MAKING LEAR DREAMING: SINGAPORE, AFFECTS AND TRANSNATIONAL ENCOUNTERS
AN INTERVIEW WITH ONG KENG SEN

BY DR MARGHERITA LAERA

Margherita Laera: Mr Ong, in May 2012 your new production Lear Dreaming opened at the SOTA Theatre in Singapore as part of the Singapore Arts Festival. This was not your first attempt to adapt Shakespeare’s King Lear for a contemporary audience. In 1997 your first project, entitled Lear, had attracted considerable attention and controversy among spectators, critics and academics. Having had the chance to attend rehearsals for Lear Dreaming, I have been struck by how much the ‘original’ production haunts this new work, almost like a ghost. What interests you about this text and why did you come back to it?

Ong Keng Sen: I came to this text very simply because I studied Shakespeare at school, but I actually read King Lear for the first time at the age of ten, when my older sister was studying it. I decided to stage it because it was one of Shakespeare’s tragedies on which I was most familiar, but also for a number of resonances that I think still apply today, especially in the context of Singapore and Asia in general. There was something archetypical about this story that really attracted me: in the beginning of the play, a general asks his daughters how much they love him and then banishes the one that actually is the most loyal. I find this scenario very Asian: the ‘original’ production haunts this new work, almost like a ghost.

ML: Do you mean with your life on a personal or political level?

OKS: Both. For instance, Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father of Singapore, fought for the independence of this island from the British after World War II. He very much promoted the idea of Asian democracy as being different from Western democracy, and of course this was a way to consolidate his power and authority in Singapore. There is the sense that you have to be loyal and obedient to the state, that you have to be Asian. Overall my 1997 production was much more political than Lear Dreaming, because back then I was making a strong statement about ‘new Asia’, the conceptual perspective of killing the father and the necessity of ridding ourselves of history in order to move on. In 1997, the production aimed to be a morality tale for young generations who kill their fathers but then realise that it is almost impossible to break free from their heritage, that they are forever bound by history which repeats itself and its narratives. The sense of violent acts perpetrated by the characters on stage served the purpose of freeing the younger generations from their history, but at the same time there was the sense that inevitable they will not succeed in freeing themselves.

ML: Has this shift from politics to ‘human nature’ got anything to do with the current socio-political situation? Do you feel that you no longer need to spur younger generations to political action?

OKS: No, I think this reflects changes in personal views. I believe that there is a need for art to become more personal in a time flooded by political manifestos, advertisement and branding. Especially in Singapore, I feel there is still very little respect for the individual. The individual’s perspective is not deemed important unless it has some kind of social relevance. So Lear Dreaming is less didactic in its approach, even if of course it allows the various political readings. In the 1997 production, Japanese critics felt threatened by the fact that Ganeri was interpreted by a Chinese opera singer, while the Father was performed by a Japanese No actor. China at the time was still emerging as an economic power, and this stage metaphor did not go down very well among the Japanese. In 1997, I was shocked to see how people read the show as representative of cultural issues.

ML: Do you mean with your life on a personal or political level?

OKS: Yes, they did. But I really was not expecting that. In Lear Dreaming, there are still ways in which this new production can resonate politically, and I am now aware that I cannot stop people from making those readings. For instance, people could ask why the Mother, a Korean comfort singer, kills the Japanese King. One possible interpretation has to do with the issue of Korean comfort women, and I subscribe to that reading to an extent. However, I am more interested in the human aspect of the story.

ML: In Lear Dreaming, the Daughter is still Chinese and the Father is still Japanese. Why did you chose to leave these nationalities intact?

OKS: Maybe, as you said earlier, the 1997 experience haunts the new production. But I think casting for Lear Dreaming was a different matter altogether. I chose to work with
specific performers because I had worked with them before and had already appreciated their abilities, while in 1997 the casting was almost done culturally. I always return to Asian performing arts traditions as a form of beginning for my work. My decisions are based on an idea of the effect I want to achieve. I like casting transnationally, I never think of casting exclusively people who live in my city.

ML: Can you tell us more about the cast of Lear Dreaming?

OKS: Wu Man is the pipa player who performs the Daughter. I admire the mystery that she has when she plays her instrument, I think she is able to go quite deeply into a sort of autistic relationship with the instrument. I include her art form in the 1997 production because I felt it was important to have a group of artists who came from that kind of background, who saw the mother as the most important element in their culture. In Lear Dreaming, I wanted someone who could perform the community storyteller, and I feel Randai embodies a didactic theatrical form through which morality tales are passed on to the members of a community. So naturally I gravitated back to Wu Man but moved him out of the orchestra pit onto the stage as a character! As for the musicians, my constant collaborator Yamamoto Tama's electronic music smooths or disrupts established power hierarchies by writing in vernacular Japanese, disregarding the classical literary language. I think she raised some important questions in this text. But whereas in 1997 we had Kishida's adaptation of King Lear, this time we are working with an adaptation of King Lear's son, so we are twice removed from Shakespeare. I wanted to keep exploring the idea of femininity as set out by Kishida. Also, I am interested in what happens if we move further and farther away from King Lear.

ML: The first week-long workshop for Lear Dreaming was held in New York City in March 2011. Following this, in May 2012, you devised and rehearsed for two weeks in Singapore. Can you tell us about the process of creating this piece?

