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1 to 25 June



Desdemona

Conceived and Directed by
Ong Keng Sen

- 2 - 5 June
- Victoria Theatre

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Singapore Arts Festival 2000

presents

Desdemona



A TheatreWorks Production

Co-commissioned by the Telstra Adelaide Festival 2000, Singapore Arts Festival and TheatreWorks (Singapore) Ltd
Supported by Lee Foundation, Arts Fund Committee and Saison Foundation

Desdemona (TheatreWorks, Singapore)

Conceived and directed by ONG Keng Sen (Singapore)

in collaboration with

Playwright	Rio KISHIDA (Japan)	
Video/Installation/Slide Animations	Matthew NGUI (Singapore-Australia)	
	PARK Hwa Young (Korea)	
Music Director/Composer	JANG Jae Hyo (Korea)	
Collaborators-Performers	Madhu MARGI (India)	Othello
	Maya Krishna RAO (India)	Othello
	Claire WONG (Malaysia-Singapore)	Desdemona
	JANG Jae Hyo	Zero
	LOW Kee Hong (Singapore)	Zero
	Martinus MIROTO (Indonesia)	Zero
	Matthew NGUI	Zero
	PARK Hwa Young	Zero
	SHIN Chang Yool (Korea)	Zero
	U ZAW MIN (Myanmar)	Zero
Set Designer	Justin HILL (Australia-Singapore)	
Lightning Designer	Scott ZIELINSKI (USA)	
Costume Designer	PARK Hwa Young	
Script Translators	English	Michiyo SUMIDA
	Sanskrit	Dr E.N. NARAYANAN
	Javanese	Bakdi SOEMANTO
	Korean	KWON Hyun Ah
Production Team		
Producer	TAY Tong	
Technical Director	Kenny WONG of The Esplanade Co Ltd	
Production/Stage Manager	Lisa PORTER	
Assistant Stage Manager	Valerie OLIVEIRO	
Technical Assistant	Lennie LEE	
Costume Maker	Peeramon CHOMDHAVAT	
Program Coordinator/Singapore Publicity	Traslin ONG	
Production Assistant	Audrey HOO	
Rehearsal Assistants	Nooraidah Bte Mohd Nasir	
	Joyce YAO	
Rehearsal Translators	Franceska KIM Mi Sook (Korean)	
	Tony PARK (Korean)	
	OH Hae Jin (Korea)	
	PYO Su Kyoung (Korean)	
	MA CHAW SU (Myanmar)	
	MA MYA SAN AYE (Myanmar)	
	MA KHINE SABAI KHIN (Myanmar)	
	Toshi SUZUKI (Japanese)	
	Vanessa TAY Lee Kiang (Japanese)	

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programme notes

Desdemona is a dreamscape of discovering the She within the He, of discovering the other within the self, of discovering another culture within one's culture.

The performance text of *Desdemona* can be said to be conceptually a shamanic journey intersected with contemporary visual art and the intercultural process. Through rethinking questions, *Desdemona* turns its inspiration, Shakespeare's *Othello*, completely on its head.

Desdemona is a multiplicity of cultural styles: Myanmar puppets weave into a kathakali actress performing as *Othello*. In fact, there are two *Othellos*, the other being a performer from the 1,500 year-old Sanskrit theatre form, kudiyaattam. All the time the characters are interfaced with video images engineered by two visual/installation artists from Singapore and Korea. Providing a soundscape will be two musicians from Korea: a percussionist and a highly skilled ajaeng (a zither played with a bow) player from a fusion traditional/pop group. Combining a youthful zest with the ancient music of the Korean court, the music can be said to be a symbol of the entire production.

For this is a new wave Asian production featuring many younger generation artists well trained in traditional arts. A unique factor in this production is the global experience of some of these artists who have had wide exposure to international arts-making. The artists of *Desdemona* have been exposed to their very local contexts in dynamic cities such as Seoul or to highly traditional contexts such as the kratons of Jogjakarta or the temples in Kerala.

The different performers in *Desdemona* will perform in their own languages and cultural styles. Yet they engage in their dialogue with each other, intersecting into a complex theatrical language.



programme synopsis

The audience is introduced to Othello asking the question "Who am I? What am I?". They are told that his father was also Othello, his father's father was also Othello and that he is childless. He is haunted by his father. He is obsessed by a longing for his unborn son, who would also be named Othello. He perceives Desdemona as his sex slave whose main function is to produce the male heir to the kingdom of Othello.

Desdemona tells of her people who were colonised by Othello's father's father. With the colonisation, her people were not allowed to have names and were instead called by numbers. However, her mother gave her a secret name, ie Desdemona. With that she sings the song of mother and memory. Othello hears her singing this song and retorts that he has no memory of his mother or his mother's mother. As he spies on her, this is the beginning of his fear of Desdemona; she represents mother/memory and all that is female. In an archetypal twist, he kills her because of this fear. His final line to her is "In you, I do not exist."

Desdemona has challenged him and her destiny as preordained by her colonisers. She has embraced her identity and her memory. As the performance unfolds, Desdemona hallucinates about her death, her mother and about being stabbed by a sword. She reveals her desire to drink the poisonous saliva of the sword. The sword, mother, Desdemona slowly fuse into a single passion. It is this passion that Othello destroys as he becomes overwhelmingly threatened by his female slave.

However, Desdemona returns as a ghost to haunt him, she possesses him and another male slave, transforming them both into beautiful women/Desdemona. She wreaks her final revenge by entering their bodies and in this state, they kiss each other. The kiss kills Othello as the poisonous saliva flows from Desdemona's sword or weapon (the male slave) into his mouth. The penultimate image is of two men on stage kissing each other as two women while Desdemona wills this happening.



Apart from the narrative, there is a unique feature to this production. When Desdemona, in her loneliness, states that she desires a conversation with Othello, this ruptures the performance to reveal our desire to have a conversation as a company of individual artists from different cultures. Can we have a conversation when we have different histories, different memories and different languages? Fiction dovetails into the reality of creating this work itself. Desdemona's imagination becomes a vessel to contain our intercultural process, our frustrations in communicating, finding a common ground to dialogue and the ultimate dilemmas of an intercultural company.

