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An Australian Perspective on Drama Education and the Asian Century

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*Year 9 students share their performance of *The Year of Living Dangerously* a term-long project based on Christopher Koch's novel about a tumultuous year in Indonesia at the time of the overthrow of President Sukarno. The story is told through the experiences of a newly arrived journalist and his friendship with his cameraman, Billy Kwan, a Chinese Australian dwarf. Intrigue, politics and the confronting contradictions of Sukarno's leadership are threaded together.*

Interwoven with the barebones of this plot are tales of the Indonesian gods.

There are three stages, each with screens onto which are projected, as if living wayang kulit puppets, the mythological characters. Students play multiple roles and characters are played by more than one actor. The lives of both the ex-pat Australians living a semi-colonial twilight world immune from the abject poverty. Through Billy's eyes we see the lives of everyday Indonesians. Through Billy the young journalist gains a sense of compassion and empathy for what lies underneath the surface of Indonesian society while all the time being embroiled in the intrigues and espionage of diplomats.

The play which runs for about 90 minutes moves backwards and forwards in more complicated twists and turns as political tensions mount within the community and as Billy becomes more agitated about the lack of action from Sukarno, once the hero of the revolution.

Then blackness abruptly descends on the audience. They sit there restless. Out of the dark there is shouting and the auditorium is full of soldiers in army fatigues. The audience of parents and grandparents are abruptly ordered from their seats, herded through the doors of the theatre and out into the car parking space behind the theatre. Two large shipping containers face each other. On top of the containers are ranged on one side soldiers and on the other protestors. Members of the audience feel intimidated and threatened by the soldier students. As the breeze from the ocean and port lightly cools them, they stand as the two sides of the conflict shout and menace. Then there is a sudden shout and from the second story window of the building behind the protestors, we see Billy Kwan unfurl a protest banner but then is thrown from the window. His protest is in vain.

This intriguing project has involved all three specialist Year 9 drama classes at John Curtin College of the Arts, a selective-entry gifted and talented arts program in Fremantle, Western Australia. Students have worked with their teacher to develop the scenarios and scripts, research the background material and to engage with one aspect of Asian culture, history and society. Careful attention is paid to the use of movement, hand gestures and key aspects of Balinese dance. Even though these Year 9 students are stretching themselves to play roles that require more mature actors, they are focused and committed to their roles. The production had loose ends and was ambitious in its scope for students of this age.

Drama is a form of living dangerously. Within the safety of fiction and role, drama students hold up to our view an examined world and we see it as through the canvas screen of the wayang kullit – clearly but distanced.

Photos by JCCA



I begin this keynote by focusing on a success story about how some Australian drama students are coming to terms with one facet of the Asian Century. This is a heartening and optimistic story of students engaging with their region and its stories. It is worth celebrating but it is also relatively rare and therefore a reminder of how much further we need to go on this journey.

Australia as a nation is again re-focusing attention on Asia politically, socially, economically and educationally.

The publication late in 2012 of the Australian Government White Paper *Australia in the Asian Century* has placed Asia and its relationships within the region on the political agenda. Socially Australians travel to and through Asia in vast numbers; for example, around 800,000 Australians holidayed in Bali in the last year and many more used transit hubs such as Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan and China as they ventured into the wider world. Daily newspapers carry stories on fluctuations in the prices of resources paid by Asian trading partners. The geographic location of Australia within the Asian axis has been long noted and identified in Australian curriculum through a focus on teaching Asian languages and incorporation of Asian arts and culture.

This paper will focus on two questions:

- What evidence is there of this focus in Australian drama education?
- What are some of the lessons that Australian drama educators can learn from engagement with Asia? And, in turn, what might Asian drama educators take from the Australian experience that might add value to their work?

Part 1: An Asian Focus in Australian Drama Education

Contexts and inheritances

Australian drama education and the Asian Century does not start with a blank page.

