



INTERNATIONALISATION: AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN HOME AND OTHER THEATRE CULTURES

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Abstract

Nguyen Dinh Thi, the Director of the Hanoi Academy of Cinema and Theatre, in this paper, outlines his theory of Internationalisation, where traditional forms of Vietnamese theatre encounter theatrical forms from other cultures. The processes of intermingling of differing cultural performance practices and expressions and the degree to which these are assimilated with traditional forms influence the cultural heritage maintained in Vietnamese theatre. Referencing prominent performance studies theorists, this paper reflects on the difference between Vietnamese and American concepts of cultural exchange. Offering a range of examples, this paper differentiates between the maintenance or loss of cultural meaning in contemporary Vietnamese theatre productions where cross-cultural influences are at play.

Keywords: Vietnamese theatre; Intercultural theatre; Cultural exchange

Both in the final decades of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century, the growing number of international performance festivals and cultural exchange projects have been breaking down barriers between the world's theatre cultures. An international community is emerging where both those who make and consume theatre have become increasingly familiar with a diversity of forms and issues presented on stages of all nations. However, there have evolved a series of new theoretical "isms" in the theatre today that need to be strongly questioned. This phenomenon is opening up new relationships between theatre cultures that are eroding the specificities of their own traditions.

A prominent area for international exchange, theatre culture will be susceptible to cross-cultural influences. Recent theatre practices reveal that theatre practitioners adapt, assimilate, borrow or innovate in response to a wide range of contacts and encounters, forced or voluntary. Old forms are constantly being remoulded to the requirements of today. New practices are being created and, if accepted and practised for a time, become absorbed into traditional practice.

The question is whether this process, as complex as the many variants of cross cultural exchange in the theatre, can be encapsulated by the term "internationalisation". Is it a collaborative process in which elements, external to the home culture, equally exist with the original tradition and then create a new form which becomes familiar? Or are they assimilated into the tradition and absorbed by it? Do "foreign" elements remain unfamiliar used within traditional structures - thus demonstrating their Otherness?

My assertion that tradition is the contemporary interpretation of the past, rather than something passively received, is a crucial element in a theory of preserving tradition. My point is that in theatre, cultural identity must be understood as creative and dynamic, and such an understanding is only possible with a symbolic concept of culture. In utilising the concept of "internationalisation" of theatre, I am less interested in creating a new genre than, through analysing and comparing different models, in searching for a stimulus to strengthen my own Vietnamese theatre culture.

It has been questionable how culturally different theatrical elements can be amalgamated with traditional performance forms. A number of questions need to be answered:

1. Can internationalisation be the inclusion of external elements existing equally with traditional elements to make a new form that becomes familiar?
2. Through contact with international theatrical influences, do culturally different elements introduced to traditional theatrical forms become absorbed?
3. Do culturally different elements introduced into Vietnamese traditional forms remain external and demonstrate "Otherness"?

The issue of cultural identity is particularly acute for Vietnamese people who are very respectful of their own tradition. There are conflicting definitions of what Vietnamese cultural identity is, because of a long history of being influenced by foreigners. It is important, I think for theatre practitioners to understand that culture is not a fixed but a discursive space that enables interaction to take place. "Culture engenders a sense of belonging, of identity and inclusion."¹ However this also "implies exclusion, denial of membership, and borders. Borders, the lines that demarcate one culture from another, may not be as clear-cut as national borders but they are at the centre of cultural relations."²

Recently, in Vietnam, theatre practitioners have been expected to develop international cultural exchange programs in which they can take opportunities to learn from other theatre cultures to strengthen Vietnamese theatre. In this Vietnamese traditional theatre's renaissance, the effort has been to apply international theatrical techniques to our own theatre works. But this tendency has been accompanied by increasing concern that Vietnamese traditional theatrical principles are being lost to a tourist entertainment. This is why the identification of common cultural themes and the maintenance of Vietnamese traditional theatre practices and processes are important issues in integrating culturally external elements with traditional theatre forms.

