

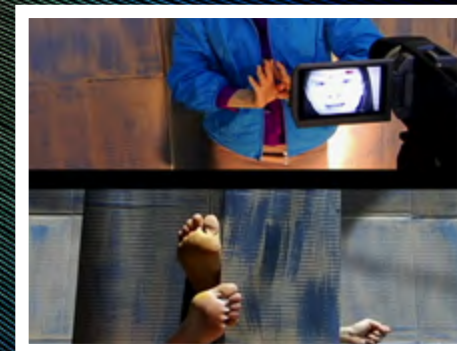
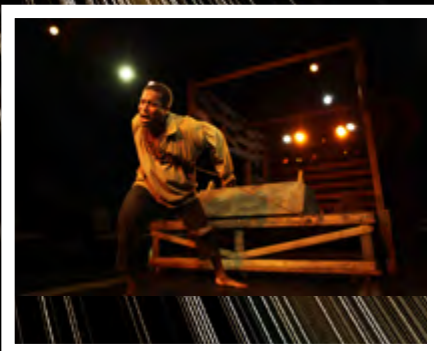
CSWupdate

FACULTY CURATOR: SUE-ELLEN CASE,
PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF THEATER AT UCLA AND
DIRECTOR OF THE UCLA CENTER FOR PERFORMANCE STUDIES

GLOBAL FLASHPOINTS

TRANSNATIONAL PERFORMANCE AND POLITICS

special issue



OCT 6 to 8, 11 & 12, 2011

GLOBAL FLASHPOINTS

TRANSNATIONAL PERFORMANCE AND POLITICS



THE WIFE'S LETTER



DARWIN AND GOD



BONDED



THE GOOD PERSON

PERFORMANCES
THURS, OCT 6
THE WIFE'S LETTER
 based on Tagore's story about child brides in India
 5 to 7 pm, Glorya Kaufman Hall 200

FRI, OCT 7
BONDED
 excerpts from the play about homoeroticism and
 plantation life, 3 pm, Royce 314

DIALOGOS ENTRE DARWIN Y DIOS
 a Mexican cabaret by Jesusa Rodriguez,
 5 pm, Macgowan 1330

SAT, OCT 8
**DANCING MOTHER COURAGE &
 THE GOOD PERSON**
 deconstructing orientalism by Cheng-Chieh Yu
 3 to 5 pm, Glorya Kaufman Hall 200

PANELS
FRI, OCT 7 & SAT, OCT 8
 see reverse for full program

SEMINARS on transnational studies
 of performance and gender

TUES, OCT 11
 Bishnupriya Dutt, 1 to 4 pm, YRL 11348

WED, OCT 12
 Urmimala Sarkar Munsi, 1 to 4 pm, YRL 11348

ORGANIZED BY UCLA CENTER FOR PERFORMANCE STUDIES
 AND UCLA CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WOMEN
 AND COSPONSORED BY UCHRI

FREE · OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

IN ORGANIZING "Global Flashpoints: Transnational Performance and Politics," our purpose was to open up an international exploration of transnational/global practices concerning social organization, gender, and sexuality through performances and academic research across a variety of countries and colleges. To that end, we hosted performances from India, Mexico, Taiwan, and Los Angeles, with themes concerning the abusive practices surrounding the taking of child brides in *The Wife's Letter*; the role of the arts in metaphysical discourses and social protests in *Dialogues Between Darwin and God*, deconstructing orientalist fantasies of women in *Dancing Mother Courage* and *The Good Person*, and imagining homoerotic relationships between slaves in the antebellum South in *bonded*. The performances took place in various sites across the campus, including Royce Hall, Glorya Kaufman hall, and MacGowan. They were attended by students and scholars from UCLA, USC, CSULA, as well as local community members from various ethnic and diasporic communities.

– Sue-Ellen Case
 Professor, Department of Theater
 Director, Center for Performance Studies

special issue: *global flashpoints*

CSWupdate

Global Flashpoints

TRANSNATIONAL PERFORMANCE AND POLITICS

A FREE, MULTIPLE DAY EVENT AT UCLA, *Global Flashpoints: Transnational Performance and Politics*, combined performances, seminars, and panel discussions that focused on the how the new globalized arena of performance approached tensions between postcolonial and transnational structures through strategies of representation and contestation. Taking place from October 6th to 8th, the conference and performance schedule included roundtable discussions, panels, and performances with post-performance discussions. On October 11th and 12th, visiting scholars and founders of the first graduate study program for performance studies in India, Bishnupriya Dutt and Urmimala

Sarkar from School of Arts and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University each hosted a seminar on transnational studies of performance and gender at the Young Research Library.

According to the curator for the series, Sue-El-len Case, Director of the Center for Performance Studies and Professor in the Department of Theater, “The structure of the *Global Flashpoints* conference is not only unique but crucial to creating a new understanding of how performing bodies and politics work together in the global arena.”

The Wife's Letter

Opening the series on Thursday, October 6 at 5 pm was *The Wife's Letter (Streer Patra)*, a stage

adaptation of the short story of the same name by the Bengali poet and Brahmo philosopher Rabindranath Tagore. It was directed by Dr. Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry, a renowned figure in contemporary Indian drama, and performed by Gick Grewal and Vansh Bhardwaj. “We are excited about bringing *The Wife's Letter (Streer Patra)* to UCLA as the inaugural performance for the series. The play revolves around complex family relationships that emerge in the context of child marriage, a subject Tagore treated with great sensitivity and imagination,” said Anurima Banerji, Assistant Professor in the Department of World Arts and Cultures and a faculty affiliate of the Center for Performance Studies before the event.

“This is a unique chance to witness the work of The Company, a theatre troupe based in Chandigarh, India, which is dedicated to exploring the performance idioms of Punjab in a contemporary frame. These innovative theater artists are redefining the boundaries of traditional and regional aesthetics.”

Chowdhry is the artistic director of The Company, which she founded in 1983 in Chandigarh and which has shown its work at major international venues including Ranga Shankara Festival, London International Festival of Theatre, and Nandikar Festival. A member of the Academic Council of the National School of Drama, Chowdhry received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award as well as the Padma Shri for 2011, serves on the advisory panel for the theater for the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, and currently teaches in the Department of Indian Theater at Panjab University. The plays produced by The Company have, for the most part, been based upon great classics of the western world, rendered into Punjabi by the eminent poet, Surjit Patar.

Gick Grewal and Vansh Bhardwaj have extensive acting credits in the worlds of TV, stage, and film. Recently, the two were featured in the movie *Heaven on Earth* (2008), directed by Oscar-nominated director Deepa Mehta and starring Bollywood star Preity Zinta.

Banerji led a post-show discussion with Bishnupriya Dutt, Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry, as well as actors Gick Grewal and Vansh Bhardwaj.



A Wife's Letter

bonded



“We are very pleased,” said Banerji, “to be hosting a theatre group of this caliber here, engaging with their creative work, and introducing them to new audiences.”

bonded

“With *bonded* I want to say: We did exist/We still exist/We shall exist. I need that affirmation. I am sure I am not the only one. Finding our place in history is one way of reminding those who seek to deny that we are human that we are not mere political issues, that you can’t vote on a proposition to strip us of our civil rights and relegate us to second-class status,” said playwright Donald Jolly. On Friday, October 7 at 3 pm, an excerpt from the play directed by Jon Lawrence Rivera

was presented in Royce 314. *bonded* is a reimagined slave-narrative that takes place in 1820s Virginia and centers on the same-sex attraction between two slaves, Sonny and Asa. In a review in the *Los Angeles Times*, David C. Nichols called the play an “unsparing study of homosexuality within the legacy of slavery” and extolled “the gritty milieu and authentic vernacular” and Jolly’s storytelling.