There has been a healthy cross-fertilisation between drama educators in Australia and Asia. Just as drama education in Australia has drawn from its connections with drama in Europe, the United Kingdom, Canada and (to a lesser extent) the United States, so too have there been rich exchanges with drama educators from across the breadth of Asia (as defined in the White Paper). Drama educators have studied in Australia and Australian drama educators have taught in Asian universities. Griffith University (amongst others) has partnered with the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts in Masters courses. IDEA congresses and other conferences and workshops have seen a sharing of knowledge and practice. The IDEA 1995 Congress in Brisbane was one initial platform for sharing that matured with the IDEA2007 Congress in Hong Kong. Mok Chiu-yu was keynote speaker for the Drama Australia Conference in Launceston, Tasmania in 2005. He spoke as a former student at Adelaide University and as co-director of IDEA2007 as well as drawing on his work within his own community.

There is a more immediate changing context.

The Australian Government White Paper *Australia in the Asian Century* (2012 p. 1) notes:

Asia's rise is changing the world. This is a defining feature of the 21st century—the Asian century. These developments have profound implications for people everywhere.

Asia's extraordinary ascent has already changed the Australian economy, society and strategic environment. The scale and pace of the change still to come mean Australia is entering a truly transformative period in our history.

Success in the Asian century requires a whole-of-Australia effort, with businesses, unions, communities and governments being partners in a transformation as profound as any that have defined Australia throughout our history.

Rhetoric and political will is shaping a transformative focus for Australians. This is played out for drama teachers in Australia in a number of ways. Strategies identified by the White Paper include amongst the *Twenty-five national objectives for 2025: a roadmap to navigate the Asian century*:

10. Every Australian student will have significant exposure to studies of Asia across the curriculum to increase their cultural knowledge and skills and enable them to be active in the region.

- All schools will engage with at least one school in Asia to support the teaching of a priority Asian language, including through increased use of the National Broadband Network.

Pathways

- Fully implement the Australian Curriculum, which includes the cross-curriculum priority of 'Asia and Australia's engagement in Asia'. Develop measures to track how Australian students are increasing their knowledge of Asia, in consultation with States and Territories and non-government education authorities.
- Work collaboratively with States, Territories, non-government education authorities and higher education institutions to develop detailed strategies for studies of Asia to become a core part of school education.

11. All Australian students will have the opportunity, and be encouraged, to undertake a continuous course of study in an Asian language throughout their years of schooling.

- All students will have access to at least one priority Asian language; these will be Chinese (Mandarin), Hindi, Indonesian and Japanese.

This whole of government approach is played out in education in the work of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA. www.acara.edu.au) As an independent authority ACARA is responsible for the development of a national curriculum, a national assessment program and a national data collection and reporting program that supports 21st century learning for all Australian students. ACARA reports to the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA), made up of all State, Territory and Australian Government Education Ministers.

Asia and the Australian Drama Curriculum

While each of the eight states/territories have primary responsibility for education, the Australian Government plays a significant funding and oversight role particularly through the development of the Australian Curriculum. This impacts directly on the work of drama teachers through the *Australian Curriculum: The Arts* to be finally published in 2013 after over three years of development and consultation.

The work of ACARA was set out in the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (2008) which identified three priorities

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures
- Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia
- Sustainability

The ACARA website elaborates:

Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia

This priority will ensure that students learn about and recognise the diversity within and between the countries of the Asia region. They will develop knowledge and understanding of Asian societies, cultures, beliefs and environments, and the connections between the peoples of Asia, Australia, and the rest of the world. Asia literacy provides students with the skills to communicate and engage with the peoples of Asia so they can effectively live, work and learn in the region. (http://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum/cross_curriculum_priorities.html)

The *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: the Arts* which sets the broad direction for the writing of the Australian Curriculum for the Arts spelt this out in more detail for arts (and drama) educators.

Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia

75. The Australian Curriculum: The Arts will explore the art forms of Asia and the way these have arisen from the rich and diverse cultures, belief systems and traditions of the peoples of the Asia region. It will examine their significance aesthetically and their impact both regionally and globally.

76. Australia's evolving ethnic composition and the increasing national importance placed on our geographic location in the Asia-Pacific region brings with it a variety of cultural, social, and ethical interests and responsibilities. These interests, and the collective cultural memories that have accumulated around them, are represented in a diversity of Arts across Australia.