Cultural identity in Vietnam may be viewed as deriving from Vietnamese traditions which in turn have been closely linked to Vietnamese models of spirituality. In contemporary society the concept of cultural identity is constantly adapting and is creatively fashioned by the current generation. In making contemporary theatre, new processes deviating from the traditional may be introduced in response to situational contingencies to create new theatre forms. For example, one of Vietnam's traditional theatrical forms, *Cai Luong* was established by the combination of Western realistic drama and *Tuong* in the early twentieth century when French colonisers came to Vietnam.

The establishment of *Cai Luong* is an evidence of the inclusion of culturally differing elements, in this case French theatrical elements, existing equally with traditional elements to make a new form that now has become a traditional theatrical form. In this creation we can see the influence of a realistic style of acting, which is drawn from Western drama integrated with Vietnamese traditional dance and movements.

In my own development as a theatre practitioner I have learned from contact with Australian and British cultures. These cultural exchanges have been helpful to me as a Vietnamese theatre director. However there are also Vietnamese cultural values, which I would not compromise. For example, in recent years, through increasing cultural exchanges between Vietnam and Western countries, we have seen a lot of Western films, performances and art products in which there is much sexuality. The facts of life are not a problematic issue for Vietnamese; in Vietnam, however, both creators and consumers choose discretion in showing sexual scenes in our own artistic works. In my 2000 production of *Romeo and Juliet*³, in Ho Chi Minh City, for instance, on which I worked with a British director, Roger Chamberlain, a Western concept of physical theatre was used to express Romeo and Juliet's feelings when they first meet and kiss. The dancers at the carnival slowly turned to melting bodies representing sexuality and Roger said to me: "It is very sexy". But the sexuality was shown using a Vietnamese aesthetic, rather than the predominantly American way used in imported materials.

By directing this play, my desire was to bring Shakespeare's plays closer to Vietnamese audiences, and to enable them to comprehend cultural values of other countries, while being aware of their own tradition. Simultaneously I hoped to show international audiences a different version of *Romeo and Juliet* with a Vietnamese interpretation, by using one of the most important principles of Vietnamese traditional theatre: to materialise invisible elements of characters. From my point of view, this is a matter of integrating the 'Otherness' of the Vietnamese cultural traditions whilst still maintaining the integrity of a Shakespeare production. Consideration was taken of the cultural identity of both western and Vietnamese traditions.

The exploration of other instances of theatre internationalisation has given me an appreciation of the great advantages of cross-cultural exchange through which each theatre culture can enrich itself by absorbing or adapting techniques from other models. In addition, I am aware of the vitality of understanding cultural identity, how and where theatre is created and what it can tell us about notions of geography, boundaries and nations.

Within the scope of this discussion, then, I define theatre "internationalisation" as an encounter between home and other theatre cultures in which cultural borderlines are respected by all participants. In such an encounter practitioners from one theatre culture - the Own - can adapt or absorb techniques from various cultures - the Other, whilst the meaning and context of the absorbed "foreign" elements retain their cultural significance and do not disturb the cultural identity of the theatre piece. Both retain and unite their independent cultural values to create a new heterogeneous theatrical identity. By the Own, I mean the native theatre forms which can be traditional or a

¹ Watson, Ian. *Negotiating Cultures: Eugenio Barba and The Intercultural Debate*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002, p.3.

² *ibid*

³ *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, directed by Nguyen Dinh Thi, at Ho Chi Minh City College of Theatre and Cinema, Hoa Binh Theatre, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Redirected in Hanoi in 2003 by the author, Nguyen Dinh Thi, at The Hanoi Academy of Theatre and Cinema, for his Doctor of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, Australia.

form created by absorbing elements from other cultures which then become accepted as part of native culture. The Other should be seen as theatre forms which do not belong to the same culture; they can also become, through time, a type of Own, absorbed and developed from the former.

