

Of Training, Tokenism and Productive Misinterpretation: Reflections on the *After China* Project

Peter Copeman and Rebecca Scollen

The theatrical adaptation of Brian Castro's novel, *After China*, was a substantial performance-as-research project undertaken at the Centre for Innovation in the Arts, Queensland University of Technology, in 1997 and 1998. Over that period the script, devised by Peter Copeman, went through a total of seven drafts with dramaturgical input from Rod Wissler. The development process included in-house workshops, a showcase reading at the 1997 conference of the Australasian Drama Studies Association, and a studio production involving staff and undergraduate students of the QUT Academy of the Arts. From this was developed a professional production, directed by Rod Wissler, which toured to Belvoir Street Theatre in Sydney in August 1998.

Research activities associated with the professional production included a focus-group feedback session with the cast of seven — four Chinese-Australians and three European-Australians — concerning processes of cross-cultural collaboration in the project and how these had impacted on, and been affected by, the individual and collective subjectivities of the cast members. This essay will delineate the theoretical and practical contexts of the *After China* project in order to establish an appropriate framework for analytical reflection on the cast responses, especially in relation to ways in which notions of 'boundaries' between cultures might need to be reconsidered in an intracultural context.

The project aligned with the strand of cross-cultural theatre Rustom Bharucha calls intraculturalism, which aims to explore and represent both the ties and the tensions between diverse cultures living together within an overall shared culture such as that of a nation state.¹ While Bharucha developed the concept in reference to the many deep-rooted tribal cultures that co-exist within the contemporary nation of India, its principles seem transferable to a multicultural nation of settlers such as Australia. *Intraculturalism* is distinct from *interculturalism*, which is generally used to explore cross-cultural interaction across national boundaries. As a concept concerned with issues of identity, location and representation in performance, intraculturalism inhabits an area of overlap between several contemporary discourses, including multiculturalism, nationalism, and postcolonialism. It shares with multiculturalism a respect for cultural difference within a wider community, but eschews what Castles et al have argued is multiculturalism's agenda of keeping minorities in their place² in favour of an active interrogation and reformulation of the dominant culture by the minorities. At the same time, intraculturalism accepts that there can be what Benedict Anderson calls an imagined community of values and attitudes shared by the majority of citizens of a nation state, regardless of their culture of origin or the relative status of that culture in the nation's mix.³

Intraculturalism also shares postcolonialism's concern with political resistance to the institutions of cultural domination wielded by national or indeed global hegemonies.

In opening up the possibility of mutually beneficial cross-cultural engagement in the theatre, an intracultural practitioner needs to pay close heed to the politics of representation while also endeavouring to ensure that they do not overwhelm the genuine artistic impulse. As Trevor Hay suggests:

Being anxious about "Asian" culture, respecting it all the time, guarding its indigenous purity, and scrutinizing the arts for paternalism, orientalism and ethnocentrism can make people very insensitive. It robs them of the raw curiosity and imagination needed for sifting through the stereotypes and finding odd traces of truth, or for simply looking at them afresh and finding inspiration.⁴

So while cross-cultural practitioners need to take account of the theoretical discourses of multiculturalism, postcolonialism and so on, they should also be prepared to engage with those discourses on the basis of their practical experience, recognising that any theory of performance should be tested and refined with reflective reference to the successes and especially the mistakes of actual practice — or what Jean-Marie Pradier calls 'productive misinterpretation'.⁵