OKS: With artists of this calibre, I can be a fast worker. During the first workshop I was able to draft every scene and locate those sections that required more work. This is primarily a musical piece performed by virtuoso artists, and I knew I was going to foreground their abilities, but I was also aware that I was going to require some of the musicians to act as well. I asked them to step outside of their specialist area of virtuosity, perhaps making them uncomfortable. I like working with the limitations that emerge from the performers' virtuosic skills, but at the same time this demands a lot of attention. How can I guide a singer towards the act of stabbing another character onstage? I think this kind of negotiations are interesting, they are the fault lines of interdisciplinary intercultural work, and I like stepping on those fault lines. That is where my own artistry emerges, in solving these practical problems. Mostly however, I leave the performers with the freedom to express themselves and their art on stage.

ML: In general, what do rehearsals mean to you? Are they a moment of creation or verification?

OKS: For me, they are often a trial period to explore ideas, and perhaps fail in doing so. I do not think rehearsals work as a period of verification for me, on the contrary I have instincts and I try things out in the studio. It is about working with the materiality of the performers, a bit like sculpting clay, and being open to the material as it speaks to you. I really enjoy rehearsals and the materiality of this encounter. Rehearsals are a testimony to the fact that labour and pleasure are so intertwined in the process of creation or verification.
Much of your work during the rehearsal process for Lear Dreaming had to do with managing feelings. Whether you were the anxieties of performers, the designation of a character’s emotional landscape or the discussion of the desired affective response to a scene, you are constantly dealing with sentiments. And talking about them. How do you approach this task?

OKS: This has been quite a different process for me, since much of my work is not about feelings at all but about developing conceptual elements and narratives. I would say that these performers are quite emotionally responsive, and I feel this vocabulary is effective with them. I tell them about the feeling of a particular moment. I ask them to find a particular emotion in them when they perform, and I hope that this will be visible to the spectators. I use an affective language because I do not have a musical background, so I cannot talk to them in technical terms about their music. I leave them to work out some of the technicalities for themselves. It is a bit like directing Bertolt Brecht in German without understanding German which, I have done it, is all about feeling a certain response about the language. I think that in a transnational context, even if you are using a default language like English, you very often have to work on feelings because it is hard to communicate conceptually, when people do not speak the same language. Although we were communicating in English, most performers and musicians did not know English at all and, during rehearsals, they had to rely on interpreters. I know that translation is problematic, and I was aware of the fact that what I was saying was not being translated exactly as I meant it. So I dealt with these distortions by discussing aesthetics through emotions. I think emotions could be seen as the lowest common denominator in a transnational environment like our rehearsal room. The question is: how do you effect a response? And in the context of this production, you do it through affect. Every performer had the feeling that Brecht was there. Kang in ‘zamakwa’ Kang in ‘zamakwa’, have their techniques for ‘getting there’. How do you communicate across at least four linguistic borders? There are many invisible boundaries between these performers and very little common ground. So how do you find a link?

ML: You are known for your interest in intercultural theatre experiments. Do you consider interculturalism as an option or a necessity? And do you think your delight in mixing traditions and cultures bears a relationship with Singaporean history and transnationalism?

OKS: I do think of it as a necessity, but interculturalism is so natural for me, I cannot think of any other way to make a work. I think that Singapore has given me this perspective. And at the same time I know my work is so distant from the Singaporean audiences who come and watch it. If you project a metaphor of their authoritarian leader onto the stage without naming the lead character Lee Kuan Yew, they will not see the metaphor Singaporean audiences are very practical. So although I can use the connection of my directing style with being Singaporean, I do not think my work is being perceived as particularly Singaporean by the people. Obviously, through my intercultural work, I am not literally talking about multiculturalism in Singapore in fact, it is, in Singapore, multiculturalism is always filtered through language: we come from different backgrounds but we share at least one common language. Whereas, on the other hand, in my work I am interested in exploring what happens before we are able to speak the same language, before experience becomes communicable. My country is founded on multiculturalism but with singular rationality. I am interested in multiple perspectives.

ML: For you, what is the value of making intercultural work?

OKS: I like the richness and complexities of coming together as a group. I practice it for the personal pleasures it gives me, rather than, as in the past, for a political agenda. I came to the theatre in the 80s when there were a lot of Collingwood street dialectics, but now I engage more in personal dimensions. In the past I was keen to explore what happened if we juxtaposed, say, kabuki with Gamelan. Now I feel that the formal interest is dispersed and negotiability an interest in the performers as individuals. Of course it is more expensive than casting locally, but if I believe that a performer from, say, Sweden would be the best in a role, I will do all I can to make it work, and in this I am supported by my colleagues at TheatreWorks.

ML: So while you are inhabiting this transnational space, who do you think of as your audience? Do you create for a Singaporean audience or for a ‘global’ audience, if there is such a thing?

OKS: This is the biggest difficulty for me in a way there is no audience for this kind of work. I feel that the work pitches itself in relation to its ideal audience. So this is what is strange about this work, that when I am making it, I cannot think of it as being for Singapore, London or Melbourne. So I make the work for the work itself. The work is independent of what I want it to be. In bringing all these people together, the work generates its own world, languages, ideals, relationships. Or rather, this particular group of performers generates its own audience.

Margherita Lasa is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the University of Kent, where she will take up a permanent lecturership in Drama and Theatre from very soon. Her current Leverhulme-funded project explores the politics of affect in transnational performance. In 2012, she convened the Leverhulme Olympic Talks at Queen Mary, University of London, on Theatre & Adaptation. Margherita is the editor of Theatres & Adaptation: Directors, Actors, Performers (Routledge, 2017), a collection of interviews based on those talks, her stage translations from French and English into Italian, her peer-reviewed articles across blogs. She has published articles in academic journals such as Theatre Forum, Contemporary Theatre Review and Performance Research.