Jolly is an LA-based playwright who employs imaginative uses of language to explore the intersections/interactions between race, class, gender, and sexual orientation through historical and contemporary lenses.

A post-performance discussion with playwright Jolly and director Rivera was led by

Arthur Little, Associate Professor and Chair of LGBT Studies at UCLA.

Diálogos entre Darwin y Dios

In Macgowan 1330 at 5 pm on October 7, *Diálogos entre Darwin y Dios* (*Dialogues between Darwin and God*) was performed by Jesusa Rodríguez with accompanying piano by Liliana Felipe. Rodríguez describes the play in this way: “The evolution of the species through natural selection has been called into question in a country that is amid a vertiginous process of evolution. Charles Darwin comes back from the grave after his 200th birthday to defend his theory.... In the second half, led by the Necromancer, the audience participates in a new experience: THE APPEARANCE OF GOD IN PERSON, before the audience, before their very eyes, in full color and everywhere. Near the end, the genius of evolution attempts to communicate with HIM via the Internet.”

Jesusa Rodríguez is a director, actress, playwright, performance artist, scenographer, entrepreneur, and social activist. Liliana Felipe is composer and songwriter. Together they owned and operated El Habito and Teatro de la Capilla, alternative performances spaces in Mexico City. Rodríguez currently leads the Resistencia Creativa movement in Mexico, using the key strategy of “massive cabaret” as a tool for political action.

The performance was followed by a post-show discussion led by Chantal Rodríguez of the Los Angeles Theatre Center.

Dancing Mother Courage and The Good Person

“I worked to develop a choreographic persona, that of Mother Courage the protagonist of Brecht’s dramatic script, to develop an underlying the motivation for dance. I was intrigued by her desperate situation, of a poor conniving barter woman, and single mother traveling through a society long broken by war, and engaged in the most dehumanizing dilemmas of survival,” said Cheng-Chieh Yu of her piece *Dancing Mother Courage*, which she performed on October 8 at 3 pm in Kaufman 200.

Yu, Associate Professor of the Department of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA, also screened her video, *The Good Person*, a collaboration with Marianne M. Kim, a Korean American artist and educator working in performance, public art, and multimedia installation. *The Good Person*, Kim said, “is a performance-based video that follows the surreal journey of a single female character moving in and out of abstracted fantasy.... It is an imagistic portrait of a woman wrestling with the roles of victim and criminal. She travels and dances with the clothes on and off her back and a box that serves as her dancing partner and shelter. She stoically wanders through the streets of Guangzhou uncertain if she’s looking for a place to hide or for a place to be seen. The video attempts to intricately link artistic visions and practical investigations of physicality and space.”

Daphne Lei, Associate Professor in the Drama Department at UC Irvine, led a post-performance

discussion with Yu and Rachel Lee, Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Women’s Studies.

Panels and Roundtables

Friday morning began with a welcome by Sue-ElLEN Case, Professor in the Department of Theater at UCLA and Director of the Center for Performance Studies, and continued with a roundtable discussion moderated by Susan Leigh Foster, Professor of Choreography, History and Theories of the Body at UCLA and featuring Urmimala Sarkar Munsu, Visiting Fellow for Dance at the School of Arts and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University; Shannon Steen, Associate Professor in the Department of Theater Dance and Performance Studies at UC Berkeley; and Alicia Arizón, Professor and Chair of the Women’s Studies Department at UC Riverside.

The Friday afternoon panel, “Performing Gender and Ethnicity in the Americas,” included presentations by Gastón Alzate, Associate Professor of Spanish at California State University, Los Angeles, and Yogita Goyal, Associate Professor in the Department of English at UCLA. This panel included a discussion of the work of Jesusa Rodríguez and Mexican political cabaret that served as an introduction to Rodríguez’s performance that evening.

On Saturday morning, a roundtable was moderated by Sue-ElLEN Case with input from Marcela Fuentes, a Mellon Post-Doctoral Fellow in the Department of Theater Studies at UCLA; Priya

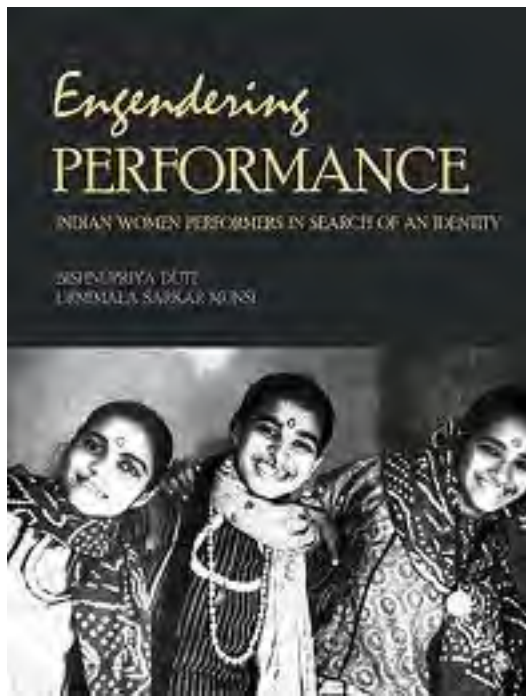
Srinivasan, Associate Professor in the Department of Dance at UC Riverside; Daphne Lei, Associate Professor in the Drama Department at UC Irvine; and Bishnupriya Dutt, practitioner and theatre historian in the School of Arts and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University.

In the afternoon on Saturday, a panel, entitled “Performing the Nation State,” featured Suk-Young Kim, Associate Professor in the Department of Theater and Dance at UC Santa Barbara, who presented “DMZ Crossing: Local Partitions and Global Encounters,” and Emily Roxworthy, Assistant Professor in the Department of Theater and Dance at UC San Diego, who presented “Empathy’s Place in America’s Concentration Camps: Allegiance: An American Musical and the Drama in the Delta Video Game.”

“Brecht’s Orientalism,” a presentation by John Rouse, Professor in the Department of Theater and Dance at UC San Diego, preceded the performance by Yu.

Seminars

Global Flashpoints concluded with two seminars on on Transnational Studies of Performance and Gender led by visiting scholars Bishnupriya Dutt and Urmimala Sarkar Munsu. The two scholars recently co-authored *Engendering Performance: Indian Women Performers in Search of an Identity*, published by Sage India. The volume is a comprehensive critical history of women performers in Indian theatre and dance of the colonial and postcolonial periods. Its underlying premise is



that one cannot evaluate performance in the Indian context without looking at dance and theatre together. Issues of sexuality and colonialism, and culture and society come together in this study to provide a holistic account of women performers in India.

Bishnupriya Dutt is a practitioner and theatre historian in the School of Arts and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University. Her particular interests are nineteenth-century theatre and dramatic literature. Trained at the Ernst Busch Hoch Schule, Berlin, she has worked at the Volksbuhne and the Berliner Ensemble. Her present research concerns Jatra, a popular folk-theatre form of Bengali theatre, and marginalized performances and feminist readings. She is collecting, recording and collating a comprehensive fact-file on

marginalized Indian performative practices with special emphasis on professional and semi-professional women. Her seminar took place on Tuesday October 11, from 1 to 4 pm in YRL 11348.

Urmimala Sarkar Munsi, a Visiting Fellow for Dance at the School of Arts and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University and co-chair of the Research and Documentation Network of the World Dance Alliance for the Asia Pacific Region. She recently edited *Dance: Transcending Borders*, a landmark project for the World Dance Alliance Research and Documentation Network. A social anthropologist and a dancer/ choreographer, she has done extensive research on Indian dance, theory and practice, living traditions, dance, gender, therapeutic use of movement systems and performance documentation. She has contributed articles to numerous journals and is editing *Celebrating Dance in India*, part of the Routledge “Celebrating Dance” Series. Her seminar took place on Tuesday October 12, from 1 to 4 pm in YRL 11348.