To this end, a variety of means including video/audio interviews with different members of the cast, witty parallel texts highlighting a fictional character called Mona, email conversations are employed. These devices shatter the narrative to expose the metatext of our process, much like a documentary-performance or a rehearsal log.

scene synopsis

Preshow

The performance begins with an anamorphic image which is installed on stage. The audience coming into the auditorium sees several upright plywood boards painted with splashes of white. This image does not make any sense until the performance begins. Suddenly the four video screens, two onstage and two on the proscenium wall, are flooded with the figure, O. This video image is readable as the same stage but the white splashes now articulate a meaning. They have coalesced into the image of O when viewed from a specific direction. A video camera placed in that direction has transmitted the image to the screens. From a certain point of view, the fractured surfaces make sense.

Singaporean installation artist, Matthew Ngui, who specializes in making anamorphic images, has created the symbol of the production of Desdemona.

Prologue

We see the ghost of Desdemona (Claire Wong) trapped in this image of O. She tells of her loneliness and reveals her hatred for Othello.

Scene 1

There is an old man (Maya Rao) onstage. He is catching lice in his hair, in his dreams he is transformed into a beautiful young woman. Is he old Othello, Othello's father or a symbol of the historical legacy of the kingdom of Othello? Who is the beautiful young woman? Is she Othello's mother? Is she a symbol of the youth and hope that he has lost?

Scene 2

The scene cuts to the young Othello (Madhu Margi). He reveals that he has killed his wife, that it was not a dream. He tells the audience that his father was also Othello, his father's father was also Othello and that he is childless. He is haunted by his father. He is obsessed by a longing for his unborn son, who would also be named Othello. He perceives Desdemona as his sex slave whose main function is to produce the male heir to the kingdom of Othello.

Scene 3

Desdemona tells of her people who were colonised by Othello's father's father. With the colonisation, her people were not allowed to have names and were instead called by numbers. However, her mother gave her a secret name, ie Desdemona. She dances with another male slave (Martinius Miroto) whom she names Sword.

Scene 4

Othello asks "Who am I, what am I since all my fathers before me were also Othello and all my sons after me will also be Othello?" Desdemona begins to sing the song of mother and memory. Othello hears her singing and retorts that he has no memory of his mother or his mother's mother. As he spies on her, this is the beginning of his fear of Desdemona; she represents mother/memory and all that is female.

The symbol of mother/memory is enacted through the presence of puppets. The first appearance of the puppets is through U Zaw Min, the Myanmar puppet dancer/puppeteer, dancing as a puppet. Subsequently U Zaw Min reverses this in the second half of the performance when mother/memory visits Desdemona again to empower her to challenge Othello. This time he performs the role of the puppeteer with puppets to bring Desdemona back into her childhood. This metaphor of puppet who becomes puppeteer is employed throughout the performance to talk about power relationships between Othello and Desdemona. The Myanmar performance tradition of puppetry and marionette dance (where the dancer imitates the puppet) allowed us to develop this metaphor.

Scene 5

The male slave elaborates further about the colonised land. He begins to dance his tale.

This is interrupted by the arrival of Matthew once again. His arrival signals a change - he seems to be measuring the performance space with his hands and feet. Desdemona begins to follow him, encouraged.

At the same time, we are introduced to Mona. Park Hwa Young, Korean video artist, created witty parallel texts highlighting the dilemmas of a fictional character called Mona. Mona is a contemporary woman who gossips on the phone, goes on diets, signs declarations that she is not pregnant at the immigration department in order to extend her visa.



When Desdemona, in her loneliness, states that she desires a conversation with Othello, this ruptures the performance to reveal our desire to have a conversation as a company of individual artists from different cultures. Can we have a conversation when we have different histories, different memories and different languages? Fiction dovetails into the reality of creating this work itself. Desdemona's imagination becomes a vessel to contain our intercultural process, our frustrations in communicating, finding a common ground to dialogue and the ultimate dilemmas of an intercultural company.

Videos begin, these are interviews with the cast: the multiple and often schizophrenic identities of contemporary Asians who grew up with Beatles and yet Malayali (Kerala) folk songs/rigorous kathakali training are hilariously brought up. On another screen, one of the performers talks of the limitations in the intercultural process "you do not speak my language and I do not speak yours".

Scene 6

We encounter the old man again. This time, he dreams of himself as the glorious warrior of bygone days encountering the god of fire. He shouts "Get me the key to my kingdom." and tells us of his father, his father's father and his son. He teaches his son archery.

Cuts to young Othello. He is hunting. He tells us that he is devoid of feelings, he is disconnected. We begin to sense that he is ill...

Scene 7

Mona is on a diet.

Scene 8

As Mona starves herself, Desdemona hallucinates of challenging her destiny - she will revenge her people by confronting Othello.

Scene 9

Matthew enters once again. He brings the music director, Jang Jae Hyo onto stage.

Scene 10

Jang begins a pansori song. Pansori is traditional storytelling from Korea. Jang sings of Desdemona encountering her dead mother in a dream. Desdemona's mother tells her that she will die soon.



Park is creating a parallel text at this moment of a hypochondriac eating empty capsules. The magnified image of lips/mouth relentlessly chewing the capsule sets off our imagination. The obsessiveness of her action is mimicked by Desdemona. Perhaps Desdemona is ill.

Another performer/sociologist, Singaporean Low Kee Hong punctures the narrative of Desdemona with a frank and incisive email written onstage to Mona. The email is suspicious of the director's intentions in amassing such an intercultural company "are we simply pawns in Keng Sen's game". It also questions the festival market in the way they perceive Asian work "do we provide an instant Asia exotic tidbit for the festival market", attempts to probe individual artist's reasons for entering such a project, details the rehearsal tensions between the contemporary and traditional artists.

Finally Desdemona intones "I will die soon."