Richard Schechner, an American director and theoretician, used the term “internationalism” to describe exchanges among cultures. However he felt that the important exchange for artists was not that between nations, suggestive of official exchanges and artificial boundaries. Rather he advanced the discussions of “interculturalism” by pointing out: “in the postcolonial world, national boundaries and cultural boundaries differ.”⁴

Schechner's statement seems to me based on a Westerner's perception in which cultural identities of nations are ignored. In Asian countries in general and in Vietnam in particular, cultural identity is considered as a spiritual boundary. Rather than referring to cultural boundaries as “artificial kinds of boundaries”⁵, I prefer the notion of respecting these boundaries and identifying them, since culture is both material and spiritual.

The importance of spiritual culture to the development of human knowledge cannot be underestimated. Culturally, the simple question: “Where are you from?” may not simply be answered with, “From where I live”. To answer this question fully you need to include the cultural context in which you are rooted. For example, it is unlikely that any one who has not grown up with Vietnam's water rice, can be sufficiently aware of the numerous metaphors of fish sauce or shrimp sauce that hint at spiritual concepts and values. The flavour of these sauces represents a torrent of emotions, thoughts, taboos and fantasies which are transformed into a deeply spiritual experience. In making theatre, there will be an incomplete interpretation of a text if we do not fully understand what is flowing under the text - the cultural subtext. We cannot neglect spiritual concepts from which a theatrical language frequently is developed.

Schechner has drawn the attention of theatre scholars to the interdisciplinary advantages between theatre and anthropology, but he does not suggest that one discipline interprets society for the other. A theatre practitioner cannot fully comprehend a play from another culture if he/she ignores the cultural context. This cultural context, used in the process of bringing theatre into being or evaluating its finished products, ranges freely, but purposefully, in an effort to emphasise cultural values. In many societies, theatre and religious ritual, seen as a cultural value, have come to share common characteristics. These characteristics make it difficult to draw any clear line between ritual and theatre.

Schechner explains that the meaning of a particular ritual is altered when that ritual is transformed from its own culture into another: “it [ritual] means something different to us”, he states, “You go to another country to see your own more clearly.”⁶ His statement is highly questionable: what about the ‘Other’ culture? Can rituals, which are a part of one's cultural heritage, simply be used in personal ways without understanding their original meaning? Schechner's view that “[a]ny ritual can be lifted from its original setting and performed as theatre - just as any everyday event can be.”⁷ is also questionable: how can he lift rituals of a non-Western culture to an everyday event in the service of American standards without a distortion of the original rituals?

As Rustom Bharucha, an Indian theatrical scholar, pointed out: “Schechner presumes to represent ‘other’ cultures by placing them in his own ‘map’ of post-modern performance.”⁸ Schechner's writings conspicuously reveal his state of preoccupation with the ‘himself’ overpowering the representations of ‘Other’ cultures. Instead of considering the validity of cultural/spiritual boundaries, he upholds the individual contexts of other cultures through a simple mixture of physical and ritual actions, in order “to reveal himself as a set of disconnected thoughts,”⁹ and to celebrate his own fragmentation.

By analysing Schechner's point of view on international theatrical exchanges I wanted to confront my own cultural identity in relation to the prodigiously diverse cultures in Vietnam. I am aware that preserving cultural identity does not stop cultures from changing. It is true that “culture” functions as a process of ongoing actions in which exchange is encouraged and the past can be told as it truly is, not was. However, it is not justified for traditional cultures to assimilate other cultural values simply because this has become an international trend.

To develop further my idea of theatre internationalisation, I have undertaken numerous studies on theatrical experiences in relation to my intention. One of them was Ong Keng Sen's¹⁰ practice in Singapore where selected culturally “foreign” elements were introduced to become absorbed into their own theatre works.

In 1996, I was invited to attend a workshop called SEALAB¹¹ in Singapore, where artists from Southeast Asian countries were gathered to work together. They were encouraged to use their own national backgrounds to

⁴ Schechner, Richard, “Interculturalism and The Culture of Choice: Richard Schechner Interviewed by Patrice Pavis.” In *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, edited by Patrice Pavis (41 - 50), London: Routledge, p. 42

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Schechner, Richard, “Fragments of Dialog(s)”, *The Bennington Review*, December 1978. p. 97.