Organized by the UCLA Center for Performance Studies and UCLA Center for the Study of Women., this unusual series explored new ways to consider performance in a global context. As Sue-Ellen Case, Professor in the Department of Theater at UCLA and Director of the Center for Performance Studies, said, “The structure of *Global Flashpoints* is not only unique but also crucial to creating a new understanding of how performing bodies and politics work together in the global arena. Flashpoints brings performers

from India, Mexico, Taiwan, and the U.S. together with scholars from India and across the UC campuses to explore how gesture and image can bear and are forced to bear both national and transnational meanings; how these meaning are conveyed and how they might be studied. In the new transnational realm, where performance and visual markers are deployed to travel more efficiently than languages, future research will depend on creating interfaces between those who create these performances and those who study them.”

Lindsey McLean is a staff writer for CSW Update and a graduate student in the Department of Information Studies.

A Wife's Letter

A STAGE ADAPTION OF TAGORE'S SHORT STORY
ABOUT CHILD BRIDES FEATURES DEGENDERED ROLES

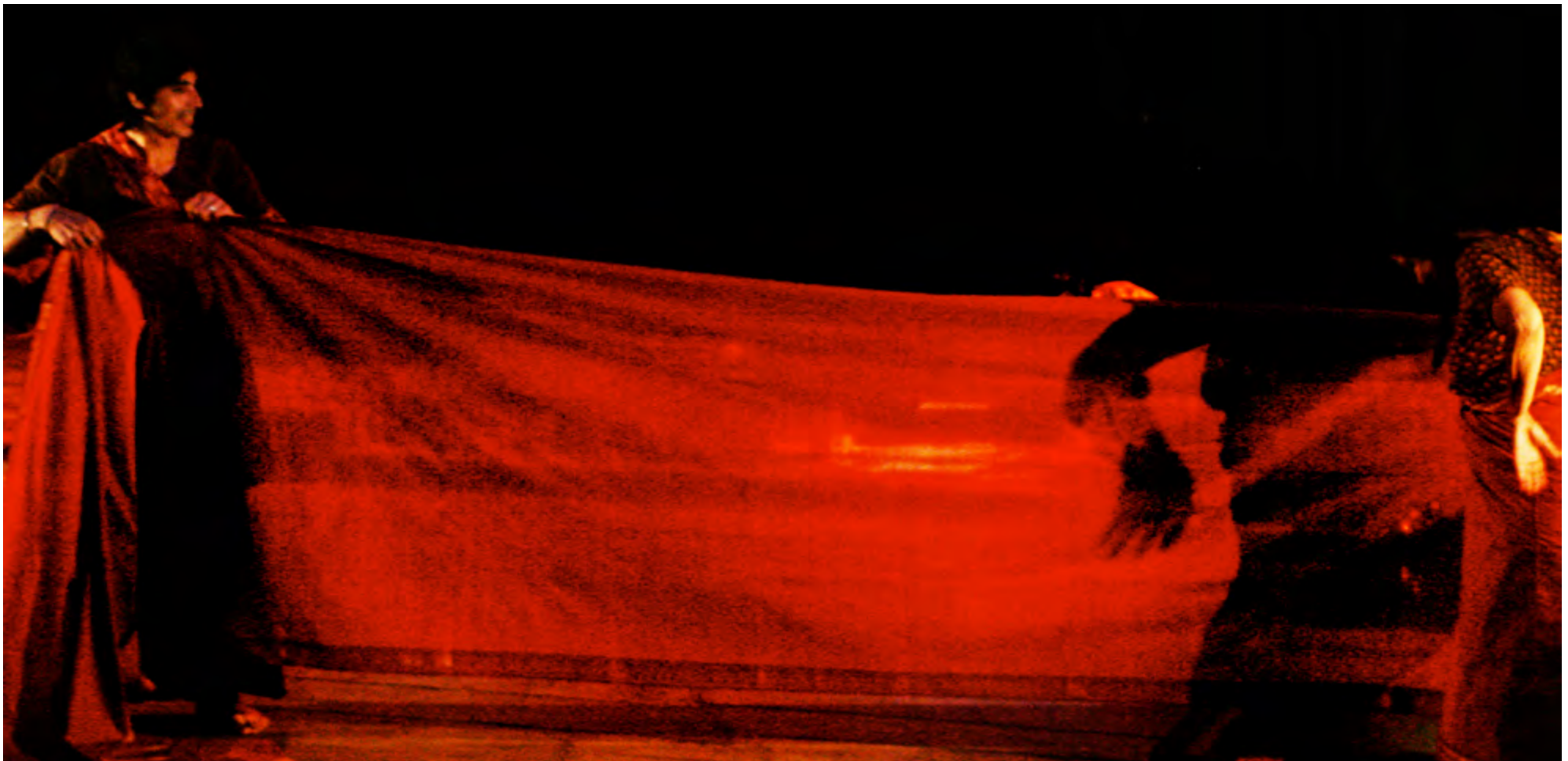
RABINDRANATH TAGORE was most distrustful of the restricted, narrow, domestic interiors of the bourgeois household, and he translated this distrust into a way of understanding or representing character. The precise contours of a character's inner life or aspirations may be viewed against their placement in a material space or in the public. As a result, this has helped me to understand that even though the characters were subjected to a feudal and domestic order, they found their "imaginary" space where they could dream, weave games, and play...The male actor who portrays Mrinal is not constructing the role as a female impersonator nor is he playing androgynous. He is creating a

degendering of his role, leading perhaps to a more egalitarian approach to performance, according to the directorial note in the program.

A stage adaption of Tagore's short story, *A Wife's Letter*, was the inaugural event of the *Global Flashpoints: Transnational Performance and Politics*, a conference organized by the UCLA Center for Performance Studies and UCLA Center for the Study of Women. Before the performance, Anurima Banerji provided a brief introduction to the performance, which was directed by Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry, a renowned figure in contemporary Indian drama, and performed by Gick Grewal and Vansh Bhardwaj. As the full-length version of *A Wife's Letter*

involves a larger cast as well as live musicians and other elements, the performance presented excerpts from the play. On the left side of the stage was a red bed. On the right side of the stage were three mats that held a few simple props: The mat closest to the front of the stage held a stack of steel plates and a neatly-folded red cloth. On the mat situated behind that were two square containers filled with water. The mat to the rear of the stage held a black box with a drawing of a white cow on it.

The plot, which is roughly the same in Tagore's story and Chowdhry's adaptation, revolves around complex family relationships that emerge in the context of child marriage. It unfolds in the



...the address of the performance is giving voice to and creating space for women through degendering. Tagore's original short story rescues Mrinal's point of view by placing Mrinal at the center of the dramatic narrative and in the title of the play. Similar to Tagore's work, Chowdhry's production tells Mrinal's story—her detachment from her family, her memory of her encounter with Bindu, and her struggle to help Bindu—and eclipses her husband's.

form of a letter from a wife (Mrinal) to her husband, telling of her childhood and of her isolation and oppression as a daughter, a wife, and a mother. Mrinal develops a companionship with Bindu, her elder sister-in-law's orphaned sister. As the play was performed in Punjabi, I was able to concentrate more on the actors' movements than on the dialogue.

Mrinal and Bindu stood still, facing each other. Mrinal wore a brown shirt and dress with a red sash across her chest. Bindu wore a brown dress in a matching color. Both were barefoot. In Mrinal's hands was a jump rope that enclosed the two. Mrinal and Bindu looked at each other and laughed out loud. The two started to playfully jump rope. They broke apart, but Mrinal continued to jump rope as she sang. Bindu chased after Mrinal, clapping her hands. Mrinal tied Bindu with the jump rope. Then the two each took an end of the rope, as if in a tug-of-war. Mrinal fell first. Next, Bindu fell. The two became silent. Their toes touched for a brief moment. This scene was one of several throughout the performance that created an atmosphere that signified their undefined relationship.

