning of “intercultural theater.” As a group we are certainly engaged in cross-cultural exchange, but are the plays themselves acts of intercultural artistic creation? One point of view might hold to a very precise and narrow definition of intercultural theater: a hybrid combining different cultures and performance traditions. By this definition *Sun* can be considered intercultural, but *Moon* perhaps not. However, another side might argue that all spoken drama in Chinese is intercultural because it developed out of a non-Chinese tradition during the 20th century, and, in this understanding, both could be considered intercultural, albeit for different reasons.

Thinking about these two plays through the lens of intercultural performance also opens up the question of the intercultural spectator. For British audiences of *Sun*, elements of the production like its emphasis on servant-master relations may call to mind television shows like *Upstairs Downstairs* and local socio-economic history, while spectators from different backgrounds - in which class relations per se are not so prominent a part of national consciousness –may see the theme of binding by familial and social relations as more broadly applicable to women worldwide. In *Moon*, the references to Japanese adult video and Cantonese pop made the context of the play legible and relatable to audience members who have spent time in fast-growing Chinese cities, while the themes of alienation and isolation of the individual – as well as the feeling of watching and being watched– tap into more common cosmopolitan experience and our current Facebook- and Twitter-mediated era.

At the same time,while we were eager for threads to connect the plays to one another and to our own experiences of the world, we also found that our individual backgrounds led to unique – and very different – understandings of certain elements within them. With *Moon*, for example, the core symbolism of the moon seems deceptively universal (what culture *doesn’t* have moon metaphors?), when in fact the moon has different classical referents in different cultures. Invoking the story of Chang’e and Ho Yi to those with Chinese cultural background, it is often read as a symbol of madness in British and European texts.

When it came to critical discussion of the pieces, their potential to generate multiple readings for a diverse audience became all the more apparent. Among our group of postgraduate/graduate students, we have researchers of intercultural theater, Chinese drama, Shakespeare, directing, gender studies, film, and a combination of the above. Our academic positions turned our gaze towards different details and colored our interpretations of them. For someone who studies film, one of the things that might be most striking about *Sun* was its theatricality: in combining vignettes from several plays, narrativity and character-building or plot-advancing scenes heavy with dialogue. Those scenes that do depart from classic dialogue-driven drama move towards dance and the kind of physical expression of inner psyche that has become a staple of contemporary performance training. The *Moon,*in contrast, seems filmic not because of the use of multimedia – a trait that it shares with the *Sun* – but rather because of its structure. The characters are linked less by direct relation or confrontation and more by juxtaposition of monologue; as when watching a film, audiences feel compelled to draw parallels and connections between series of scenes that are not all immediately related. And when the characters do meet onstage, the encounters are brief, awkward, and comedic – in short, realistic. Like film, the filmic performance seems particularly suited to expressing the alienated, tenuously connected condition of modern city life.

Another thing that interested us was the contrast in the ways that the two plays chose to expose the motivations and desires of their characters. In *Sun,* women literally are denied exposure to the sun, and much is left shadowed and unsaid in the dialogue; in *Moon,* characters areas if illuminated (not concealed) by the moonlight and reveal themselves through direct address monologue. They stand alone before the audience, naked and exposed.

Nakedness and bodily exposure bring to light another connection between the two plays, especially for a spectator with a background in gender studies or gender performance: the focus on the representation of genders and bodies. As came up in discussion during the workshop, Cao Yu wrote his plays during a time in which women’s liberation was a hot topic and Ibsen’s Nora was a popular symbol for women in China.*Sun*is in many ways faithful to this basic theme, but filtered through the lens of contemporary liberal British feminism. The use of foot binding scene to open the performance also touches on the issue of the female body and the fact that for women (and not just Chinese women), restrictions and confinements were visceral. To be liberated from the traditional bounds of family and class also required physical liberation. In *Moon*, the body plays an even more prominent role, but in this case we see that the effects of certain kinds of liberation – the freedom to watch whatever films one wants, to select from a wide array of goods at the supermarket, to style one’s own star persona – can lead to isolation and alienation at the fringes of society. In both cases, control and transformation of the body play a role, and the emphasis on physicality helps to bring broad themes – liberation, freedom, isolation, alienation – out of the theoretical realm and grounds them in lived, embodied experience.

As intercultural spectators, we too have shared in a lived, embodied experience: that of being present for the live performance of these two plays. It has been a truly unique experience and for this we again thank you all. We look forward to exchanging more thoughts on the productions later during the discussion session.

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