An intracultural theatre thus offers, through the collaborative processes by which it is formed, presented and received, a frame within which aspects of difference — areas of sensitivity arising from such difference — can be probed, analysed and even transgressed, while simultaneously being celebrated. The potential for conflict arising from this probing, analysis and transgression can be modelled, along with ways of resolving it. The development of an appropriate model for intracultural work depends on a willingness from participants of all cultural background to engage in the act of cross-cultural transgression, understanding the risks but also being open to the synergistic possibilities that may ensue. All participants have to become accomplices in the transgression, all feeling that they have as much at stake, and potentially as much to gain, as the others. And this complicity, in turn, requires all sides to enter into 'a conspiracy of narration and interpretation that binds them together'.⁶ Appropriation in this context should perhaps be thought of less as theft or annexation than (after Ellen Donkin) as making appropriate or accessible.⁷ In this light appropriation becomes virtually synonymous with representation, the most basic form of which, according to Ben B Halm, is mimesis. Mimesis, in turn, is 'a way of imitating or "making like" others in order to understand and ultimately comprehend (embrace; consume) them'.⁸

An adaptation of Brian Castro's *After China* was chosen as the vehicle for an exploration of these issues for several reasons. The novel is postcolonial, postmodern and intracultural — a difficult, delicate, irascible, middle-aged cross-cultural love story. It is also a story about storytelling, about its power to help us cope with the transitory, illusory and contradictory nature of existence. The two main characters, a Chinese-Australian architect and a European-Australian writer, meet on a beach. He has escaped from the China of the Cultural Revolution; she is dying of cancer. Attracted to each other yet infinitely cautious, they spin ties between themselves with stories of ancient China, of architectural history, and, hesitantly, of their own guilt-laden pasts. The Chinese stories derive from Taoist manuals which prescribe sexual control as a path to immortality, but as Louise's disease advances, they come

to accept that while their bodies are totally time-bound, storytelling can begin to exorcise time. The novel presents the storytelling in a labyrinthine, associative form with a postmodern plethora of parody, pastiche, quotation, self-reflexiveness and eclecticism that challenges any adaptation to find performative equivalents.

In the play, the writer Louise becomes a kind of Dianne Cilento figure, a playwright/director living and working in an idyllic Australian coastal town, surrounded by a troupe of actors who help develop her work. The stories within the story of the novel are couched as plays within the adapted play, each performed by the members of the troupe, while the play as a whole is revealed to be Louise's last opus, written while she has been living the events depicted in it. Each of the plays within the play has its own performance style, chosen to resonate with the content and period of the story, so that the whole text mixes styles from the dominant European theatre traditions of Australia with forms and traditions from Chinese culture. Thus stories of Ancient China are presented in a style loosely fashioned after traditional Beijing Opera; stories of the architect You Bok Mun's youth in the Cultural Revolution are fashioned after the 'model operas' of that period; a story of nineteenth-century English architectural innovation is styled after Gilbert and Sullivan musicals; stories of Louise's youth in 1950s Australia are fashioned after Samuel Beckett's theatre; and stories of You's time as a student in the Paris of the 1960s are modelled on early rock opera. The pastiche is contained within an overarching style loosely based on Brecht's concept of epic theatre.

These stylistic appropriations — or perhaps they are better termed misappropriations since what was sought was *influence* rather than imitation — were intended to balance each other as far as possible. The physical/visual/musical emphasis of the European styles (even the Beckettian echoes of vaudeville and circus clowning) sought to reciprocate the similar emphasis of the Chinese styles. Any suspicion that the Chinese styles were appropriated merely for their quaint, exotic otherness were hopefully allayed by the appropriation of European styles which, by dint of their historicity, might be equally quaint, exotic and 'other' for many contemporary performers and audiences. Such a range of styles posed a fairly daunting challenge for directors Rod Wissler and Simon Chan (director of the in-house studio production), as well as for other key creative production personnel, especially composer Deng Wei, movement director Anna Yen, choreographer Cheryl Stock and Beijing Opera specialist Susan Wang. The key task was to find an appropriate level at which to pitch the stylistic influences of each of the plays within the play, and an overall approach to the production that would contain the diverse styles within some kind of cohesive whole. There was the additional challenge of selecting a cast not only with the right mix of Chinese and European ethnic backgrounds, but also capable of performing the range of styles to a uniform, professional standard. For the cast themselves, there was the challenge of actually achieving these performances.