Bindu got up and began to draw square-like figures on the stage. Next, she went to the water box where she playfully splashed the water, then washed her hands. Mrinal approached Bindu from behind, then washed Bindu's feet. After conversing briefly, the two changed into new

clothes. Mrinal and Bindu took opposite ends of a long red cloth. The cloth shook for a moment. Then Mrinal wrapped Bindu with the red cloth with care, as if to protect the orphaned girl. Mrinal lifted the steel plates and placed them individually on the stage, a foot's distance between each plate. Bindu carefully stepped on the plates one by one, her arms held up in the air. Mrinal and Bindu stepped on the last plate together, hugging each other. The two became silent as they faced each other.

Mrinal got up and washed her face. Making clucking noises, she threw wood shavings toward the cowshed. Bindu started making the bed, arranging the cloth around it. Then she started slapping herself. She fell to the floor but did not stop slapping herself. Mrinal handed her a steel plate and poured some jewelry onto it. Mrinal picked a bracelet from the plate and rolled it on the floor. Shouting out, she repeated the action a few times. Bindu pretended to plant something. Mrinal shook two cup-like containers. A cloud of dust trailed after her. Bindu continued to plant something with care. Mrinal wrapped herself in a red sari. She knelt down. While Bindu sang, tapping her hands on the floor, Mrinal wrapped herself in the sari and the cloth on the floor. Still wrapped in the sari and cloth, she got up and went to the left side of the stage with the containers in her hands. Bindu continued to sing. Mrinal unwrapped herself, folded the cloth, and placed it

on the steel plate.

Bindu started stacking bricks. Mrinal took the plate filled with wood shavings and rearranged the plates. She cried out, pretending to be bitten by the cow. Then she pretended to chase the cow as she laughed out loud. Bindu started placing pieces of dough on a box covered with red cloth. Mrinal suddenly let out a shout and lay on the stage, writhing as if in pain. She threw the plate. Bindu made a stirring motion in a bowl, which made clanging sounds that echoed. Mrinal got up with difficulty. She gathered all of the wood shavings in one plate. She covered the plate with a red cloth. Crying, she turned her face away and wiped her tears. She got up and stepped into the water. Holding the front of her dress, she splashed water between her legs. Still holding the front of her dress, she got out of the water. The echo created from Bindu's clanging continued. Mrinal approached Bindu and then sat down. Bindu, her back facing Mrinal, continued to stir. Mrinal drew out an egg and started rolling it from her right hand to her left. Then she broke it. She cupped her hands, trying not to let the egg run between her fingers, but it did anyway. She buried the broken egg in the dirt. Then she washed her hands.

Bindu started crying, sitting in front of the bed. The two conversed. Bindu, her hands held up in a praying position, cried out, then hugged Mrinal's ankles. Mrinal held Bindu's face in her hands.



Mrinal took up a pair of earrings and put the earrings on Bindu. She also put a gold piece on Bindu's forehead and wrapped the red sari around her. They put lipstick on each other. Bindu continued to snifle. Mrinal poured the wood shavings into the plate and placed it on top of Bindu's head. Holding a box in her hands, Bindu started to sing as she walked. Next to her was a bundle of sticks stuck in a crown and pointing out in different directions. She took out a matchbox and lighted the crown. Both Mrinal and Bindu cried out as if in despair. Mrinal threw the plates. Bindu placed the crown on her head. Red light shone directly upon Bindu, which made her look as if she was on fire. As Bindu walked, the incense that she held billowed a trail of smoke behind her. Bindu left the crown on the cowshed and slowly exited the stage, signifying her death.

Tears streaming down her face, Mrinal spoke. She placed the containers in the red cloth. Mrinal started dancing with the wind-bell in her right hand and the red cloth in her left. Red light shone over the water. Mrinal poured soap over the water. She mixed the water and the soap with her hands, then she made spooning motions with the rattle and shook it above her head, her right leg in mid-air. Hitting herself, she started to turn in circles. While the original text writes that Mrinal leaves home in search of freedom, I read this particular scene as an act of suicide—an act transcending her imprisonment. The theater went dark.

In *A Wife's Letter*, the address of the performance is giving voice to and creating space for women through degendering. Tagore's original short story rescues Mrinal's point of view by placing Mrinal at the center of the dramatic narrative and in the title of the play. Similar to Tagore's work, Chowdhry's production tells Mrinal's story—her detachment from her family, her memory of her encounter with Bindu, and her struggle to help Bindu—and eclipses her husband's. Chowdhry takes an additional step in articulating a feminist perspective by using a male actor.

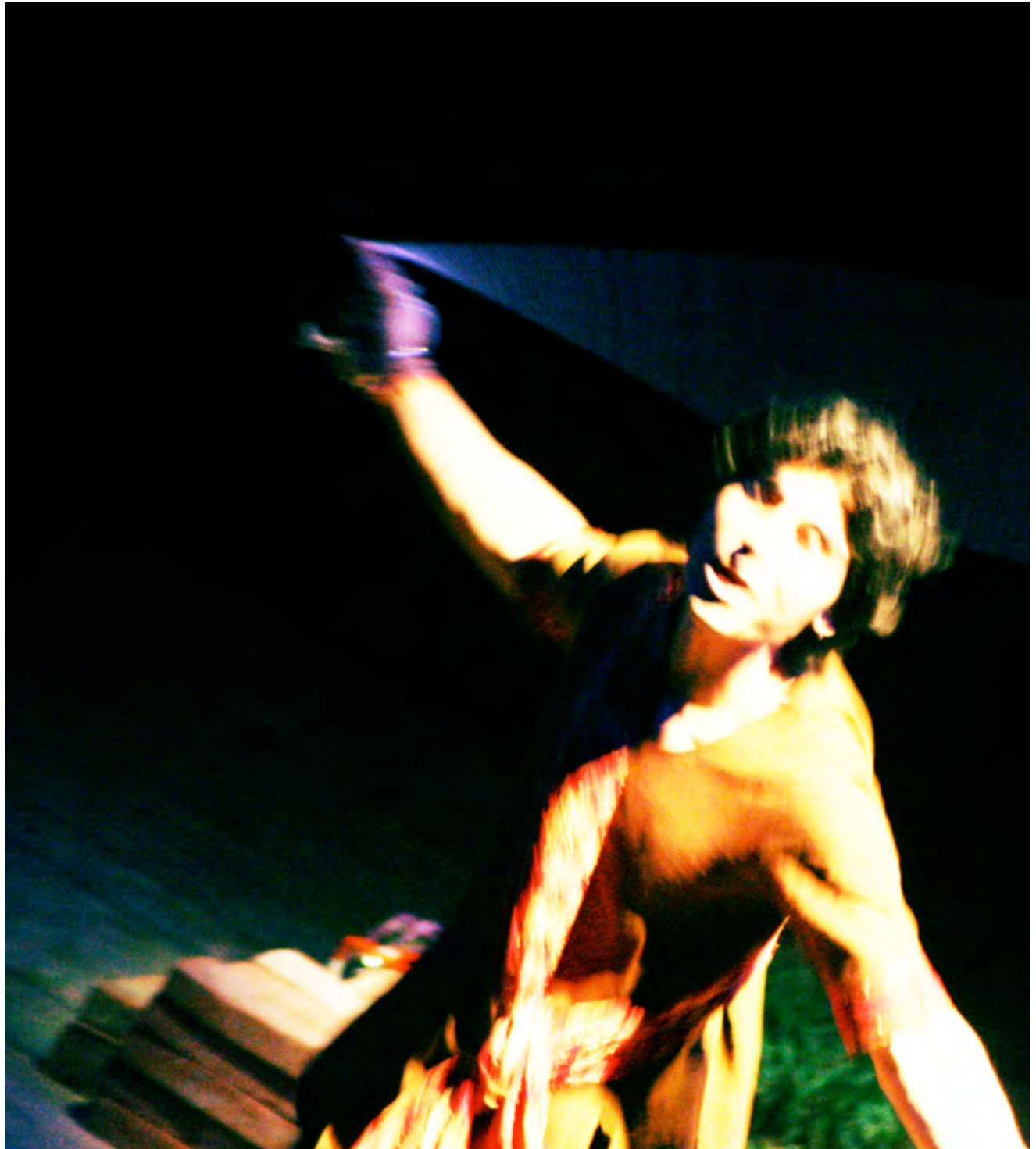
Culturally and socially relegated to the background of Indian patriarchal culture, Mrinal is a minoritarian subject who has only been given license to speak for herself in Tagore's text and Chowdhry's production. Mrinal is a figure that has been kept out of official histories. She is constantly defined by her husband; her position as his wife, the object of his affection, and her time spent with her in-laws were left untold until the appearance of Tagore's text and Chowdhry's production. Only when Mrinal is able to tell her own tale does she find an appropriate manifestation in the creation of space.