77. Students will experiment with, learn to use and respond to art forms, media, instruments and technologies of the Asia region. They will learn the intrinsic value of the art work and artists' practices, as well as their place and value within broader social, cultural, historical and political contexts.

The completion of the Australian Curriculum: The Arts for Years Foundation to Year 10 (anticipated for March 2013) and implementation in 2014 opens doors for Asia and drama education. But there are already across Australia courses running. What are the existing opportunities for focusing on Asian drama?

Within the suite of senior secondary drama courses across Australia there are identified opportunities for engagement with Asian drama. For example, the Queensland Senior Secondary drama Syllabus (www.qsa.qld.edu.au/downloads/senior/snr_drama_07_syll.pdf) indicates that texts should be selected from a range that includes Asian texts as non-western (p. 48); and names “Asian styles includ[ing] noh, kabuki and kathakali” (p. 71).

But a cautionary tale about the implementation of these intended curriculum aspirations.

When the Western Australian Certificate of Education Drama Course was introduced in 1999, the set texts lists purposefully included Asian texts drawing on the former course:

- Arisin C. Noer, *The Bottomless Well*
- Wee, C. J. W. L. & Lee Chee Keng (Editors) (2003). *Two plays by Kuo Pao Kun: Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral & the Spirits Play*. Singapore, SNP (years of production: 1998, 2001) Note: choose either play

The syllabus also identified the following Asian Theatre contexts for study:

- Asian theatre and practitioners
- Wayang Kulit or shadow puppetry
- Puppetry such as Bunraku or Wayang Golek
- Kabuki and Nô Theatre
- Rabindranath Tagore
- Chinese Opera
- Suzuki Tadashi
- Butoh Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno
- Kuo Pao Kun

Surveys of teachers and markers in the subsequent Year 12 examinations showed few if any of these opportunities were taken up. In the revision of the set texts implemented in 2013, there are none left for examination.

It is interesting to speculate on the issues raised by this situation: were the set texts appropriate, suitable and representative of the broad spectrum of Asian drama? was their inclusion an artificial curriculum construct? did teachers need additional preparation and support in order to be able to effectively include these texts? were there gaps in the knowledge of teachers about drama and Asia – and therefore gaps in their pre-service and in-service teacher education? were there opportunities for supporting students to study these texts? were these texts (or other Asian texts) being performed by theatre companies?

The Asia Education Foundation Report (Wilkinson & Milgate, April 2009 p. ii-iii) reviewing Studies of Asia in Year 12, answers some of these questions:

- Across Australia it is only a small minority of students who undertake studies with content or focus on Asia
- Many of the subjects and units reviewed allow for the possibility of content or focus on Asia. In other words, teachers or students could choose to include this content or focus. However, there is little or no evidence that this is happening
- Across Australia, there is generally a strong disposition for the inclusion of content on Europe rather than content on Asia; much of the material that does have content or focus on Asia has an Australian or Western focus; and, Where it does occur, content or focus on Asia generally covers a limited range of countries within the region.
- Simply making content or focus on Asia available as an option in courses does not appear to be stimulating the study of Asia. In practice, it is schools and teachers who select the material that students will study. Teachers are not likely to select material with which they themselves are unfamiliar or may have never studied. They will tend to choose what they know about and are confident of teaching. What teachers know and teach about will of course reflect to some extent the content of their own tertiary education, including teacher training.

Further research is needed on this issue.

For Australian drama educators to include Asian drama in their courses, there needs to be a better understanding of the field. I don't pretend to be an instant expert on Asian drama and Australian-Asian

drama, so the following notes are from the perspective of an interested participant addressing my own knowledge gaps at this moment of shifting expectations. Each of us must begin with our own learning.