The cast consisted of seven performers: four female, three male; four of Chinese background, three of European. The two lead roles of You Bok Mun and Louise Carter were played respectively by Lawrence Mah, a professional actor, and Christine Comans, a member of the Academy's academic staff, both of whom had already played their roles in the developmental studio season. The troupe members consisted of the following: Simon Chan, an MA student in the Academy with some professional experience; Anna Yen, a highly trained physical theatre and circus performer who

had worked as movement director on the studio production, continuing in that role for the professional one as well as performing in it; Barbara Fordham, an acting graduate from the Academy now known mostly as a singer; Chris Sleight, a highly experienced circus performer and physical theatre exponent; and Hsiao-Ling Tang, a recent acting graduate on her first professional engagement.

Each of the troupe members had to be able not only to execute at least basic physical theatre moves such as tumbles and lifts (and in some cases much more sophisticated ones), but also to play between five and eight acting roles in the different styles outlined. They also had to sing in a similar range of styles, including in solo. The challenge of these tasks was intensified by the fact that there was only a three-week rehearsal period, not even the standard four weeks usually allocated to professional productions, most of which are of plays with established production provenance and less stylistic complexity. The reason for this was purely financial; there simply were not the resources to fund the extra week. It was hoped that there would be some offset in the groundwork already laid by the studio production (in which four of the cast had also been involved). However, while this proved to be the case to some degree, it was no substitute for adequate preparation time, as the cast focus-group discussion demonstrated.

This discussion was held late in the Sydney season, attended by all of the cast and facilitated by Rebecca Scollen, a PhD student in the Academy researching theatre audience development strategies including the use of focus groups. With no artistic or cross-cultural investment of her own in the project, Scollen was accepted by the cast as impartial, although they had had sufficient social contact with her to feel comfortable with her presence. For her part, Scollen had seen the production several times and so could comprehend the issues raised. She had prepared a series of questions with which to prime the proceedings, but found little need of them as the ground was well covered in the free-ranging, hour-long discussion. Since it is beyond the scope of this essay to canvass every aspect of the discussion in detail, we intend to focus on three interrelated issues that took up most of the time: the representation of certain Chinese cultural artifacts in the production design; the use of accents in the portrayal of Chinese characters; and especially the degree of skill and therefore training needed to meet the stylistic demands of the script.

The design was conceptually simple, with a stage bare except for a few mobile boxes that did service as tables, chairs, beds and so on. Location, ambience, and mood were established by projection of slide and video images onto parts of the stage. Most of these were straightforward enough, but in one scene Chinese script characters were projected to suggest excerpts from the Taoist manuals. Questions were raised by the Chinese-background members of the cast as to whether some of the characters were back to front, and whether the characters were indeed from the Taoist manuals. These cast members were acutely aware that although they themselves could not read Chinese, some audience members familiar with the language might recognise any errors. Similar concerns were expressed about the decorative markings on the masks used in the passages of the play styled after Beijing Opera. Masks are not, of course, traditionally used in Beijing Opera — or to be precise, they are not used as separate costume items; rather an elaborate mask is applied to the face via make-up. This was not a viable option in *After China* because of the need for troupe members to change quickly from scenes performed in completely different styles. It was therefore decided early in the development

process that the make-up effect would be achieved by the use of masks. However, since the ones provided by the designer were not replicas of the traditional make-up designs but distortions of them, concerns arose that the masks might cause offence to audience members familiar with the details of Beijing Opera traditions.