Scene 11

Desdemona watches as Matthew manipulates his paper puppets.

At the same time, the video screens are all flooded with writing in the different languages by different members of the cast: Myanmar language, Malayalam, Hindi, an email written in English.

Through audio interviews with different members of the cast, their life histories are documented by Matthew. Desdemona's state is paralleled with the dilemma of traditional artists in a changing Asia. The different worlds which the artists come from such as the traditional puppeteer who has lived for sixty years in Myanmar. These interviews suggest that translation can be misleading.

The many devices which shatter the narrative to expose the metatext of our process is much like a documentary-performance and a rehearsal log.

Desdemona watches these video images, she seems to gain a strength from them.

Scene 12

Desdemona imagines herself being stabbed by a sword. She reveals her desire to drink the poisonous saliva of the sword. The sword, her mother, Desdemona slowly fuse into a single passion. It is this passion that Othello destroys as he becomes overwhelmingly threatened by his female slave.

In the archetypal twist, he kills her because of this fear. His final line to her is "In you, I do not exist."

Desdemona has challenged him and her destiny as preordained by her colonisers. She has embraced her identity and her memory.

The killing returns to haunt Othello. Strangely, Desdemona awakens, called upon by a puppet doll and U Zaw Min. Desdemona challenges Othello to kill her once again. She mocks him through a puppet play manipulated by herself. She fights a mock battle with him, only to be killed again. The nightmare continues for Othello as she awakens once again. Desdemona seems to be invincible. With every killing she returns stronger than before.

The old man wanders onto stage as this is happening. He talks of her fragrance accumulating within him. He drifts in his own world despite the surrounding chaos.

Scene 13

The male slave grieves over Desdemona's death at the lake. He is transformed by the water into the great warrior that his father was. Similarly the old man is once again transformed into the beautiful young woman. She walks out of the water. Suddenly a video image of a face appears, a puppet appears, there seems to be the magic of water. Desdemona appears to be in the space as she begins to possess the people onstage.

Scene 14

Mona goes to immigration to extend her visa. She declares that she is not pregnant, not violent, not redundant, not efficient, not present...

Scene 15

The lights come on Othello's bedchamber. We see the beautiful young woman in his room, she imprints herself onto the wall. Othello comes into the room. He tells us once again that it is not a dream, he has killed Desdemona. He is suddenly transformed into a demon of fear. This is the demon within him, the fear that has destroyed Desdemona and now is about to destroy him. The beautiful young woman returns to hold him and comfort him against his fear.



Scene 16

Desdemona returns as a ghost to haunt him, she possesses him and another male slave, transforming them both into beautiful women/Desdemona. She wreaks her final revenge by entering their bodies and in this state, they kiss each other. The kiss kills Othello as the poisonous saliva flows from Desdemona's sword or weapon (the male slave) into his mouth.

The gender parallels with Desdemona's journey is extended by a section on Korean socks for women and how Korean women were once characterised according to the shape of their feet! This is juxtapositioned with the possession of Othello by Desdemona. The video image of Park's hand writing the Korean word for "fragrant" in lipstick creates an echo, reverberation, shadow of the possession onstage. The handwritten word follows a scientific academic listing of the characteristics of women based on the shape of their feet. The handwriting begins to be threatening as it also hints at the larger systems of entrapment which have faced women in history. This disconnected image created live onstage is seemingly innocuous. It is simply manufactured. However blown up on screen, it becomes frightening in its silence and repetitiveness.

The penultimate image is of two men on stage kissing each other as two women while Desdemona wills this happening. The marionette dance becomes a dual edge sword of entrapment and liberation; it is Desdemona's dance of revenge and ultimately her dance of triumph.

Epilogue

Desdemona and Othello both await rebirth. They have been cured. The beautiful young woman passes through the space once again.

director's notes

***Desdemona*: a journey through difference in Asia, traditional performing arts, gender, ritual and contemporary art; a process of reinvention.**

November 1997: I set out for a research trip to India. It was an eight-week visit to commence the second workshop of The Flying Circus Project. This Asian laboratory was set up to bring together Asian artists of diverse disciplines to explore the continuum of traditional and contemporary arts. It was the beginning of the journey of *Desdemona*.

After *Lear*, also written by Rio Kishida, I had become dissatisfied with simply directing an Asian production that juxtaposed many different languages and many different traditional expressions. I felt that I had to take a more critical reflexive look at the process that I was engaging in. What was behind the mask of the impeccable precision of the *Lear* that I had directed? How do I allow the intercultural process to deliberately peep through at the seams of a new work?

I thought of Shakespeare's *Othello* as the next project. It was an early look at an intercultural marriage. Perhaps it was an appropriate work to discuss culture and race. After all, these are the stark differences that face me when I direct a performance with artists from nine countries.

But I had no interest in how this Shakespeare play had been interpreted before, especially in its obsessive stereotyping of the black machismo. This drew me into my earlier studies with Peggy Phelan in New York University and her critique of gender and culture, an interesting door to open. What if *Othello* was played by a woman or by slight, slender boy?

In India, an irate Sanskrit scholar had confronted me about calling the work *Lear* when we had reworked it so much. Our *Lear* looked like an Asian epic about a daughter who killed her father. It was no longer Shakespeare. I remember him with great affection as it was a most unlikely scolding to receive in the heart of Kerala. I told him then that my work was about reinvention,

in particular about Asians having the choice to reinvent ourselves, to reinvent an accepted worldview. Without the reference to a standard, this reinvention would not be a political action. Hence the blatant 'appropriation' of Shakespeare to say something else was simply a beginning. A beginning which would develop into other journeys.

Recently I was asked what *Desdemona* is about. I often find such questions rather difficult to answer. How can I express in a sentence, a paragraph, the meaning of a performance? If I can do it, does that not mean that an audience does not need to sit in the auditorium for two hours? How do we express in a nutshell two hours of lived experience which different people would read differently?