To understand why this situation exists it is necessary to look at how Asia has emerged in Australian drama: to understand in overview how Asia and Australia mesh through drama. It is important to also consider which Asian drama has toured in Australia and Australian theatre makers who have chosen Asian theatre texts in their work. Sometimes we talk of the Trade Winds that connect and intersect. Just as the old spice and silk routes moved commerce, theatre and drama have moved between and through our region. There have been Asian Theatre companies touring to Australia; Asian texts have been performed by Australian Theatre Companies; Australian playwrights have looked out to Asia for their themes and styles; Australian playwrights have examined the Australian Asian experience – looking out to look in.

Asia and Australian Drama

Australian Theatre Historian Veronica Kelly (1993) noted Australian colonial audiences were avid consumers of Orientalist imagery, which pervaded opera, pantomime, burlesque, Shakespeare drama, melodrama and literature. In tune with this trend Australian audiences flocked to see imported and local productions of *The Mikado*, *Kismet*, *Chu Chin Chow*, *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Kelly's observed that "the stage has always functioned typically as a frame for experimentation with identities and by rifling the wardrobe and set of theatricalised Orient, the white colonial could find material for construction of local identities and meanings" (p. 33). Despite a significant Chinese population, attracted during the gold rushes of the Nineteenth Century, the British and European colonial culture in Australia conjured up an exotic otherness of faux Indians, Asians, Islanders played by white actors in make up and pigtails, accents and broken English. Insulated by the White Australia Policy¹ for a good part of the Twentieth Century and residual fear of war with the Japanese, the so called "yellow peril" and the concept of a Domino Theory driven by the Chinese Communism, Australian theatre's engagement with Asia was held at arm's length.

John Romeril's 1974 play *The Floating World* marked a significant moment of change. Charting the descent into madness of a former prisoner-of-war on a Women's Weekly Cherry Blossom Cruise to Japan, the play contrasts the seedy on-board vaudeville entertainment with horrific memories of an all-Australian male soldier. Emerging in the midst of a flourish of theatre focused on Australian identity, Romeril's play and companion pieces *Love Suicides* (1997) and *Miss Tanaka* (2001) gave voice to an emerging Asian-australian perspective.

Jacqueline Lo's (1998) review of Australian-Asia Theatre written at the end of the 90's noted how the changing political and economic interest in Asia was reflected in festivals and in the commitment of funds by the Australia Council for the Arts. She also observed that the text-based nature of theatre made it less successful than visual arts and music in reaching into Asia. She draws attention to the increasing number of Australian plays addressing the shift in perspective from privileging geography over history and inherited heritage: for example, Jill Shearer's *Shimada* (1987 exploring reactions to proposed business takeovers of family businesses in Queensland), Michael Gurr's *Sex Diary of an Infidel* (1992 dealing with Australian sex tours to the Philippines), Anna Brionowski's *The Gap* (1993), and Deborah Pollard's *Mother Tongue Interference* (1995). Space has also been found in Australian theatre for Asian immigrant playwright voices: for example, William Yang's one person multi-media production. The photographer-storyteller focused on his return to a motherland he never knew. It is the story of an Australian-born Chinese a stranger in his homeland. As an immigrant nation, Australian theatre has a history of reflecting Asian immigrant experience: e.g. *Wild Rice* (1997) by Huong Nguyen, Phi Hai, Pat Rix and Geoff Crowhurst, explored the contrast between being a contemporary Australian Vietnamese adolescent and childhood memories of fleeing Vietnam by boat. A couple of generations later, similar experience of being a refugee arriving in Australia by boat is explored in *Lucky* by Ferenc Alexander Zavaros (2011).

Black Swan Theatre Company, which carved a name for itself through close connections with indigenous theatre, widened its horizons in 1999 to adapt *The Year of Living Dangerously* (the same material as the students from John Curtin College of the Arts that I began with). The 1998 production was founded on a long-standing Sister State relationships between Western Australia and the Taman Budaya (arts centre) in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia, and the gift to the people of WA of an entire Gamelan orchestra (now part of the collection at Murdoch University and played regularly in the pendopo visible from my study window).

¹ The 'White Australia' policy describes Australia's approach to immigration that intentionally restricted non-white immigration to Australia from Federation in 1901 until 1973. <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/08abolition.htm>

The Australian actors brought to life the major part of the narrative, complemented by an Indonesian wayang puppet show and gamelan music. The Indonesia performers presented the thematic links to Indonesian mythology.