Running away from her insane husband, Bindu meets Mrinal, who takes her in and builds her a space where she gradually begins to perform attachment to Mrinal. On stage, Mrinal's domicile traces the coalescence of her encounter with Bindu. The home is a theatrical space where

Mrinal both psychically and psychologically encounters Bindu. What significantly links Mrinal's home to her actions in encountering Bindu are its physical qualities, or rather, its negative physical space. The dwelling is made up of a few simple props, concretizing the empty space it surrounds. It is Mrinal's status as a minority, or theoretically queer, subject and the visually lacking space that stand as a testament to her own figurative absence from both society and history. Mrinal's space performs her queer memory aptly and embodies in an active way her place both in society and in Chowdhry's production.

A Degendering Discourse

The post-show discussion after the performance featured Bishnupriya Dutt, Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry, Gick Grewal, and Vansh Bhardwaj. Dutt noted that *A Wife's Letter* is a process-based performance rather than a text-based performance—it is a performance that experiments with physical theater and the performative body. Dutt also discussed contemporary Indian theater. Whereas colonial and postcolonial modernity dealt with issues of masculinity, today's popular theater deals with women's issues. Dutt views Chowdhry as a national figure in the era of globalization in which paradigms of nations are breaking away. While many adaptations of *A Wife's Letter*—both in cinematic



and theatrical productions—have highlighted the issue of nationalism, Chowdhry’s production de-masculinized the space and created a space for female bonding.

Next, Chowdhry spoke. She commented that the relationship between the text and the theater is not set in stone, and explained how she dealt with Tagore’s work. Although there is criticism that Tagore is speaking for and/or through Mrinal, Chowdhry stated that she sees an alternative view: Tagore’s text enables a woman to tell and write her story, “spilling the beans” about the culture of the times and unraveling a story of gender relationships.

“Is the text really about female bonding and sisterhood?” Chowdhry then asked, noting that this “sisterhood” was the only solution that was available to the female protagonists. It is an act of placing one’s expectations on another person in a relationship that is not socially qualified through marriage or other conventional kinship systems. Therefore, every gesture in this liminal, nonqualified space becomes meaningful for both Mrinal and Bindu. For Chowdhry, the space becomes a solution in a society that is “eating itself” through the colonial legacy and the patriarchal paradigm.

Vansh Bhardwaj discussed his acting and the training he received in *The Company*. His training there was notably different from that which he received as a theater student: in *The Company*, the director and the actors went through the script

only once, then they would focus on improvisation instead of going over the script again. For example, the director and the actors would improvise one scene in ten different ways. They would choose one to five improvisations and combine them into one scene. Bhardwaj stated that it is a process in which the actor gets the opportunity to tell more of his own self: the actor comes before the script. In addition to techniques of improvisation, Bhardwaj explained how he learned to use objects in acting. For Bhardwaj, the various ways that one uses objects can make a whole different story.

In the question-and-answer portion of the event, an audience member asked about the decision to use a male actor. Chowdhry posed a few questions: What does gender mean on the stage? Do we construct gender performatively? Is gender an aspect of the character? Is it biological? Chowdhry stated that the concept of tradition is going through many changes—it is a continuous process of dynamics and change. She answered that she responds to the ambiguity of gender diffusion and the idea of androgyny in which gender is not defined. She decided to cast Bhardwaj as Mrinal because she thought Bhardwaj was an actor who could become anything.

The second question was whether British colonialism had influenced the cross-dressing aspect of play. Chowdhry answered that there is a similar theatrical history in India. She also noted that the

issue of cross-dressing provided the play a reprieve from social codes, enabling the play to give voice to women. At this, Bhardwaj commented that every man has a woman in himself, and that every woman has a man in herself. Dutt also suggested that the aspect of cross-dressing showed the ultimate breakdown of the wife’s relationship with the family and that the only people whom the wife could bond with were the people who changed their gender.

Areum Jeong is a PhD student in Theater and Performance Studies. Her research interests include Asian performance art, feminist theory, theories of identification, and narratology.

Note: All photos courtesy of *The Company*

JESUSA RODRÍGUEZ'S

Dialogues between Darwin and God



IN *Diálogos entre Darwin y Dios (Dialogues between Darwin and God)*, renowned Mexican director, performance artist, and activist Jesusa Rodríguez steps on stage to engage with the archetypal Western figures. Performed in Spanish, with instances of code-switching and English supertitles, Rodríguez's *Dialogues* serves to satirize and critique preserved and perpetuated global icons. With aesthetic forms inspired by Mexican cabaret—including the use of comedy, song, dance, and improvisation—Rodríguez covers a wide range of U.S. history and politics. The performance closed the second day of events at *Global Flashpoints: Transnational Performance and Politics*, a conference held from October 6th

to 12th, 2011, and organized by the UCLA Center for Performance Studies and Center for the Study of Women.

How do religion and science relate, Rodríguez asks, to McDonald's, KFC, Burger King, and Starbucks? Consumption. Her piece employs a critique on consumerism by underlining large chains of fast-food restaurants. To start the show, Rodríguez as Darwin gives a keynote lecture by explaining the theory of evolution: she states that everything is a process, the "table first had to be a tree, went on to be wood, and was transformed into a table." Likewise, an image of the evolution of "man" (projected later in the show) illustrates how the ape goes on to be a man with a spear,

then a man with a rifle, then an overweight man with a McDonald's cup and bag in each hand, then finally a pig. She calls this a process of in-volution rather than evolution, that is, a process of regressing as represented by the consumption of fast food. Here, Rodríguez visually exploits the multiple slang meanings of the word "pig" as either a gluttonous or greedy person. Her use of visual and verbal forms of comedy foregrounds the severity of consumption and exploitation as a global phenomenon.

Rodríguez's physical embodiment of Darwin distorts an archetype, associating *Dialogues between Darwin and God* with concepts of memory and body techniques. In another instance during

the lecture, Darwin, who is over two hundred years old, continuously loses his place in his notes. Throughout his lecture he seems to forget what he is saying as he walks from stage right to stage left and vice-versa. Rodríguez walks with a limp, hunches her back, and supports herself with one arm. In the process of reaching for her notes, Rodríguez also frequently coughs. She calls attention to Darwin's bad health: his physical state, as represented by Rodríguez's body techniques, represents a form of decay that cites earlier comments on involution.