Finally I said that *Desdemona* is a study of culture, hopefully a journey which is neither didactic nor academic. It is about a group of Asian artists looking at ourselves and rethinking the way in which Asia has been represented on the stage in the past. Further, I told the journalist that this was only my view and that all the artists involved would have different views and different reasons for doing this production.

Ultimately, this is what is appealing about an intercultural venture. All of us will never have a consensus about an intercultural venture. All of us will never have a consensus about the 'whats', the 'whys' and the 'hows' of this project. We have different approaches to artmaking but our interests and opinions can intersect. It is at these intersections that *Desdemona* exist.



March 1998: Robyn Archer invited me to Adelaide to consider participating in the 2000 festival. Her thoughts and the Festival's ambition to engage with artists in the risky business of new commissions spurred me to continue my personal processes, methodologies and aesthetics.

May 1998: I visited Korea to continue research for The Flying Circus Project II. This second workshop would primarily juxtaposition one culture from South Asia, one from East Asia and a third from South East Asia (Myanmar). In Korea, I was overwhelmed by the power of traditional music and gripped by its shaman practice. Subsequently, the shaman was a common thread that weaved through my research in the three countries. The body of the shaman is that of the marginalised in these cultures; women, untouchables and transvestites.

By chance in Korea, I met Rio. I had not seen her for close to a year. I discussed some of my early thoughts of *Desdemona* with her. As we collaborated well together and she was deeply fueled by the position of women in Korea and Japan, I thought it was a good opportunity. We then commenced a year of working out a draft for rehearsal, a draft to be deconstructed by the energies of the different artists.

July 1998: I visited Myanmar and encountered the marionette dance. It made me reconsider the definitions of traditional and contemporary. A dance where the human being represents a puppet and in fact dances side by side with a puppet. If I had seen it somewhere else, I would have mistaken it for a contemporary dance. In Myanmar, it is studied as traditional performance repertory.

Invented traditions aside, it made me think hard about how to reflect the different levels of the 'contemporary' in *Desdemona*. *Desdemona* would be a continuum flowing from Madhu and U Zaw Min who are completely trained in tradition (this is perhaps 'contemporary' to them); to Maya, Miroto, Jang and Shin who are reinventing their own traditional training into expressions of themselves today; to Claire and Kee Hong who are adaptive/flexible to embrace different artforms as their own traditional perspective is not monolithic; to the two contemporary visual artists Matthew and Park. Parallel to this, is the many different bodies on stage ranging from the formal body used to measure and study space, to the everyday urban body, to Barba's 'decided body' formed by rigorous traditional training.



December 1998: The Flying Circus II commenced. This was a four-week process laboratory to understand the different cultures, different aesthetics, different disciplines and different individual personalities of fifty artists from 7 different Asian countries. A unique feature of The Flying Circus is that there is no public presentation, end product or production orientation. However, it definitely contributed to our understanding of the artists who were finally invited back for *Desdemona*. Without this time, I would hesitate to produce any intercultural work.

1999: A process of lobbying for the finances to support the intercultural process. This production would not have been possible without the assistance of many individuals who had the confidence in our work. Ms Goh Ching Lee at the Singapore Arts Festival, Mrs Ho Lien Fung and Mrs Chong Yuan Chien at the Arts Fund Singapore, Ms Atsuko Hisano at the Saison Foundation Tokyo, and Mrs Goh Chok Tong.

October 1999 - March 2000: In the last 6 months leading up to the production, there have been music direction meetings, final script meetings, design meetings, visual discussions, technical production meetings. Such a process is compounded by the difficulty of distance but also stimulated and challenged by the many different attitudes towards art making.

Finally the last six weeks of rehearsals began. This period is extremely instructive for me and is still a learning phase. My methodology of constantly creating different performance drafts; turning written scenes on their head; developing extensive performance texts; multiple focal points and multiple realities; parallel texts of music and visual arts; were difficult experiences for the more traditional artists. In their artforms, they often rehearsed by fixing and drilling sequences.



In particular, my insistence on leaving open spaces till 2 weeks before leaving for Adelaide was initially a shock to many. I was also intent on driving a dense, intense, stream of consciousness journey into the psyche of the two central characters. This required multiple layering, quick shifts into surrealism and abstraction, symbolism, fracturing of self into artists rose to the challenge, finally building a company who is porous to each other's instincts and each other's subconscious/unconscious.

During the rehearsals, I have been intrigued by the development of a performance concept of gender with Maya. In this production, gender is viewed as a continuum rather than as two polar opposites of male and female. The flow between male and female has been exhilarating.

This has been paralleled by the development of the concept of zero during the rehearsals. What is zero, who is zero? Zero is the beginning, zero is the end, zero is negative space, zero is absence, zero is shadow, zero is the echo, zero is the reflection, zero is the trace, zero is the source, zero is the process...

Finally, I would like to thank Ching Lee and the Singapore Arts Festival for giving us the generous support.

ONG KENG SEN, Director
23 February 2000

desdemona: a mosaic performance

I wanted to deconstruct and reconstruct Shakespeare's play. I also wanted to extract the factors of Love and Death from the original work and focus on them. Love and Death in this play appear to contain various meanings and aspects. People have to confront Love and Death ultimately.

Two dead mothers appear in this play. One is *Desdemona's* mother and another is *Othello's* mother. The existence of the dead mothers is a metaphor of relief, healing, eternity, and revival.

The end becomes the beginning...

Desdemona is like a mosaic or jigsaw puzzle - I would like to find the fragments which fill the play, together with an audience.

Rio KISHIDA, Playwright
22 February 2000

processing dessy

The position of 'new' theatre from an equally 'new' Asia is consciously one of reinvention within the given current contexts and a desire for a different expression from these same contexts. These pressures in turn surround the experiment; colliding molecules carrying divergent skills, belief structures, social positionings, languages, aesthetic senses, identities and sexualities. Homogeneity in every aspect is the anti-thesis in this project. I guess it is hoped that the right sparks generated from these collisions will be fanned and passed through a sieve made of a theatrical-audio-visual fabric, so that these can possibly be recreated, though not necessarily in exactly the same way, as performance, night after night. Such an experiment cannot be viewed in any other way than by peeling through its thick skin, layer after layer. What happens when an ancient traditional form encounters another? What if this encounter is simultaneously framed by technology in the context of an isolated experiment? Why this desire to make such a piece? Why has a group of individual artists come together at this point of time to make such a piece? Is there really a direction? What is the meaning in having *Desdemona* premiere in Adelaide and then travel to Munich, Singapore and elsewhere? Is this significant? Is it really different, should it be different?