A second more recent example from Black Swan is *The White Divers of Broome* (2012) which explored the story of pearl divers of Broome as part of its quest to tell unique Australian stories. In the boom times of 1912 Broome, a wealthy pearling master looking for a way around the White Australia Policy, anxious to keep his cheap Asian workers – and his high profits. One of the strongest features of this sprawling flawed production was the narrative thread of the Japanese diver and his wife, performed in Japanese with surtitles.

Visiting companies from Asia have performed in Australia. For example, the Perth International Arts Festival PIAF toured *The Peony Pavilion* a number of years ago. Matt Luton produced *The Lady Aoi* for the same Festival. The potential for interchange between theatre from Asia and Australia exists though is still relatively under-developed perhaps because of the difficulties of language and differing aesthetic sensibilities based on the strong influences of European and American theatre styles. It is easier to bring to Australia as PIAF has done the spectacular Indian performance *The Manganiyar Seduction*, which while theatrical was not text based.

These few examples signal a shifting understanding of the Asian voice in Australian drama – and the flow on effect to Australian drama education.

In the scope of this presentation, I can do little more than sketch some trends and mention a few examples. There has been a shifting focus of Australian theatre to match a changing sense of identity within the region. In the next section I will explore some of the lessons to be learnt in the face of the rise of Asia in the Twenty-first Century.

Part 2 Some lessons to be learnt

A necessary two-way process of exchange

There is much that drama educators in Australia and Asia share. But there are significant differences to negotiate and understand. There are many lessons to be shared and writing this presentation has helped me to start that journey.

Firstly, there are no useful generalisations. Asia as a region is geographically vast, culturally, socially and artistically diverse. Just as Asia's past cannot be explained by a single model, nor can its complex current and future development be reduced to simple terms. Australian drama educators need to understand complexity. Even within broad geographic groupings there is diversity. Drama education in Hong Kong is not necessarily the same as drama education in other parts of China or in other Mandarin speaking places let alone in the other Asian regions.

The second lesson to be learnt is that we need to engage in a two way communication. One of the former expressions used in Australian politics about Asia was *enmeshment* and I find it a useful image. What are the lines of connection? What are the points of departure and difference? When we can understand them we can begin this journey.

What is distinctive or unique about the arts in Asia that Australian drama educators need to learn?

Carroll and Gantner (April 2012) in *Finding a Place on the Asian Stage* identify useful indicators of Asian arts that serve as signposts for Australian drama educators to begin to understand. They argue that in traditional Asian performance:

- Time is unending, the audience can come and go, the ancient story is known and only part of it usually performed (akin to indigenous Australian performance).
- Like time, space is not the same in Asian arts.
- Western drama is driven by the content, but Asian performance is driven by rhythm, tone, volume, mass, colour, intensity and speed.
- Letting go of the Western rational paradigm of the 'story', [releases audiences] into a different metaphysical world; for example, Noh theatre works on a very different level of expression and thinking, building layers of meaning and nuance beyond the verbal interchange so frequently prioritized

in the West. Sitting in the Noh theatre, the audience is given time to change their mode of breathing and thinking: a kind of meditation can take over.

- Ways of performance are different in Asia. Western performance has traditionally developed in silos – spoken drama, classical dance, modern dance, puppetry etc. Asian performing arts tend to blend various elements across such boundaries: live actors and shadow puppets together, with symbolic gesture, colour, costumes and properties; sung theatre forms with masks and stylized movement; and folk forms blending many other elements.
- The focus is on the refined movement of the performer, with the interpretation being the aspect for both audience and performer to anticipate, judge and enjoy. The key person is the actor who, after years of training of his (and it was always 'his' in the past) mind and body, initiates the action with few props and often no words.
- In the use of the body, Asian performers work with a different premise to the West: for example, indigenous dance forms in Asia for the most part push downwards, keeping the upper body firm and controlled.

