

Asian Arts in the Liberal Arts

Asian Theater and the Liberal Arts

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The arts occupy a unique place in the liberal arts. A random sampling of the general education requirements of over a dozen member schools of ASIANetwork indicates that the average small liberal arts school requires an average of two arts courses during the student's tenure. Some schools combine arts and humanities and make no distinction between the two for purposes of graduation requirements, thus ensuring the student who wishes to avoid the arts can do an end run around them. The overall impression of the attitude towards the arts in ASIANetwork schools runs from the belief in the importance of the arts in balancing a liberal arts education to the notion that a knowledge of the arts is nice, but not necessary. It is the position of those on this panel, however, that the arts are valuable on their own, as well as within the liberal arts.

The arts allow us to view how a culture sees itself; how the artist within a society chooses to represent that society. The arts in general and theatre in particular engage all that a culture contains: history, philosophy, religion, economics, social concerns, etc. The stories a culture tells itself tells us who and what that culture is and what it holds dear. The theatre, functioning as it does, shows human beings engaging in human behavior. The theatre is arguably the most social of the arts. An actor needs an audience in order to create his art, which is, after all, temporally and spatially located. Theatre can only take place in the here and now when watched by an audience. A musician playing alone still makes music. A dancer dancing alone still dances. A painter painting alone still creates a painting. An actor playing alone is schizophrenic or in need of counseling. I say this not to disparage either the craft of the actor or the value and use of the other arts. I cite this for the sole purpose of arguing the value of theatre to demonstrate what lies at the heart of a culture: it is socially bound, represents human behavior, and engages the issues and concerns at the heart of society. The very word "theatre" comes from the Greek *theatron*, "the seeing place." Theatre is the only art named after the activity of the audience and not the artist. Value is

placed on both the doer and the experiencer, so to speak.

The study of theatre as an art form might be divided into two sections: history and theory, and practice. The teaching of the practice of Asian theatre is alive and well in many schools across the country. In the decade following World War II, Earl Ernst began a program in Japanese theatre at the University of Hawaii, including a practical training component. Since then, numerous scholar/practitioners have included practical training in the traditional theatres of Asia as part of the curriculum. Kabuki, noh, kathakali, bharata natyam, Beijing opera, are all being taught in the theatre schools of America, both on their own and as part of fusion or intercultural theatre projects. In Japanese theatre alone, James Brandon at the University of Hawaii, Shozo Satoh in Illinois, Yukihiko Goto at San Francisco State University, Carol Sorgenfrie at UCLA, and Andrew Tsubaki at the University of Kansas, among others, for example, all teach Japanese theatre practice, including to undergraduate students. Their primary function, however, is the teaching of advanced degrees and in the training of professional artists. Those who study under Brandon, or Satoh, do so to complete an M.F.A.

We should remember, however, that one of the very first producers of Japanese theatre by American students was Leonard Pronko, who taught (and still teaches) the undergraduates at Pomona College. Though a Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures (indeed, many of his writings are about French theatre), Pronko studied kabuki in Japan in the early 1960s. In 1964 he began directing productions of kabuki plays. In his seminal book *Theatre: East and West*, Pronko describes his early kabuki productions at Pomona. Though he acknowledges their less-than-accurate rendering of kabuki at times, the productions clearly engaged Japanese theatre practice as a pedagogical tool for the learning of both Japanese culture and theatre practice. In 1978 Pronko co-wrote *The Revenge of Spider* with two students, with two additional students writing the music for the production. As a training exercise for future playwrights and musicians, the project also exposed the students to Japanese theatre practice. Pronko introduced kabuki to student actors and student audiences. The acting students learned a new type of theatre, the students in the audience had an admittedly cross-cultural, mediated encounter with kabuki, but the door had been opened to Asian culture.

A variation on this theme, so to speak, was introduced by Pronko's project that followed the initial kabuki production: a performance of Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew*

of *Malta* using kabuki techniques. Cross-cultural, intercultural, or fusion theatre are all names given to this form—the production of a text of one culture with the techniques of another. It is an excellent tool for both the exploration of another culture's theatre, and the reflective/reflexive consideration of one's own tradition.