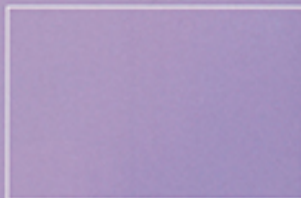


What does it mean to have a female Japanese playwright contort *Othello* along the lines of feminism and post-colonialism in the face of Korean male musicians and a female contemporary visual artist? For me, it is ultimately important to be able to answer these questions to some coherent degree through the processes of directly intersecting with each other - in rehearsals and in our homes.

One of the other big issues for the project is to allow, in the same 'free-form' way, for the intersection of different methodologies and frames that drive theatre and visual art. By this, I refer to the concept of 'bodies in space', which drive the preformative and moving or still image elements. At present, all elements swim in juxtaposition, in isolation and in different contexts.

Meanwhile the experiment continues with collisions initiated and sparks produced. Neither the performers nor the audience would catch fire, but a spark or two may land on bare skin, unless, of course, one is wearing protection.

Matthew NGUI, Installation Artist/Performer
8 February 2000



a ship named *desdemona*

Just a glance at the script, I could sense how demanding the project will be. The script was a symbol in itself. It would be a challenge for me to coordinate it with Korean traditional music.

I read the script over and over for hours. My research for suitable music began and ended. The result was a disaster. Nothing seemed to be in place.

In October 1999, Ong Keng Sen, the director, visited Seoul for 3 days. After a long discussion, there were only a few words I could remember: 'All situations derive from conflict.'

Still there was nothing fixed. Even today I do not know how the music will turn out. However, there is one thing for sure. The flexibility of leather and the sharpness of metal will make the first melody. The second will be the moderation of court music and the riches of folk music.

As language, thoughts and cultures differ, we have to find a music that can speak to as many people as possible. So let there be more rhythms than melodies, more improvised simple rhythms than complex patterns.

And that is the strength of Korean traditional music, in my view. Personally, this is an exciting experience to be on stage as a performer in a theatre production. It is also very encouraging to have such a great partner as Shin.

As Rio, our playwright once mentioned, we might be on a long, distant and wearisome voyage on a ship named *Desdemona*. And as a musician and actor, I will continue singing until we reach the holy ground.

JANG Jae Hyo, Music Director/Composer
12 February 2000



biographies

ONG Keng Sen/Director (Singapore)

Keng Sen, Artistic Director of TheatreWorks (Singapore), has engaged in cross-cultural work with fellow Asian artists for 6 years. He is known for his rejection of authenticity and his embracing of multiple realities and hybridity within Asia. Although his training is in contemporary performance from New York University, he often brings the strength of traditional concepts into his work.

In 1994, Keng Sen conceptualised The Flying Circus Project, a creative strategy laboratory which is a robust encounter between contemporary arts and traditional performance. This is an intercultural workshop amongst Asian artists which explores the fields of theatre, music, dance, visual arts and finally at the end of 2000, documentary film. 100 artists from countries such as India, Indonesia, Korea, Myanmar, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam have taken part thus far in 1996 and 1998. In December 2000, the most ambitious laboratory so far plans to explore religious performance and the urban artist with artists and ritualists from China, Japan, Philippines, Taiwan and Tibet. The key elements of The Flying Circus Project are reinvention, juxtaposition and cultural negotiation.

Believing that it is important to represent on stage an Asia of today, Keng Sen directed *Lear* which premiered in Tokyo in 1997. In particular, he has been hailed for his sensitive balance of traditions and cultures in *Lear*. To date, this production involving performers from six Asian countries has toured nine cities in Asia, Europe and Australia including the Festival of Perth. This personal exploration continues with *Desdemona*.

Keng Sen's philosophy of making work with an international dimension and relevance has seen his productions being presented in major arts festivals and cultural institutions in Asia, Australia, Europe and the United States of America. However, his contribution to the evolution of Singapore theatre is undeniable. He developed The Writers' Laboratory, which over the years has developed into a powerhouse for Singaporean writing.



He created, in collaboration with performers and artists, epic site-specific, interdisciplinary productions that included *Destinies of Flowers in the Mirror* which brought 300 audience members every night inside a mammoth fountain. He has also developed a genre which he calls docu-performance. These docu-performances explore the identity of today's Asia through the excavation of history and a confrontation of self and the other. They include *Broken Birds*, a piece about Japanese prostitutes in Singapore at the turn of the century and *Workhorse Afloat* which explores the consumption of the foreign construction worker from India by the Singaporean middle class.

He has lectured in London, Paris, Berlin, Sydney and Hong Kong (for The Asia Society of New York) about Asian performance. He is presently a member of an Asian-Europe network to look at exchange between new Asia and new Europe. He is the holder of several foundation fellowships including the Japan Foundation, British Council, Asian Cultural Council (New York) and is also a Fulbright Scholar. He has also directed film and television as well.

Recently he initiated a new network for Asian artists to dialogue and engage with each other, known as the Arts Networks Asia. He is also in the process of developing a series of personal biographies of South East Asian traditional artists on CD-ROM. He is dreaming of many projects including a new production about World War II with numerous young Japanese visual artists and a diaspora piece with Chinese from around the world. In May 2000, he directed his first opera for The Spoleto Festival, USA.

Rio KISHIDA/Playwright (Japan)

An award-winning Japanese playwright, Rio is a major collaborator of the late Shuji Terayama, whose work has had a worldwide impact that continues even today, more than a decade after his death. She worked closely with Terayama on many pieces, including *Shintokumaru*, *Leming*, and *Ekibyō Ryukoki* (*Account of an Epidemic*).