But Rodríguez never entirely commits to the Darwin icon. There are moments when she reveals herself as a performer by either no longer limping or changing the tone of her voice. There are also instances while she is still dressed as Darwin where she conflates his actions with actions that would typically represent God. This happens when Rodríguez, as Darwin, cues the stage lights to dim or brighten. These meta-theatrical moments destabilize and make visible her citation of gender and age codes. Darwin's old age and forgetfulness also serve as a trope for many types of political corruption that have benefitted from strategic forms of historical amnesia—that is, archived accounts of history willfully forgetting, denying, and excluding in the service of advancing a majoritative point of view.

Considering the title of the performance, Rodríguez chooses to impersonate both Darwin and

God. At one point, the projector screen rises to reveal God, and he just so happens to be in the image of Darwin—a white male with a balding head of white hair and beard. This moment reflects the patriarchal tendencies to idolize and emblemize images of men that represent larger structures of power. Notably, the only physical characteristic that differs between Darwin and God is the use of costume. Darwin wears a red vest over a white collared shirt and a pair of slacks, while God wears a silver cloak and dons a matching hat with an inverted pyramid. Nonetheless, Darwin and God are mirror images of each other.

The bearded white man not only follows the image of Darwin and the Western conception of the image of God but also resembles myriad figures of power in the United States imaginary that are constructed as white, masculine, heterosexual, and, in this case, aged, men. Here Rodríguez conflates iconographies, which results in defamiliarizing religious and scientific categories of identification; as stated earlier, there are moments when Darwin acts like God and vice-versa. For example, Darwin frequently controls the lighting, and God quotes Robert Giblin and Thomas Paine. Rodríguez does not make any gestures toward a historical reality. Instead, she skirts any ontological claims to truth by avoiding realism.

The focus on and acknowledgement of location is central to grounding topics in history and destabilizing their claims to truth. This is achieved,

in part, by Mexican cabaret. In Mexico, other forms of theater such as Teatro de Carpa (Tent Shows) and Teatro de Revista (Review Theater) inform cabaret. Whereas her performance references many U.S. figures, Rodríguez ultimately brings the topic back to Mexico in content and style. In short, her performance includes parodying political and religious figures that are simultaneously outside and within Mexico. They remain outside in terms of physical location but within by considering the ways that these figures have affected Mexico or Mexicans.

The first song that Rodríguez sings comments on the Monsanto Corporation: “I give thanks to Monsanto, who has given me so much. It gave me whooping cough and swine flu, breast cancer, colon cancer...and it gave deformities to the man I love.” Monsanto, a U.S.-based agricultural corporation that produces genetically modified seeds, grows and sells transgenic seeds to such countries as Mexico, India, and Brazil. Rodríguez's song reflects a form of grace-giving (she continually gives thanks) that satirically discloses a critique of multinational corporations and the effects they produce on the countries that they target.

“Viva la Evolución!” Rodríguez says following the Monsanto song as she references another political icon. The backdrop shows a red and black commodified silhouette that once was Che Guevarra but now is an evolved monkey. Rather than identifying with this Latin American cultural



Bringing in a variety of U.S. political figures from the late eighteenth century up to the twentieth century, Rodríguez destabilizes chronological notions of time in history to remember that which has been forgotten—the way that revolutionary and reactionary movements, in many cases, carry on a masculinist and misogynistic frame. Thus, while Rodríguez channels Darwin she is able to juxtapose and critique figures without limiting herself to a temporal or topographic location.

icon, Rodríguez opts to disidentify with Guevara. Guevara's image is often associated with all that is utopic about revolutionary movements, but in this case it does otherwise: he is critiqued alongside Thomas Paine, Carl Sagan and the Ku Klux Klan. Bringing in a variety of U.S. political figures from the late eighteenth century up to the twentieth century, Rodríguez destabilizes chronological notions of time in history to remember that which has been forgotten—the way that revolutionary and reactionary movements, in many cases, carry on a masculinist and misogynistic frame. Thus, while Rodríguez channels Darwin she is able to juxtapose and critique figures without limiting herself to a temporal or topographic location.

Another way Rodríguez resists sustaining a particular time or space is by engaging with the audience. Rodríguez sets up an actor-audience relationship that posits a reluctantly active spectator. To achieve this she depends on live and improvised interaction. At one point, Rodríguez says to her spectators in English, “Raise your hand if you believe in God. Now, who does not believe in God?” As the “disbelievers” raise their hands, Rodríguez asks one audience member to lower one hand (two hands are not allowed). Then she asks audience members to explain why they believe in God. Among the responses is a young woman who says that the existence of God is probable, and, likewise, evolution is probable.

As a reaction, Rodríguez states that everything is probable, and as an audience member leaves the performance Rodríguez tells her that she is as beautiful as a goddess and now she believes in this goddess.

While Rodríguez interrogates her audience on their religion (or lack thereof), the projected script infers a type of answer from the audience, even while Rodríguez herself has no control over how the audience will react. The supertitle reads, “Many of you did not raise your hand in either instance, so either you were masturbating or you believe that you do not believe.” The presumed response comments on the discomfort caused by requesting participation from members of the audience. The discomfort also lies in the direct inquiry of religion and on the perception of religion as something practiced on an individual level. Even while there is an occasional lag or advancing of subtitles that distinguishes spectators who speak Spanish from those who don't, Rodríguez lessens the discomfort with her comical sexual remarks.

Since Rodríguez's use of comedy makes use of the material body, she is able to communicate with the audience with or without supertitles. As she mentions in the post-show discussion, comedy in the U.S. is different than in Mexico because Mexican comedy is more corporeal. Considering that her background and experience originate in Mexico, the performance brings with it body

techniques from Mexican cabaret. The inclusion of the body, particularly in moments of comic relief, helps Rodríguez communicate the idea that religion often serves to benefit a “self,” resulting in the denial and exclusion of others (both individuals or institutions).

Rodríguez uses cabaret to de-privilege conventional and archival forms of knowledge through her body movements, the material aspects of theater, and audience interaction. In this performance Rodríguez has the agency to choose the memories or codes she wishes to cite and/or edit. Rodríguez challenges a long history of ongoing patriarchy generated by Mexican and U.S. cultures and fostered through religion and science. Rather than commodifying her own performance, she calls into question multiple forms of consumption, be it through food or entertainment. Her use of subtitles and interaction with the audience, among other tactics, makes visible the otherwise invisible population of Latinos in the U.S. and communicates locally about global concerns.

Yvette Martinez-Vu is a doctoral student in Theater and Performance Studies. Her interests include race and gender in Mexican and Chicana/o performance.

Note: All photos courtesy of Jesusa Rodríguez



Seeing the Ghost

CHENG-CHIEH YU'S *THE GOOD PERSON*
AND *DANCING MOTHER COURAGE*

THE FINAL PERFORMANCE of the *Global Flashpoints: Transnational Performance and Politics*, an international conference held from October 6th to 12th, 2011, and organized by the UCLA Center for Performance Studies and Center for the Study of Women, featured the work of Cheng-Chieh Yu, dancer, choreographer, and Associate Professor of the Department of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA. The two pieces she presented were the video work *The Good Person* and the live dance piece *Dancing Mother Courage* with an accompanying video projection. Both pieces, as is clear from their titles, engage with Bertolt Brecht's work. *The Good Person* questions the

orientalism in Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan*; *Dancing Mother Courage* seeks to meld the iconic title character of *Mother Courage and Her Children* with dance.¹

The Good Person opens with a soft blue screen, and then a white piece of paper gently floats across the frame, as though blown in the wind. The paper twists and the viewer sees that it is a wanted poster: a photograph of Yu's face fills the page. Above her photo is the word "WANTED," and below is "THE GOOD PERSON." One has barely had time to absorb the content of the paper before it has turned, obscuring its message. During this opening moment, the wanted poster float-

ing across the screen, the single screen divides into a split screen, a thick black line running between the top and bottom sections. For the rest of the video this division remains in place, the center of the screen a black strip of void. The slow, contemplative pace of the opening is soon replaced with a frantic tempo as vignettes cut between each other and the two screen spaces show differing images.