In the education of the artist, especially in regard to practice, the use and integration of Asian theatre offers wonderful opportunities to learn about one's craft from a different cultural perspective. Not only do ontological questions arise ("What, exactly, is theatre?"), but methodologies of training differ between East and West. When studying kabuki or noh, the student does not memorize lines and then analyze character and contemplate motivation as one would in order to play a role by Tennessee Williams or Arthur Miller or Shakespeare. Instead, one learns by mimicking one's teacher. One stands behind and slightly to the right of the *sensei* and follows his steps and movements. One sits with the *sensei* and echoes him as he sings the songs or declaims the lines. Gone is the director, the designers, and the entire method traditionally used in American theatre. The actor is forced to learn in a new (albeit new to him or her—the method is perhaps the oldest pedagogical trick in the book) manner and contemplate the use of body, voice, mind, and spirit in order to create a performance in an entirely different fashion. The added benefit is the distance from one's own tradition that is gained by studying another. To paraphrase the wise saw, what does he know of realistic acting that only realistic acting knows. By studying kabuki, or noh, or kathakali, or jingju (Beijing opera), the artist better understands both other traditions and her own.

Furthermore, the practical experience of a performing art form from another culture forces the student to think about culture in a manner other than strictly intellectual. Too often in higher education we experience other cultures solely as minds, leaving our bodies at the door. When one learns a noh dance, or a kabuki *mie*, or the hand gestures of bharata natyam, one learns in a different way—through physical process. This experience is much different than reading a book or watching a video. It is, if only for a moment, to move and act like one from a different culture. A student of noh of my acquaintance remarked that the most difficult part of learning about noh is learning how to sit like a noh actor sits when learning. Ankles hurt, feet fall asleep, and yet in learning how to "sit Japanese" this student has encountered Japanese culture in a very real and unique manner.

Most actors find the experience of studying a new style of acting initially novel, then frustrating, then difficult, then enlightening. Character as koan, as it were. Charlie Hensley, a professional actor from Virginia, observes of his experience in training in noh over the course of a month: "Last summer I went to Pennsylvania to study a 600-year-old Japanese art form I knew nothing about, and I come before you now to say that I had an enervating, exhilarating, soul-challenging, callus-inducing, life-changing experience. Noh Kidding." Even those who are completely unaware of the cultures of Asia gain new insights and experiences by learning

its theatre practices.

Not all arts courses are practical, however. [In fact, that is the problem that the parents of many an undergraduate have with them! "What can you do with that?" is not an unfamiliar question.] In this case, however, I refer to the teaching of the history and theory of Asian theatre: courses such as Non-Western Theatre, including the histories of the theatres of China, Japan, and India, offered at Pomona College, or my own Japanese Theatre and the Cinema at Denison University, an exploration of the history of the mutual influence of these two art forms throughout the twentieth century in Japan.

We should note, however, that the average small liberal arts college must carefully consider its academic offerings, especially in departments in the arts which tend to be smaller than the humanities and sciences. Compare Dance, Cinema, or Theatre departments with English, Psychology, or history at any small school and my point should be clear. Many courses in the arts must serve multiple purposes: meeting the requirements of multiple constituencies simultaneously. A single course must meet general education requirements for some, theatre major requirements for others, and perhaps Asian studies major requirements for still others. At Denison University, for example, five faculty members teaching three courses per semester each can offer fifteen classes per semester, in toto. One of those courses is not likely to be Trends in Meiji Kabuki from 1868 to 1900. Perhaps even a course focusing only Japanese theatre alone might prove too limited for the curriculum of a small liberal arts college and the previously mentioned multiple constituencies.

Comparative courses in the arts seem to offer a compromise that integrates Asian theatre into the theatre curriculum without being too specialized to either the artist or the Asianist. One course I have recently offered is *Revenge: East and West*, a comparison of plays about revenge in the West, such as *Hamlet*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, and the plays of Seneca, and the revenge plays of Japan, such as *Chushingura* or the Soga brothers plays. Such a course satisfies the theatre major's requirement to take a drama seminar, the Asian studies major's requirement to take a comparative cultures seminar, and the liberal arts student's general requirement for a course in artistic inquiry. We considered the concept of revenge, philosophically, legally, morally, ethically, and dramatically in each culture. We examined how the representation of revenge on stage in each culture tells us about that culture and the similarities and differences which are implied in each culture. Lastly, we discussed at length why two of the arguably greatest plays ever written, *Chushingura* and *Hamlet* are both about revenge.

In the interest of being a "practical artist," I offer the following suggestions, from a theatrical point of view, for engaging Asian studies and the arts in general and theatre in particular:

First: The use of the arts, especially theatre, in non-artistic educational contexts. Already, this practice is carried out by many who teach Asian culture. Theatre is, to twist Hamlet's words, the mirror held up to society. As

anthropologist Victor Turner tells us, the drama within society shows up in the drama on its stages. Conversely, as Turner also observes, the theatre, in representing society, shows society how to behave and respond. As Turner notes, "There was a lot of *Perry Mason* in Watergate."