Since 1992 Rio has been active in international exchange in the theatre world, with a focus on South Korea, through her theatre series *Rio Kishida: Transcending National Borders*. During 1993 and 1994, *Se-weol e jota* (*The Blessings of the Years*), performed by a South Korean cast under the direction of Lee Yun Taek, toured Tokyo, Seoul, New York and San Francisco. She has also worked with the renowned Japanese director Yukio Ninagawa on major productions such as *Shintokumaru* (1996 in Japan; 1997 in London) and *Kusa Meikyu* (*Glass Labyrinth*; 1997 in Tokyo).

In 1986 she won the 29th Annual Kishida Drama Prize, the most important drama prize in Japan, for *Ito Jigoku* (*Woven Hell*), a play that depicts women living in obscurity in Japanese history. It was then performed at the Adelaide and Perth festivals where it was well received. In 1988, she won the 23rd Kinokuniya Drama Prize for *Tsui no Sumika/Kari no Yado* (*Final Home, Temporary Lodging*).

Rio writes about women from the perspective of gender as well as about the nature and role of the Father. She has also written many television and film scripts; she won the screenwriter's award at the 1989 Kumamoto Film Festival for *Senkyuhyaku Kyujukyunen no Natsuyasumi* (*Summer Vacation*, 1999).

In the last few years, Rio has collaborated successfully with Keng Sen. She wrote *Lear* in an extended 15-month process of discussion, workshops and rehearsals. She continues to refine the script with Keng Sen whenever the production is remounted.



Matthew NGUI/Installation Artist - Performer (Singapore-Australia)

Matthew, contemporary visual artist, works in a site-specific manner, developing works which are 'in tune' with where he is exhibiting. These sites vary tremendously - from numerous contemporary art museums and galleries throughout the world to public urban spaces to the Australian outback. The main concept behind his work focuses on interrogating and reformulating representation. This is extrapolated to deal with issues of identity and ubiquity, illusion and reality, set in the often fluxing cultural contexts present in each of the countries in which his works are developed.

He has installed major works and performed in the Sao Paulo Bienal 1996, the tenth *Documenta*, dX in Kassel 97, and in EAT! at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. He is part of the *Cities on the Move* travelling exhibition in Asian urbanism, developing new works for each venue which have so far included the Secession in Vienna, CAPC Musée d'art Contemporain in Bordeaux, the Louisiana Museum of Contemporary Art in Denmark and the Hayward Gallery at the South Bank Centre in London. He has made a multi-site video work in Hong Kong which was shown in Central Plaza as a major part of an exhibition showcasing Singaporean contemporary art.

Matthew has worked consistently with various groups of people and communities developing a series of computer controlled slide animations about how they researched their own cultural identities. He has worked with children at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, the schools in the farming towns of Western Australian Wheatbelt and at the Ecolé des Beaux Art Cantonale du Valais in Switzerland. He is currently involved in researching and preparing new works for an exhibition on food, culture and representation at the Singapore Art Museum, and for *Home*, a joint project between the Perth International Arts Festival 2000, and the Art Gallery of Western Australia. He is also working on two long-term community-based public art works, one for a train station in Singapore and the other a land-art piece as a visual and ecological experiment in salt affected areas in large Australian farms. He has recently presented a paper on international contemporary art practice at a national art school directors' conference and workshop in Switzerland.

Singaporean Matthew lives between Singapore and Australia, which he feels, is beneficial to his practice which involves the need to keep shifting one's point of view. In 1998, he participated in TheatreWorks' Flying Circus Project.

Matthew was born in 1962 and educated in Singapore, obtaining a National University of Singapore law degree there, while obtaining his BA (Fine Arts) and post graduate (Visual Arts) qualifications at Curtin University of Technology in Australia. He has taught at the art schools in Canberra (Australian National University), Perth (Curtin and Edith Cowan Universities) and Singapore (Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts). He is currently a full-time practising artist.

**PARK Hwa Young/Video Artist -
Performer and Costume Designer (Korea)**

Hwa Young is an exciting installation and video artist who has exhibited extensively both in solo and in group shows in New York City and Seoul. Since 1992, she has shown her works in at least 30 exhibitions and screenings. Her residency in 1995/96 at the reputable PS 1 International Studio Programme, Institute for Contemporary Art, NYC, is a recognition of her artistry and virtuosity. Hwa Young received a Masters in Fine Arts from the Pratt Institute in New York City, and subsequently trained in film at the New York University. In 1998, Hwa Young participated in TheatreWorks' Flying Circus Project where, interfacing with both traditional and contemporary performers, she added another dimension to the reinvention sessions.

**JANG Jae Hyo/Music Director -
Composer (Korea)**

Jae Hyo is a member of a Korean contemporary samui nori group, PURI, which is known as the Korean STOMP for its dynamic and imaginative percussion performance. He is highly skilled in the ajaeng. He trained under the Masters Geon Jung Min and Pak Song Hi. Jae Hyo, who went to the University of Traditional Arts in Seoul to study, also trained in pansori singing. He has won national awards for his work as a musician as well as performed outside Korea both as an individual as well as with PURI. In 1998, Jae Hyo participated in TheatreWorks' Flying Circus Project where he contributed greatly to the reinvention sessions.



**Madhu MARGI/Collaborator -
Performer (India)**

Madhu plays Othello. He is an exponent of the art form kudiattum, which is said to be 1,500 years old. It is the dramatic form of kathakali dance where all text is spoken in Sanskrit. Highly ritualistic, kudiattum has its origins in the temples. Madhu, though in his early 30s, is reputed as a master saviour of this art form. He has performed this rigorous art form all over the world and he was the Junior Research fellowship holder from the government of India, as well as the 'Sanskriti' National Award winner in 1996. Trained by the most important surviving guru's Ammannoor Madhava Chakyar and Moozhikkulam Kochukutlan Chakyar, Madhu has recently entered the Sree-Sankararacharya University of Sanskrit to propagate the art of kudiattum in Kerala, South India. Madhu participated in TheatreWorks' Flying Circus Project in 1998 where he led workshops in kudiattum. Madhu also recently performed in a new ritual-performance *Dragon Bond Rite* which has toured the United States of America extensively including The Japan Society in NYC, and Hong Kong.