I am sure that there are more than these. I invite Asian drama educators to identify them, explain them and share them with Australian drama educators.

There are other cultural indicators of difference. I was fascinated to listen to Professor Leong's presentation at the *Cultural Encounters and Northern Reflections: World Alliance for Art Education, Global Summit Rovaniemi November 2012*. His observations on *cultural mismatch and creativity in arts education* highlighted for me deeply enculturated issues: home culture vs school culture; academic core subjects vs the arts in schools; culture of testing, ranking and competition vs the collaborative culture of creativity in the arts; "western" thinking vs "eastern" thinking and values; and teacher's implicit beliefs and values vs their pedagogical actions.

Even though we live in a globalised economy with many similarities and push towards standardisation (sometimes referred to as a MacDonal'd's world view), it is important to recognise the lessons to be learnt from how Asian parents and communities view drama education.

Having recognised that there are deep culture differences between Australian and Asian cultures, I also want to share with you my observations of how some of Professor Leong's mismatches are also played out in Australia:

- there is a mismatch in Australia between the value placed on drama in schools (some schools) and how it is seen by parents and, as a consequence, by students
- drama in Australian schools too suffers from the imbalanced valuing in schools and society about academic core subjects (literacy and numeracy)
- the competitive testing culture in Australia is at odds with the collaborative learning that is central to drama
- teacher's undervaluing of drama – particularly in the crucial primary schooling years – is played out in their pedagogic action in the Australian classroom.

As a teacher educator working with both secondary specialist drama teachers and with primary generalist teachers, an essential part of my work is shifting the perceptions that drama is a time-filler or waste of time; that it is less important in the lives of students; that it can be reduced to skits and school assembly items; that it lacks content and that teaching it lacks pedagogical content.

Part 3: Towards a conclusion

There are questions to ask about Australian drama education and engagement with Asia.

- How will drama courses and their teachers meet the requirements of the Asia cross curriculum priority of the Australian Curriculum?
- If Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia is an identified cross curriculum priority in the Australian Curriculum, what are the opportunities in the wider drama community to meet this challenge?
- What are the challenges for drama teacher education? (for more on Australian drama teacher education see *Perspectives on Drama Teacher Education in Australia* (Pascoe & Sallis, 2012))

- How does Drama Australia as the national association for drama education support the focus of an Asian Century?
- If engagement with Asia is to be effective what are the lessons that Australian drama educators need to learn from our colleagues in Asia?

In this brief presentation I have set out to firstly understand the nature and terrain of the issue – drama teachers and the Asian century. I finish by suggesting some points of action: we will begin to address this issue by building bridges and holding conferences like this one; from here I suggest we need to share our experiences, exchange more experiences and ideas; publish together in ways that respect difference and build connection.

The Asian century is an opportunity for drama educators.

I conclude as I began: in the drama classroom. The Year 9 project described at the beginning of this article is one example of Australian drama education engaging with Asia. But it is relatively rare to see work of this focus. So it is a pleasure to report another successful project of engagement with Asia.

In 2003 students from Years 9-12 at John Curtin College of the Arts undertook a project adapting Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*.

The sprawling complexity of Roy's charting of the caste system in India was told through a mix of live action, projections and a form of artful bunraku puppets mixing with live actors. The puppets were manipulated by puppeteers dressed in white and fully visible to the audience. The monstrously bizarre Aunties were puppets waddling their way along side live actors. The girl who falls in love with a low caste man played her farewell to a life size puppet in ways that were tender and moving. Projections thrown on the curving screen backdrop blended with live action.

The production blended an adaptation of Indian material, an interpretation of a traditional form of puppetry and ingenious use of technology.

This production and other work in Australian drama classrooms shows that it is possible to engage with the Asian Century in ways that satisfactorily fulfill the requirements of curriculum while enriching the learning of students by enmeshing with the spirit and culture of Asia.

Photos by JCCA



As a postscript, I also mention another project by John Curtin College of the Arts students developing performance of *The Mahabharata*. Search deeply and you can find examples of drama education engaging with Asia. These examples are signposts to opening doors to the Asian Century.

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