Following this notion to its logical conclusion I would note that in the best Japanese history course I ever had as an undergraduate myself, we read not a history text, but *Chushingura*, the bunraku/kabuki play about the 47 loyal *ronin*. The students could see the concepts of *bushido* working within a social context, learn about the culture of Tokugawa Japan, and engage the class structure that would not allow commoners to participate fully in the revenge. In that same course we mined the *Heike Monogatari* and *Genji Monogatari* for their historical insights. We watched the kabuki play *Kanjincho* on video, which gave insight into the conflict between Taira and Minamoto, as well as between the Minamoto brothers during the twelfth century, as well as how those events were subsequently interpreted by seventeenth century authors.

Similarly, in a political science course on modern China, a showing of *Farewell My Concubine*, the award-winning film about two Beijing Opera performers, demonstrated the changing political climates of China and the overall effect of the Cultural Revolution on the lives of artists in a manner that simply reading statistics in a textbook could not. The arts can be mined by other disciplines for showing the social animal human in its historical context.

Second: One can incorporate non-Western, and specifically Asian, material in traditional arts courses. As the introductory and survey courses tend to be the ones used to satisfy general education requirements for non-arts students looking to fulfil an arts requirement, as well as being requirements for art majors to receive a thorough grounding in the background of their chosen art, such courses can and should incorporate Asian art as part of the survey. Previous to my teaching *History of the Theatre*, a two-semester pair of courses, the syllabus had only involved the theatres of Europe and the United States. I have introduced sections on the theatres of China, Japan, India, and Africa in an attempt to create balance and encourage both arts students and non-arts students to perceive the variety of cultures and theatrical experiences.

Third: a specific performance event can become the centerpiece of a larger, multi-disciplinary educational experience. Many times the theatre department of a university will work in conjunction with other departments to use the production of a specific work or set of works, or the residency of a guest artist to serve as a springboard for the larger examination of a culture or an issue.

For example, in 1998 the University of Pittsburgh sponsored a production of *Silence*, a play based on the novel by Endo Shusaku and performed by a company of Japanese and American actors. A panel discussion was held before the show opened, featuring the novel's English translator, Van Gessel, the director of the production, an acting teacher from Pitt, a historian, a Japanese film scholar, a Japanese

theatre scholar, and myself, a graduate student at the time doing work in Western religion on the stages of Japan. The arts event allowed for a multi-disciplinary consideration of the subject matter of the play: the mission work of Catholic priests in Japan after the *bakufu* ordered all missionaries to leave the country. Not only was a fascinating discussion waged, but the event itself served further pedagogical use. Students from courses from across the campus and the curriculum were required to see the play for a variety of reasons. History courses engaged the presentation of this particular period of Japanese history. Students in religion courses came to observe and argue about the nature of missionary work, the history of Christianity in Japan, and the nature of faith. Students of Japanese culture were able to engage the play on multiple levels. Lastly, theatre students engaged the play *qua* play – a theatrical experience and the product of two different theatrical cultures – American and Japanese.

A second production of the University of Pittsburgh presents another example of an art event serving as a multidisciplinary springboard that can find classroom use across the curriculum. In 1995 the Theatre Arts Department brought in guest artist Yukihiro Goto to direct Suzuki Tadashi's *Clytemnestra*, an adaptation of the *Oresteia* legend filtered through Japanese culture. As anyone who knows Suzuki's theories knows, the style of production is very demanding and physically rigorous. As opposed to *Silence*, which was a touring show, *Clytemnestra* was an educational experience for the student actors, not all of whom were theatre students. The production itself served as a pedagogical tool again in Asian studies courses, classes in the departments of Classics, history, women's studies, art, music, psychology, and philosophy. A theatre event, or for that matter a dance concert, music concert or art show can function as the starting point for a larger discussion across the curriculum and open the doors for the integration of Asian arts into other courses. [Experiencing Asian culture is a little like smoking crack—sometimes it just takes one hit to get you hooked.]

Though we value art for art's sake, in this corporate world, where a university education is seen as a product which the consumer, the student, buys because of the value it will bring in achieving post-graduation success, we can also point to the many benefits that art in general and theatre in particular bring, especially for our (nefarious) purposes, Asian art. In studying art as both a history and a practice, one learns analytical skills, problem-solving [anyone who has ever done any theatre will tell you how the few rehearsals before a show opens tend to be an exercise in creative problem solving], historical and cultural perspective, and an appreciation for aesthetics. As the Denison University Course Catalogue notes about the Theatre Department, "The programs in theatre aim to develop the skills of thoughtful inquiry, informed judgement, and imaginative response that are fundamental to the rewarding pursuit of any profession." If we can develop those skills, and also develop an understanding and appreciation if not a genuine interest in Asian art and culture, then we will have succeeded as teachers and as artists.