**Maya Krishna RAO/Collaborator -
Performer (India)**

Maya plays Othello. A choreographer-performer, she has traditional kathakali training since she was seven years old in Delhi and Kerala. She specialises in the male role, which is a rarity for a woman performer. Using her traditional training in kathakali, she has created a performance language in contemporary movement performances that melds the traditional and the contemporary.

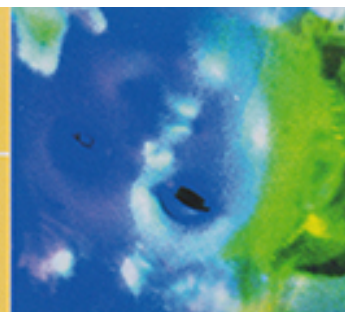
Maya has worked extensively abroad, the most recent being the 1999 London International Theatre Festival (LIFT). Her unique performance style was also showcased in the 1999 Performance Conference at the Centre for Performance Research in Wales. In 1998, Maya participated in TheatreWorks' Flying Circus Project, where she led workshops in kathakali. Her work has taken her to various cities in Asia, Europe, United States of America as well as the Middle East.

Maya works extensively in various mediums including film and television. She has created and choreographed many productions which see her delving in socio-political issues like the Indian law on rape and the Partition of India. Maya who holds two Masters degrees, including one in Theatre Arts from Leeds University UK, has also been very active in creating theatre-in-education programmes within the UK and India. She is currently working on two creative projects: an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to kathakali and a devised work for the millennium.



**Claire WONG/Collaborator -
Performer (Malaysia-Singapore)**

Claire plays *Desdemona*. She recently appeared in *Lear* at the Theater der Welt Festival in Berlin and the Sommer Festival in Copenhagen playing the Loyal Attendant, a cross-gender role based on Shakespeare's *Gloucester*. She performed the one-woman play, *Madame Mao's Memories*, which was invited to the Traverse Theatre for the Edinburgh Festival; toured Japan, Singapore and Malaysia with *Three Children* and played in New York, Berlin and Cologne in *City of Skies*. In Singapore, Claire has played leading roles in numerous productions, including the original *Beauty World*, *Mad Forest* and *Wills & Secession*. As a participant in TheatreWorks' Flying Circus Projects in 1996 and 1998, she received training in several Asian traditional art forms including Chinese opera and martial arts, Balinese mask dance, kudyattam and kathakali. Claire is currently based in New York City where she is pursuing her Masters of Fine Arts at Columbia University. Her teachers include Andrei Serban, Kristin Linklater, Niki Wolcz, Anne Bogart and she has received training in viewpoints, Suzuki and commedia dell'arte.



**LOW Kee Hong/Collaborator -
Performer (Singapore)**

Kee Hong, an original cast member of the critically acclaimed *Lear* (Asia-Pacific 1998, Japan 1997), recently reprised his role of Ambition, the Elder Daughter's shadow in the European production at the Theater der Welt Festival in Berlin (1999) and the Sommer Festival in Copenhagen (1999). Trained as a dancer in ballet, modern dance, Balinese dance and butoh, he was also a participant in TheatreWorks' Flying Circus Project in 1996 and 1998. He has appeared in *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* which toured Hamburg (Hamburg International Summer Festival) and Berlin (Asian Avant Grade: Dance and Theatre, House of World Cultures) in 1998, to much critical acclaim. Kee Hong was also a performer-collaborator with Ong Keng Sen on *Eat Me* which was presented at the Journey to the East Project, Hong Kong 1998. Together with another Singaporean actor, *Eat Me* was recently remounted at the Performance Studies International Conference 1999 in Aberystwyth, Wales. In Singapore, he is a seasoned performer in many of Keng Sen's cutting edge productions. Also an active scholar with a keen interest in cultural policy issues, he recently received his Masters in Sociology. He is currently researching a CD-ROM project with Keng Sen which aims to provide important and critical documentation on the continuum between traditional and contemporary Southeast Asian performing arts and artists.



**Martinius MIROTO/Collaborator -
Performer (Indonesia)**

A dancer-choreographer and instructor at the Indonesian Institute of Arts (ISI Yogyakarta), Miroto received his Masters of Fine Arts in dance from the University of California, Los Angeles in 1995 through a joint grant from the Asian Cultural Council, Ford Foundation and UCLA. In 1996, he was selected as the best classical Yogyanese court dancer for the refined male character and received the Sultan Hamengku Buwana X's trophy. He founded Miroto and Dancers in 1996 which produces contemporary works.

Miroto has worked much internationally. This includes Pina Bausch's *Victor* which was performed at the Holland International Dance Festival 1987 and a Peter Sellar's production of *The Persians* that toured Europe and the USA in 1993. He has recently worked on a collaboration with Peter Sellars on *B, belse Stukken* in Amsterdam, June and December 1999. Miroto was invited by the Japan Foundation to direct and choreography new works and to conduct dance workshops in several cities in Japan in November 1999.

**SHIN Chang Yool/Collaborator -
Performer (Korea)**

Chang Yool is a talented musician who majored in Korean traditional percussion in his university days. He has learnt court music (*jung ak*) from Daechuita Master Sa Jae Sung; folk rhythms from Master Kim Chung Man; samunori from Master Bang Seung Hwan, a member of the original Samunori; and Kyungki shamanism rhythms from Master Han Seng Suk. As a performer, he has won a significant prize in the KBS Traditional Music Awards, and has international touring experience. Chang Yool has also been trained as a traditional music recording engineer. He organised and directed concerts for other young enthusiastic traditional performers. A promising percussionist, Shin is eager to discover new grounds with *Desdemona*.