As the opening shot of the wanted poster dissolves, a series of cuts between different parts of Yu's body begins. Neon yellow paint crisscrosses her body or oozes out of her orifices. The paint is absurdly violent; the color is so obviously unnatural, yet it drips from her nose and ears like

1. Brecht, Bertolt. "The Good Person of Szechwan." Trans. John Willett. In *Collected Plays*. New York: Vintage Books, 1971.

blood. Brecht's orientalism seems to have literally bloodied her nose, burst her eardrums. The paint seems to highlight the crude stereotype of the "yellow-skinned" Asian Other. Yet this clear assertion of the insidiousness of orientalist stereotypes is complicated. The paint allowed the viewer to see the thoroughly constructed "yellow" Other of Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan*, yet her body, her skin pushed against the artifice of the paint, forcefully questioning and confronting the viewer with the fact of her embodiment, forcing the viewer into a particular identificatory relationship with her filmed body. While the yellow paint Yu adds to her body allows the viewer an aesthetic entry point to passively ruminate on Brecht's orientalism, her ever-present yet filmed body forces viewers to contemplate their own current culpability within the uneven power relationship of the viewer and the viewed, in relation to a still active economy of orientalism. While the yellow objects Yu adds to her body allows the viewer an aesthetic entry point to passively ruminate on Brecht's orientalism, her ever-present yet filmed body forces viewers to contemplate their own current culpability within the uneven power relationship of the viewer and the viewed, in relation to a still-active economy of orientalism.

Contrasting this yellow-toned section is an action-based thread that shows Yu dressed in a blue button-up shirt and skirt on the streets of a Chinese city. Not only are her clothes blue, but the entire thread has a blue wash. The streets she

finds herself walking down, the back alleyways in which she searches through rows and rows of rusting blue trash cans, are all shot through with a washed-out blue quality. A motif of cardboard boxes runs through this section. Toward the end of the video, a large cardboard box dominates the screen. It stands on its side, the flaps at either end extended out; her legs extend out from the bottom of the box, the rest of her body hidden. Her legs begin to move, pulling the cardboard flaps of the box closed. The camera shifts, and the viewer stares at the soles of Yu's feet, at her articulated toes; it is a sort of retreat, a pulling back into a cardboard world. It is a double move. The viewer has only her feet, with their slow articulation, to watch, and so stares entranced. But the viewer is also watching the retreat of her body, the closing off of the viewer's ability to gaze at Yu.

It is a move repeated differently at another moment in the video. Yu, a yellow Chinese opera mask affixed to the back of her head, stands with her naked back facing the camera. Her back sways from side to side, her spine imitating a slow moving snake. Her arms are extended to either side of her body; they move with a jerking rhythm, her joints—at the elbow, the wrist—creating sharp breaks in the movement. The sequence is an offering of movement and dance—it is one of the few moments of extended movement in the video—and of withholding. The viewer cannot see her face. Rather only the

mask was visible and the uncanny image of her moving back meant to replicate the movement of the front of her body.

As I sat in the darkened theatre, watching *The Good Person*, I felt a sense of distance and removal from Cheng Chieh Yu's onscreen character. The format and logic of the work constantly push against the creation of an identificatory relationship with the viewer. Yu's body enters the screen: the viewer watches as she crosses a busy street, only to have the viewer's relationship to her, to her body, shattered, fragmented, her pedestrian body replaced by the isolated image of a leg, yellow paint dripping across the shin. And then another quick cut: the viewer watches as wanted posters blow across the screen. There was a bombardment of images: bodies, landscapes rapidly fragmenting. The stability of a continuing image sequence was displaced in the video for the distancing effect of rapid montage.

The format of the piece—a video—ensures that Yu's (live) body is always already absent from the relationship created between the viewer and the work. The labor of her dancing body—her sweat, her breath—is gone, replaced with mediatized images of her body in the video space. Like Brecht's play, Yu's video work ensures that a Chinese body is never present, always already gone, displaced into the re-playable and thus completed format of the video, mirroring the orientalist fantasy of the always already completed, simplified, and thus "understood" Asian Other. Thus a straightfor-



Like Brecht's play, Cheng-Chieh Yu's video work ensures that a Chinese body is never present, always already gone, displaced into the re-playable and thus completed format of the video, mirroring the orientalist fantasy of the always already completed, simplified, and thus "understood" Asian Other. Thus a straightforward narrative problematizing the orientalism in Brecht's play is displaced in the video for a more subtle play between problematizing and *producing* the Orientalist.



ward narrative problematizing the orientalism in Brecht's play is displaced in the video for a more subtle play between problematizing and *producing* the Orientalist.

The piece ends as it began: a wanted poster fills the screen, and then the image of the poster expands to one image stretching across the two halves of the screen. What is wanted? There is an urgency, a craving inherent to the *want* of the wanted poster. Who, what *is* the good person? A signifier of a particular outmoded orientalism? A signifier of a relationship constantly produced and (re)created within the viewer/viewed relationship, within the ever-repeatable replay of a video? The viewer—aware of the orientalism at play in Brecht's work—is made culpable in the desiring relationship symbolized by the WANTED poster of her video work, a desire to (re)create the framed, finished Asian body.

Yu performed the second piece of the evening, *Dancing Mother Courage*, live while a video was projected on the scrim at the back of the stage. As the dim stage lights came up, two shadowy set pieces were revealed. The two identical pieces each comprised a large tire lying on its side, with small wheels affixed to each tire's bottom. A thin, tall metal pole emerged from the middle of each tire, a naked light bulb sitting atop each pole. The pieces were an odd mix of scrapyard junk. They diagonally split the dance space; a pair of work boots sat near one of them. A small square of video appeared in the bottom-right corner of the scrim. The video, in black and white, was of Yu dancing. In the video, Yu's arms were fluid, seeming to push the air around her. From the downstage left corner of the stage, Yu herself emerged. Dressed in black pants and shirt, she rolled a large tire on its edge in front of her. In a deep *plie*,

she moved slowly across the stage, her torso facing the audience, her hands poised above the tire. It was impossible to tell how the tire was moving; she appeared not to be touching it. Her focused progress was transfixing, not least because her ability to move with the tire seemed dependent on an intrinsically magnetic quality of her body.

Reaching the far side of the stage, Yu's slow pace broke. Moving to center stage, she began an extended and virtuosic dance phrase. Her movement, based upon martial traditions, cemented the vocabulary of the piece. Her arms, held out from her body, seemed to create currents of energy in the air around her. Largely in a deep *plie*, she swept across the space—and then one leg extended up behind her as she balanced on one foot, her body almost perpendicular to the stage. Her movements carried her across the stage space and also around herself, a constant turning marking her movements. Throughout, the work moved between periods of virtuosic movement, largely executed in the center of the stage with minimal and fleeting use of or contact with the set pieces, to phrases that utilized the tires, boots, or other props, and seemed almost task-oriented: Yu pushed a tire across the stage, or applied makeup to her face.

Yu returned to the tire poles throughout the piece. During one movement phrase she pushed one of the tires downstage. Standing atop the tire, she turned on the light bulb. The rest of the stage

dark, the naked bulb threw her face into stark and eerie relief. On the scrim behind her, her face appeared, one-fourth of it painted with dramatic red and black Chinese opera makeup. Then she suddenly turned off the light, there was a moment of blackness, and then the lights onstage and in the audience came up. The sudden blaze of light was jarring, the familiar darkness of the theater gone. Staring out at us, she began to clap. Her loud applause echoed throughout the space. Hesitantly, a few audience members followed suit, but quickly subsided. Yu did not. The moment stretched, uneasy and awkward.

