

INTRODUCTION

## Theatre and Performance in the Asia-Pacific: Regional culture and modernity in the global era

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Recent scholarship in theatre and performance studies reflects renewed interest in theories and histories of cultural modernity. This issue of ACCESS explores the evidence and impact of this new thinking on the diverse cultural and historical contexts for theatre and performance in the Asia-Pacific. New critiques of theories of postmodernism and the re-examination of “late modernity” have been paralleled by the emergence of thinking on the concept of “alternative modernities”, including as this issue proposes, non-European modernities. The articles in this issue turn a critical spotlight on diverse modes of alternative modernities in the region to offer us ways of understanding theatre and performance that look beyond the postmodern; their intention is to highlight diverse, novel modes of expressing the conditions of the present.

In Zygmunt Bauman’s terms the new modernity is “liquid”. This liquid state facilitates the rapid circulation of images, ideas, news, music, movement and dance in digital communication networks that have no fixed point of origin or destination. While the forces of globalisation have been with us for millennia in various forms, Bauman’s *Liquid Modernity* represents a redistribution and reallocation of modernity’s “melting powers” (2000: 6). Recently revived interest in the role of imagination and aesthetic experience in daily life should now be reconsidered in light of the greatly expanded public sphere that has followed the social and economic modernisation of the Asia-Pacific.

This special issue is in large part the product of two symposia: *Cultural Performance in post-New Order Indonesia: New structures, scenes, meanings* was held at Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, in June 2010 and attended by several of the authors; *Theatre and Performance in the Asia-Pacific: Regional culture and modernity in the global era* took place at the University of Melbourne, School of Culture and Communication in September, 2011, also attended by the authors. Both symposia arose from an Australian Research Council funded Discovery project entitled *Theatre in the Asia-Pacific: Regional culture in a modern global context*. The chief investigators are Denise Varney and Peter Eckersall (University of Melbourne), Chris Hudson (RMIT University), and Barbara Hatley (University of Tasmania). In order to engage with a regional diversity of cultural production and its relations to the modern these papers examine histories, case studies or contemporary culture in a number of sites that encompass marked differences in language, performance, history and politics. They also demonstrate shared regional perspectives on, and experiences of modernity.

The collection of essays begins with an article by Denise Varney, *Mixmasters and Lino: Iconic Australian modernity in Patrick White’s “The Season at Sarsaparilla”*, examining Australian modernity in the post-War period. The play—White’s first theatrical treatment of the changing social conditions in Australia—is described by the playwright as a “charade of suburbia” suggesting the performative lives of subjects in an outpost of Europe. The play represents the rise of Australian modernity in the 1960s as characterised by the mid-century suburb with its streets lined with identical homes for nuclear families. The family home as the Great Australian Dream—and the new forms of mass

consumption that accompanied its emergence—is the site for the melting of the traditional values and attitudes of working class Australia. Varney examines White’s satirical treatment of a masculined, Anglo-Saxon culture that finds itself enmeshed in Australian forms of commodity fetishism, while grappling with human desire, morality and meaning. While modernity has brought with it a seductive new consumer culture, it has also brought with it banality, a pervasive sense of confusion, and the demise of old values. The dream has transformed into the Great Australian Emptiness in which, as White said, the mind is the least of possessions.

Ariel Heryanto’s article, *New Tradition in a Modernity-Deficit Postcolony*, examines Indonesia’s “New Theatre” and the reinvention of performative traditions in the post-colonial era. Despite a period of intense innovative activity, outmoded approaches to understanding performative practices have persisted. In interrogating a specifically Indonesian modernity from within the context of an enduring oppositional binary of tradition/modernity, Heryanto problematises this dualism. Considering the work of three of Indonesia’s most prominent theatre arts practitioners—Rendra, Putu Wijaya and Nano Riantiarno—Heryanto provides a critical re-examination of the distinction between the traditional, seen as a conservative, rigid and static expression of “the East”, and a Western modernity, widely perceived as rational, innovative and dynamic. He argues that while there is no pure modernity, nor pure tradition, and elements of each are blended in the “New Theatre”, it is nevertheless still dogged by a persistent understanding of the “East” as traditional and the “West” as modern.