⁷ Schechner, Richard. *Performative Circumstances from the Avant-garde to Ramlila*. Calcutta: Seagull Books. 1983. p. 150.

⁸ Bharucha, Rustom. *Theatre and The World: Performance and The Politics of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1993, p. 28.

⁹ Schechner 1978, p. 92.

¹⁰ Artistic director of Singapore's TheatreWorks.

¹¹ South-East Asian Laboratory organised by Singapore's TheatreWorks, funded by the Japan Foundation Asia Center.

create a work in which we would see both a harmony of various art forms and the uniqueness of each country. The final presentation was improvised by actors, dancers and performers. They had taken part in a series of workshops on movement, traditional dance, and music led by representatives of countries, each with a unique musical harmony. In this presentation, I saw something very new, yet still heard sounds of Thailand's xylophone, Vietnamese musical instruments such as the *Dan bau* and *Tam thap luc*, together with other countries' musical instruments. At the same time, I saw unique movement styles developed from what participants had learned during the workshop.

This workshop was part of a project funded by the Japan Foundation Asia Center in which an adaptation of Shakespeare's play *King Lear* was directed by Ong Keng Sen, performed by an multinational cast, with text written in Japanese by Rio Kishida and then translated into Mandarin, Bahasa Indonesian and English.¹² In this production actors spoke only in languages corresponding to their performance traditions and locale (Mandarin, Japanese, Bahasa, Thai). All characters were turned to abstractions: for example Lear became the Old Man, Goneril and Regan were collapsed into the malevolent figure of the Older Daughter, Cordelia was the Younger Daughter, Gloucester and Kent were reduced to the Loyal Attendant, and Edmund became a lascivious Retainer. One of the production's most remarkable points was that all actors could identify themselves with their own specific forms and traditions of acting, yet performances still corresponded to the abstracted qualities of each character.

I wanted to know why Ong chose a Japanese actor to play the King using Japanese Noh theatre techniques while the Older Daughter was played using Chinese opera techniques? Was it because China and Japan, the Northern Asians, were becoming dominant politically and economically? Did he see theatre casting as representative of national status, a political statement?

Beyond those questions I saw, in Ong's way of melding different techniques from different theatre forms, potential to help me explore more deeply my ideas of theatre internationalisation. I saw an integration of indigenous theatrical elements within a consciousness of each nationality's identity. This seemed close to my aim to find a way of strengthening my own theatre culture by applying techniques and models from other theatre forms to create new theatrical presentations.

One process of internationalisation utilized in staging classical European plays in Vietnam is through localising the setting. For example, in 2003, The Hanoi Academy of Theatre and Cinema in association with the French theatre company, L'Espace, staged *Tartuffe*¹³ by Moliere, directed by French director Jean Sarkis. The text was adapted to take place in the early years of the 20th Century, when Vietnam was under French colonial rule. The director transposed this classical European play to a Vietnamese location and period so as to interpret issues pertinent to Vietnam at that time; the growth of a new bourgeois class was of concern then in Vietnam just as it was in Moliere's classic. The set design depicted Vietnamese houses with characters wearing Vietnamese traditional costumes; traditional folk music was used; the characters displayed Vietnamese customs from the beginning of the 20th Century and the stage was utilized in a non-representational mode akin to the Vietnamese style.

In Anton Chekhov's *A Marriage Proposal*¹⁴ (2012), the Vietnamese folk style form of traditional theatre was used, including Vietnamese music and the positioning of musicians, an open use of space, symbolic props and the unification of style across the production. The special thing in this performance was that the acting was exaggerated in the traditional Vietnamese performance style. Given that Chekhov is regarded as a master of realism, this transposition of *A Marriage Proposal* to a Vietnamese traditional style may have been considered as unacceptable, however psychologically the production accorded with the original. The similarities of character psychology resonated with the contemporary audience. At the same time, the director still remained faithful to the dramatic context, and the dramatic actions which belonged to the characters. The chosen traditional style was appropriate and effective. Internationalisation was in this case a success.