In the cases of both the projections and the masks, the Chinese-Australian cast members were concerned not so much that the traditions were appropriated, adapted and even distorted⁹ but rather that they had had no input, and therefore no complicity, in the aesthetic and cultural considerations underpinning the design choices. For lack of time and resources, and possibly for lack of experience on the part of the designer (who is primarily a visual artist) both in stage work and in cross-cultural collaboration, many of the design elements, including the suspect projections, were not seen by the cast members until very late in the production process, when there was no time to change anything. This created a double jeopardy for the Chinese-Australian cast members. They felt that because they looked Chinese, audiences would hold them responsible for transgressions, even though none of them were steeped in Chinese culture and some had even gone through stages of rejecting their Chinese backgrounds altogether. Simon Chan, for example, has written elsewhere of his alienation from his cultural origins:

Like most migrants who must learn a second language, I decided when I was getting my head slammed in lockers at a private boys' school for being a "disgusting chink" that the only way I could retaliate (physically was out of the question) was by being better at communicating than any of them ... I completely rejected my parents' culture, which seemed barbaric and driven purely by economic rationalism, and embraced a white, patriarchal, text-based culture which I loved.¹⁰

Moreover, as Anna Yen stated in the focus-group, 'it isn't the job of the Chinese performers in the cast to act as the dramaturgical resource on Chinese culture'. This raises questions as to just how far an intracultural collaboration of this nature can actually be considered cross-cultural at all, and who indeed is responsible for deciding where the boundaries are drawn. What is an appropriate level of cultural appropriation?

Similar issues were also raised in the focus-group with regard to the use of accents in the portrayal of Chinese characters. The play, like the novel, is written entirely in English, even those passages set in China and France. The book has remarkably little dialogue, so in transforming the book's narrative into a performance script Peter Copeman had tried to incorporate a variety of 'englishes', capturing appropriate rhythms, cadences and vocabularies for each context. These were relatively easy for the passages 'naturally' in English. The language and accents were those of Victorian England and America for the Gilbert-and-Sullivan-inspired scene, 1950s working-class Australia for the Beckettian scene, and so on. For the Paris sequence, Copeman attempted to capture a sense of the rhythms and syntax of French (with which he is familiar), while for the passages set in China, he chose a slightly formal, punctilious style of dialogue to suggest the speech patterns of Chinese people fluent but not colloquial in English as a second language. His objective in both the Paris and China sequences was to avoid the use of accents, and the potential for cliché and negative cultural stereotyping they can engender, by letting the linguistic patterns alone mark the dialogue as different from those passages 'naturally' in English.

Contrary to these intentions, the performers took the scripted linguistic patterns as indications that they *should* adopt accents. Barbara Fordham stated in the focus group: 'In some places the writing seems to suggest an accent ... It's all very pointed and has a rhythm to it ... So even when I'm not doing an accent as such, the lines have made me go a bit more sing-songy'. Hsiao-Ling Tang agreed, stating in relation to one scene that required a sort of Beijing Opera stylised voice, 'I automatically wanted to go into an accent. And it was never fully discussed why I shouldn't. But yes, there were rhythms ... that suggested it'. (The scene to which Tang refers here is the only one in which the dialogue was lifted almost verbatim from the novel, and from which Copeman partially took his cue for the linguistic patterns of the other China passages.) In nearly all cases the adoption of Chinese accents was resisted, apparently because the European-background performers were sensitive that their Chinese-background collaborators — especially those such as Lawrence Mah whose everyday English is still fairly heavily accented — would be insulted by the implication of stereotype. The one exception was Chris Sleight's performance as You's father in the Shanghai of the 1950s. For this particular role, it was deemed acceptable to adopt an accent because, as he stated in the discussion, after two hours of meetings about the issue, it was decided that an accent for 'the father worked because it was funny, but best avoid them for the other characters'.

While it is true that stereotypes can be a useful source of humour, they risk eliciting in the audience Orientalist feelings of superiority towards the quaint and exotic otherness of the characters, rather than encouraging viewers to laugh at the intrinsic absurdity of the situation and relationships portrayed. The performance of the Paris sequence demonstrated the risk of similar stereotyping in the presentation of European culture. It was played with full-on accents reinforced by other clichés such as the wearing of berets, in an unabashed bid to get laughs. This it certainly achieved, but at the expense of rendering the passage into a parody wherein cynical nineties performers sent up the silly extremes of the sixties. The developmental studio season, by contrast, with undergraduate students playing the sequence dead straight and without accents, had captured the naive youthful idealism of that period far more truthfully.