Continuing the theme of modernity and theatrical practices in Indonesia Barbara Hatley’s article, *Performing Identity and Community in Indonesia in Modern Times*, considers the “melting powers of modernity” in the context of recent performative expressions of community identity in Yogyakarta. Hatley argues that despite the melting and shifting that now epitomize modernity, complex patterns of continuity and attachment to local identity characterise lived social relations. Focusing on performances in Central Java, she adapts Bauman’s theoretical approach to constructed identities and communities to examine contemporary performers’ and cultural activists’ self-conscious focus on expressions of local identity and community. While Indonesian modernity “melts” and “liquifies” social relations, institutions and cultural forms just as Western modernity does, performative cultural practices still engage with and draw on enduring traditional understandings to generate meanings for a new era.

William Peterson’s article, *La Ville Sensuelle: Seeking a ‘Better City, Better Life’ in the French Pavilion*, considers a performance of a different kind: the peripatetic journey through the French Pavilion at the 2010 Shanghai International Exposition. The pavilion itself, as Peterson points out, was a remarkable performance environment where “people perform the ‘private’ with ‘public’ scripts”. This ‘public script’ was designed to be understood by the upwardly-mobile, aspirational, cosmopolitan Chinese participant/actor. Peterson maps out the peripatetic journey required of visitors to the pavilion, commenting on its sensual dimensions, while making observations on the types of public performances of ‘private texts’ that could be observed as people moved through the shifting spaces and aural and visual fields of the pavilion. The French Pavilion was remarkable for the fact that people could “emplace” themselves bodily and meander through the back streets of Paris to perform “la vie sensuelle”.

Examining Singapore through the lens of Raymond Williams’ “structure of feeling”, Chris Hudson notes in her article *Life as Theatre in Singapore*, that everyday life in Singapore has been dramatized and the performative has become an integral feature of a highly consumption-focused society. She argues that “territories of feeling” that offer performative possibilities have been constructed in public spaces. Identifying certain theme restaurants and the Singapore Arts Festival as prime public sites, she suggests that we might think of Singapore as one long carnival. The concept of the sociality of affect provides a framework for an understanding of the relationship between the social and the personal that explains how aesthetic practices, such as performance, can generate the conditions for sensory and emotional gratification. Despite its similarities to the pre-

modern carnival, this new version of the carnivalesque is crucial to the modern because of its power to marshal the affective attachments and desire so necessary for the global consumer economy.

Recent work by Singapore filmmakers provides another view of modernity in the Asia-Pacific, as Chua Beng Huat and Meisen Wong show. Their article, *Aesthetics of the Pathetic: The portrayal of the abject in Singaporean Cinema* examines the use of the recurring image of the abject in Singapore visual culture, in particular cinema. They ask why the poor and the disenfranchised seem to be such compelling subjects of artistic production in a nation-state so obviously a beneficiary of global modernity and a bastion of capitalist success. The preoccupation of the 1990s revival of Singapore film with visual representations of the marginalized and the abject is an example, they argue, of “humanist realism”. Using the concept of “realist aesthetics” they examine a range of aestheticised representations that filmmakers use to invoke pathos in the viewer and to provide political critique. While the abject may become the object of pity, Chua and Wong show that not only can affective responses be manipulated for political ends, but also that there are financial and ideological constraints on political critique.

The final article in this issue considers the influence of global modernity on traditional performance in the Minangkabau region of Indonesia. Paul Mason’s article, *A Barometer of Cultural Change: Village performances in the Highlands of West Sumatra*, focuses on *silek minang*, a form of martial arts of profound cultural significance to the region. Mason examines the way it is performed to preserve local cultural knowledge and to consolidate a recognisable Minangkabau identity. Such performances, however, and their role in communal life, have not been able to escape the challenges of modernity. Many Minangkabau traditions have been changed or transformed by outside influences, and the performance of choreographed displays of martial arts is no exception. Young men’s interest in learning *silek minang* has dwindled and the martial arts form finds itself in constant negotiation between regional heritage, national influences, and the pull of global trends.

Framed by sociological approaches that see the contemporary period as an era of new, alternative or “liquid” modernity and by anthropological approaches to cultural practice that see an expanded role for the “work of the imagination” in the social life of the present (Appadurai, 2003), these articles demonstrate that theatre and performance are key indicators of imagined lives and imagined worlds in a number of sites in the Asia-Pacific.

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