**U ZAW MIN/Collaborator -
Performer (Myanmar)**

U Zaw Min is the marionette dancer and puppeteer of *Desdemona*. He is a total artiste in his 60s who is well known for his agile performance of the Myanmar marionette dance form. U Zaw Min is widely acknowledged to be the top master of this form in the whole country today. He is also a consummate puppeteer who began his career dancing the golden deer role in the epic, *Ramayana*. In 1998, U Zaw Min participated in TheatreWorks' Flying Circus Project where he led workshops in the Myanmar marionette dance form.

Justin HILL/Set designer (Australia - Singapore)

Justin is a set designer and an architect in Singapore, where he is a partner of Kerry Hill Architects and a founder director of TheatreWorks since 1985. He studied architecture at The University of Adelaide and has worked extensively in opera, musical theatre, drama, and dance during his years in Asia and Australia.

In Singapore, he established his reputation designing the highly successful musical *The Samseng and The Chettiar's Daughter*, directed by John Tasker in 1982; a production which brought together many well known Singaporean theatre practitioners.

His recent works include *La Traviata* for the Singapore Lyric Opera; the children's opera *Arion and the Dolphin*; the popular Singaporean musical *Beauty World*, a TheatreWorks production which toured Japan and has enjoyed several seasons in Singapore, and the comedy *My Lonely Tarts* for TheatreWorks in 1999.

His most notable work was his evocative design for *Lear*, a Japan Foundation Asia Center Production, directed by TheatreWorks' Artist Director Ong Keng Sen. The play opened in Tokyo in September 1997, and toured to Singapore, Hong Kong, Jakarta, Perth, Berlin and Copenhagen in 1999. Justin's design received much critical acclaim and was described by one critic as "a marvel of minimalism, stunningly atmospheric".

Desdemona is his second production design for the international, multicultural works directed by Keng Sen.



Scott ZIELINSKI/Lighting designer (USA)

Scott is an American lighting designer based in New York City whose work has been seen extensively throughout the United States. US theatre highlights include productions for Joseph Papp Public Theatre in New York; Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis; Arena Stage in Washington, DC; Goodman Theatre in Chicago; and Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. Outside the US, theatre credits include The Royal National Theatre of Great Britain and Lyric Theatre Hammersmith in London, Edinburgh Festival in Scotland, Theatre Neumarkt in Zurich, and TheatreWorks in Singapore. His designs for dance and opera have been seen at companies such as American Ballet Theatre, San Francisco Ballet, National Ballet of Canada, Brooklyn Academy of Music and Houston Grand Opera. Scott has also been Associate Designer to Robert Wilson.

Desdemona marks Scott's fourth collaboration with Ong Keng Sen. Previous productions include *A Language of Their Own* in New York, and *Mortal Sins* and *Workhorse Afloat* in Singapore. In May this year Scott has just worked with Keng Sen on *Silver River* for Spoleto USA.



theatreworks (singapore) ltd

TheatreWorks (Singapore), established in 1985, is an international performance company based in Singapore. Since then, TheatreWorks has become known in Asia for its reinvention of traditional performance through a juxtaposition of cultures.

Under the Artistic Directorship of Mr Ong Keng Sen, TheatreWorks' concerns goes beyond that of Singapore. It sees a strong synergy between nationalism and internationalism. This philosophy informs the company's work and outlook. With this philosophy, TheatreWorks has performed in the cultural capitals of Asia and Europe since 1992 in major festivals and cultural institutions.

TheatreWorks asks, 'What is Asian in this age of globalisation, internationalisation, modernity and urbanisation? Its work exists on the tension between modernity and tradition; local and global. It hopes to rethink what is Western, what is Eastern, what is first world and what is third world: 'Do these dichotomies continue to make sense in the new millennium?' Representing the continuum between tradition and contemporary, the work is unafraid to be exotic and yet conceptual. TheatreWorks' aesthetics projects the hybrid identity of the modern Asian and embrace the multiple realities of Asia today. The processes and productions of TheatreWorks question critical cultural issues without forsaking both emotional potency and artistry.

One of the significant projects of the company is *The Flying Circus Project*, a brainchild of Keng Sen's. This laboratory, the first with such extensive scope and continuity in Asia, looks at the different creative strategies of individual artists, through the recognition of difference between the many Asian cultures. *The Flying Circus Project* was established in 1995. It is divided into three phases linked by a spirit of investigation and inquiry. The focal point is cultural negotiation through a clash of cultures, a clash of time/space through the dynamic interaction between traditional and contemporary performers and a clash of disciplines.



Over the course of a decade, TheatreWorks has undergone numerous phases, always in response to its surrounds. For instance, the company's development program for writers, *The Writers' Lab*, envisages a goal to cultivate writers commenting powerfully and controversially on the social condition in Singapore. It has developed numerous playwrights currently working in Singapore. Other past programs which developed theatre practice includes the Directors' Lab; Resident Artists Scheme; Associate Artists Scheme; and the Springboard Series.

In 1999, TheatreWorks initiated the *Arts Network Asia* that encourages and supports regional artistic collaboration. This Network is motivated by the philosophy of meaningful collaboration, distinguished by mutual respect. This Network, with funding from the Ford Foundation and managed by TheatreWorks, is run by a panel of Asian artists. The Network makes grants to assist regional collaborations. The panel of artists, including TheatreWorks, is not allowed to apply for funds from this Network.

Apart from intercultural concerns, TheatreWorks' recent works have challenged accepted history through a genre of docu-performance. Such works question the process of documentation itself. It points to the slippage when translation occurs: linguistic translation, translation from fact into history into myth into performance. These works ultimately deal with the realm of myth making in modern societies.

TheatreWorks works primarily through a process of collaboration, dialogue and engagement with artists from other cultures. The company has become increasingly concerned with the urgent need for Asia to engage with Europe, America and Australia on new territories and with a new vocabulary. Ultimately, TheatreWorks is dedicated to the development of contemporary arts in Singapore, and to the evolution of an Asian identity and aesthetics for the 21st century through a culture of difference.

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