The third and most significant issue raised in the focus-group concerned the degree of skill, and therefore of training, required to fulfil extensive stylistic demands of the script. In particular, being asked to perform several passages in a style influenced by Beijing Opera with so little preparation time was clearly a source of considerable anxiety for most of the cast. Hsiao-Ling Tang stated that she felt fake and stupid, while Chris Sleight perhaps summed up the general feeling as follows:

I think your culture lives in your body as much as it lives in your mind. Whoever does this play next needs to [train extremely rigorously] in order for their bodies to understand the culture of Chinese physical theatre. You can't understand it by reading about it ... You don't even get the flavour from three hours with Susan Wang. You can't cut those corners if you're going to give any integrity to yourself as an artist and to the culture you're working with.

Yet while this concern about lack of training was shared by all the cast, there was also recognition that no realistically achievable amount of training would allow the performers to gain full competency in a form that, in its native context, requires

extensive performer training from an early age. Christine Comans suggested, however, that the problem may not have been as great as anticipated, and that the level of achievement may in fact have been consistent with the intention of the play: '[since a] fictional playwright-cum-director is devising the work with her cast, I think what we've achieved is probably truthful. I'm not trying to defend any lack of training, but I think we may have succeeded more than we're giving ourselves credit for.

It is noteworthy that the concerns about training centred primarily on the sequences derived from Chinese theatre forms. There was little need expressed for intensive training in the Western historical styles characteristic of rock opera, or the work of Beckett, or Gilbert and Sullivan. Only Simon Chan reminded the others that they were doing seven different styles in all, asking, 'How much training do you need to do all of them?' and 'Could anyone humanly afford that?' It seems that the performers, whether of Chinese or European cultural background, generally felt more comfortable appropriating — and potentially misappropriating — European notions of *mise-en-scène*, European/American accents, and European historical performance styles, than they did appropriating Chinese ones.

The different level of concern about appropriations of European and Chinese traditions articulates a central problematic for intracultural theatre in a settler society: where lies the cultural boundary the collaborators are seeking to cross? All the team members — including the cast and other key creative personnel such as the playwright, director, designer and so on — having lived in Australia for most if not all of their lives, have the *national* culture (encompassing, to a large degree, the global culture) more or less in common. Moreover, they have internalised much of the national culture's worldview including, possibly, some of its Orientalist and racist elements. This worldview encompasses a greater familiarity with European cultural traditions, including the European tradition of appropriating and reinventing its traditions with each generation, than with Asian ones. The degree to which the collaborators also espouse a worldview derived from their primary culture of origin — whether Chinese or Irish or Scottish or whatever — is highly variable, not just in terms of the collaborative process but also for each individual's personal sense of identity, which may change according to social circumstance. And this is without even problematising monolithic notions of 'Chinese', 'Irish' and so on. The Chinese-Australian collaborators, like their European-background colleagues, approach Chinese culture(s) in a way inevitably mediated, at least in part, by Western views of Asia. In this respect, approaching Asian theatre traditions 'through the lens of the Western practitioner'¹¹ may lead performers to see the Chinese part of their identity 'as having a kind of "otherness"'.¹²

So it would seem that in the *After China* project, because no simple boundary existed between the cultures represented, all members of the company, no matter what their culture of origin, could speak to some degree for both sides of the cultural 'divide'. For example, Chinese-Australians could work as much from their training in Lecoq methods as from their experience of Chinese acrobatics and vice versa for the European-Australians. Yet equally, all clearly felt a greater degree of uncertainty and sensitivity about representing the cultural traditions most foreign to them: the Chinese ones. (It is worth noting here that Susan Wang, the specialist who provided what training the cast did receive in Beijing Opera, and who might have been expected to demand some level of 'authenticity' in its execution, seemed far less concerned