In May, 2021, as a member of ATEC (Asia Theatre Education Centre), the Hanoi Academy of Theatre and Cinema participated in the 4th World Theatre Education Conference with its 6th Asian Theatre Schools Festival performing *Oedipus the King*¹⁵ by Sophocles. The Festival organisers selected the theme: 'Humanity in Ancient Greek Plays'. In *Oedipus the King*, performed by students at the Hanoi Academy of Theatre and Cinema and directed by the author, Bui Nhu Lai, a modern approach was taken. The plot remained but in an edited version. The spiritual element was respected as spirituality is considered as a part of Vietnamese life. The desire of characters to aspire to find out the truth and to overcome their destiny and yet failing in spite of their efforts was the central theme. According to the spiritual aspect, the Vietnamese believe that each person has their own destiny. If our fate disposes us in any situations, we will have to accept it, however, as ever, we always crave for good things. The

¹² The premiere of *King Lear* was in January 1999 at Kallang Theatre, Singapore.

¹³ *Tartuffe* by Moliere, directed by Jean Sarkis, Hanoi Academy of Theatre and Cinema, Opera House, Hanoi, September, 2003.

¹⁴ *A Marriage Proposal* by Anton Chekhov, directed by Le Manh Hung, Hanoi Academy of Theatre and Cinema, for 2nd Asian Theatre Schools Festival, May 21, 2012.

¹⁵ *Oedipus The King* by Sophocles (2021), directed by Bui Nhu Lai, Hanoi Academy of Theatre, for 6th Asian Theatre Schools Festival, May 2021.

stage space was utilised as that of the Vietnamese traditional stage. Body movement plays an important part in the formation of character. Body language was maximised in order to indicate dramatic context and characters' psychological development. This production took advantage of the performative rules in Vietnamese traditional theatre (*Cheo* and *Tuong*): materialising people's thought and emotion through movement; in other words, making the invisible visible.

In the climax of this performance Jocasta, Oedipus' wife but also his mother is portrayed as two on-stage personas - Wife and Mother. This is an artistic method used in Vietnamese traditional theatre: the invisible things from soul are expressed as images that are visible.

We understand that Oedipus's wife suffers from her torment; she wants to forget the truth that she is Oedipus's mother, however, the truth is quickly determined. Jocasta too is a victim in the tragedy of fate.



**A Scene in *Oedipus the King*, performed by Hanoi Academy of Theatre and Cinema
Photo: Vuong Hao Tran**

This torment, with its intense emotions is played through imagery. In this process of internationalisation, the language of dialogues, as in the original text, was judged as not sufficient to express all the emotive nuances and depths. The director chose moving imagery to express the intricacies of the character's context.



**A Scene in *Oedipus the King* performed by Hanoi Academy of Theatre and Cinema
Photo: Vuong Hao Tran**



**A Scene in *Oedipus the King* performed by Hanoi Academy of Theatre and Cinema
Photo: Vuong Hao Tran**

These examples of intercultural theatre practices have aided my thinking about the intermingling of culturally different forms of theatre and the impact on cultural heritage when elements from an 'Other' culture are mingled with elements of an 'Own' culture. My concept of theatre internationalisation is a type of theatrical exchange between nations in which techniques or elements from culturally different theatre forms are assimilated and their cultural context respected, and in which, in return, a similar offer is made from my own tradition. More particularly, the idea of theatre internationalisation is closely connected with aesthetics of identity. Of course this is a matter of choice and there is no way such a choice can escape from being viewed in a larger hierarchy of forms, but the consideration of the concept of theatre internationalisation can, I think, provide a powerful testing ground to deal with controversial issues such as the debate on cultural identity in contemporary societies.

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