than any cast members about either the level at which the form was appropriated and performed, or the degree to which it was hybridised with other forms.) In the final analysis, the cast and other key creative personnel were all, in varying ways, Australian, all in search of a complex notion of what that means at this point in our history, and in relationship to other determinants of our identity. To that end, all were arguably seeking some kind of experience of 'Chinese-ness' or at least 'Asian-ness' through their involvement in the project. This may have been directly, say, in the case of Simon Chan, trying to come to terms with a cultural identity he had previously suppressed in his efforts to fit into Australian society; or more obliquely, as in the case of the European-Australians, trying to negotiate, articulate and promulgate a more complex and contemporary identity responsive to Australia's multicultural reality and its newly emerging ties to its geographic region.

This would suggest that the intracultural collaborative process might involve less a crossing of borders — for this implies the existence of distinguishable boundaries — than the negotiation of something more analogous to a common market. Certain aspects of the associating cultures might be declared sacrosanct and inviolable, while others are absorbed into a protectionless free trade zone in which cultural values and forms remain in a state of continuous flux and contention until all participants negotiate a common agreement about the limits of acceptable appropriation and appropriate (because productive) misinterpretation. Such a process appears to be the diametric opposite of the transculturalism of, say, Peter Brook. Rather than attempting to develop a theatre which 'transcends particular cultures on behalf of a universality of the human condition',¹³ intraculturalism *assumes* a pre-existing universality of the human condition (or something approaching it) among its participants, and seeks to negotiate a theatre which explores, explains and celebrates particular differences within that universality.

In the case of *After China*, the main areas of cast concern seem to have arisen where the processes of collaborative communication and negotiation either broke down or, in the case of the design elements, were not fully entered into in the first place, mainly for lack of time. Indeed, more focus-group sessions built into the rehearsal process and widened to include the other key creative personnel might very possibly have resolved the areas of cast uncertainty. As Barbara Fordham stated, 'it's almost like this conversation we're having now is the one we should have had way earlier in the process'. This reinforces the fairly obvious point that, despite a confidence born of a two-year development provenance for the script and production concept, it is perilous to truncate a part of the process as crucial as the preparation of its first professional outing, especially when that involves personnel who have not contributed to the previous development phases.

The success of the cast focus-group in identifying and clarifying issues of cultural representation 'from the coal-face' also demonstrates the value of such performance research processes, not only for scholarly and theoretical purposes, but also for the cast themselves in action research terms. The focus group was a mechanism whereby individuals could reflect on the process in broader terms, expressing their own insights in a secure and non-threatening way. This was something the performers appreciated and enjoyed, feeling their opinions were valued and would contribute to any further development of *After China*. All finally agreed that, despite their concerns, they would like to be part of that further development, for although this essay has focused primarily on the cast's main

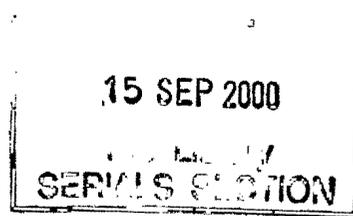
areas of concern, there were many positive things said in the focus group. Christine Comans stated that:

unless we take these sorts of risks with ... this mishmash of clashes of style ... how will we ever find a new form? This is how new forms happen. If we just honour the old forms all the time, nothing will ever change ... I see it in the big picture as a struggle towards new understandings of what Australian theatre can be and what new styles and forms we can produce.

And for Lawrence Mah, the final proof of the pudding was in the eating:

We all know about the Chinese dish chop-suey, and we probably all like it. Chop-suey is traditionally made from the leftovers from previous meals, with each ingredient on its own being no longer tasteworthy. Yet put together we get a wonderful dish. I think we should look at this play in its entirety, as a complete product on the stage. We're all arguing about little components, but if we look at the total dish, I think it's quite delicious, like chop-suey. We can criticise individual components till the cows come home, but the audience sees the complete presentation, and seems to find it quite palatable entertainment.

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