The clapping ended as abruptly as it started and she made her way to the downstage left corner. A stagehand entered carrying a stool, a hand mirror, and several tins. Sitting on the stool, holding the mirror with one hand, she quickly applied red and black makeup from the tins to half of her face. The task completed, she returned to her set pieces. Low to the ground, her feet digging into the stage floor, she pushed one of the tire poles across the stage. Her labored movements implied a struggle with friction. At times her pushing brought her body almost parallel with the floor, only her grip on the metal pole keeping her from falling flat on her face. As she struggled, images flashed across the scrim—ripples of water that dissolved into what could have been the shadows of wheels and spokes.

The video image shifted, retreating to a small square in the bottom-right corner, and her danc-

ing video form reappeared. Moving to center stage, the real-life Yu left the tire pole behind, her movements resolving into those of her onscreen avatar. The movement phrase was low; her body rarely straightened. The broad sweeping gestures of her arms brought her body around itself. Her focus was down and inwards, yet she managed to follow her dancing avatar almost exactly.

The strength of her movements, her intense focus, and her aggressive gaze as she stared out at the audience bespoke a desire to translate the defining characteristics of Brecht's famous character into dance. She presented the audience with her dancing body, addressed the viewer with a particular type of embodied, kinesthetic identity-building. I found myself, sitting in the audience, adopting her intense focus, giving her own gaze back to her. Sitting in my seat, I could not attempt to replicate her virtuosic dance, but her gaze—that I could adopt.

Numerous ghosts positioned themselves around the piece, seeming to demand a particular type of identification from me as an audience member. Most obviously, Brecht and his famous character Mother Courage ghosted the piece, seeming indeed to be offered up as ghostly presences by the work. Yet Brecht and his archetypal creation were not the only ghosts onstage with her. The optic and critical remains of *The Good Person* also ghosted her solo. Her clapping ruptured the formal structure of the piece,

piercing the spatial divide between performer and audience. Her clapping was a séance of sorts, conjuring the ghosts of Brecht and Mother Courage, her applause referencing Brecht's theatrical tactic of direct address. Yet Yu did not address the audience as a performer; rather, she adopted the unique purview of the "proper" theater audience—clapping—usurping one of our only tasks. And made obvious within the witnessing of her usurpation of our role as audience members was her embodied usurpation of Brecht. While his *The Good Person of Szechwan* removed a historical, nuanced understanding of China, Yu asserted and inserted herself as an artist invested in issues of Asian and diaspora identity into Brecht's canon, inserted herself as a dancing, transnational, postmodern Mother Courage for the twenty-first century.²

Gwyneth Shanks is a PhD student in the department of Theatre and Performance Studies. Her research interests include dance, movement, choreographies of resistance, memory theory, and issues of historiography. A dancer and choreographer, she recently performed in the MOCA gala curated by Marina Abramovic.

Note: All photos courtesy of Cheng-Chieh Yu

2. Rouse, John. "Brecht's Orientalism." *Global Flashpoints* [conference]. Los Angeles. 8 Oct. 2011. My characterization of Yu's work is based upon her biography on her website (<http://www.yudancetheatre.com/Site/About.html>) as well as introductory comments made before the presentation of her work at the *Global Flashpoints* conference on October 8th, 2011 at the UCLA campus.

Transformative Performance

TRANSNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT WITH INDIAN THEATER



OF THE MANY PERFORMANCES, talks, and roundtables at *Global Flashpoints*, *The Wife's Letter* and a seminar led by Bishnupriya Dutt specifically addressed questions of race, gender, power, patriarchy, nationalism, and colonialism, and how these issues and others can and should be explored within a transnational context. The first event of the series was a performance of *The Wife's Letter*, followed by a discussion with the director and actors moderated by Anurima Banerji, Assistant Professor in the Department of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA. On October 11, Bishnupriya Dutt, Professor of Theatre History in the School of Arts and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru Uni-

versity and coauthor of *Engendering Performance: Indian Women Performers in Search of an Identity*, held a seminar on dance and acting in Indian theater. Both events addressed issues of gender and performance, the colonial and nationalist history of India as related to theater practices, barriers of language and culture, and, more broadly, the effects of holding events such as *Global Flashpoints*.

Based on a short story written by Rabindranath Tagore, *The Wife's Letter* was directed by Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry. In the program, Tagore is called "a Bengali mystic, poet, visual artist, playwright, novelist, and composer whose works reshaped Bengali literature and music in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."

In 1913, he received the Nobel Prize for Literature for *Gitanjali*, a collection of poetry. He traveled extensively in Europe and North America and had a substantial impact on the arts and politics during the period leading up to India's independence from Britain. In her notes in the program, Chowdhry explains Tagore's use of space as a commentary on the position of individuals in domestic roles in India. Tagore was very distrustful of the restricted, narrow, domestic interiors of the Indian bourgeois household, and he translated this distrust into a way of understanding or representing character. The precise contours of a character's inner life or aspirations may be viewed against their placement in a material space or

in the public. As a result, this has helped me to understand that even though the characters were subjected to a feudal and domestic order, they found their “imaginary” space where they could dream, weave games, and play.

The play focuses on the relationship between two young brides: Mrinal and Bindu. Mrinal is a slightly older protector of Bindu, a young, naïve girl who has been cast out by Mrinal’s in-laws. On the sparse, black stage, the actors perform domestic tasks, including dressing, washing, preparing meals, making offerings, gardening, and caring for livestock. The set is composed of a sleeping area, garden, pool for bathing and washing, and a stable for animals (represented onstage by a line drawing of a cow). Gick Grewal, a woman in her fifties, plays Bindu, and Vansh Bhardwaj, a young man, plays Mrinal. This unusual casting fascinated the audience and prompted the most discussion afterward. During the first few minutes of the performance, the age and gender of the actors highlight the central themes of patriarchy and male domination that the director chose to emphasize. According to Chowdhry, she chose to de-emphasize the nationalist, post-colonial themes in Tagore’s piece and instead to stress female bonding. This choice affirms the original short story’s attempts to represent breaks from patriarchal control. As Chowdhry put it in the post-performance roundtable discussion, “this female bonding was a survival technique, a space

of solution in a society eating itself from within through the patriarchal paradigm.”

Indeed, the bond between the characters creates the sisterly foundation from which the build-up to the tragic conclusion emerges. The title of the piece comes from monologues in which Mrinal addresses her husband in letter form, during which his physical absence in the performance places the audience in his role as the object of her address. Mrinal describes her budding relationship with Bindu, who affectionately calls her “Didi,” the Punjabi word for older sister. Mrinal reenacts moments from the death of her young daughter, embodied by an egg that Mrinal carefully cradles and then breaks. She then cleanses herself in the onstage pool. Indeed, Mrinal’s kindness toward and empathy for Bindu alienate the two from the rest of the family (who are also physically absent from the performance). This isolation eventually contributes to Bindu’s arranged marriage to a mentally unstable man and her subsequent suicide. Rather than succumbing to a similar fate, Mrinal informs her husband in a letter that she will instead embark on a pilgrimage.

The performance of the actors onstage was, for this viewer, a bit awkward at first, and their acting styles verged on hyperbolic imitation of young girls, particularly when the two feigned jump roping together while singing. For me, this seeming awkwardness was a result of the nontraditional casting. As I became immersed in the story, this

feeling soon dissipated. The necessity, however, of having to read the English subtitles projected on the black curtains upstage created a linguistic barrier that denied me complete immersion. The occasional typos and awkward phrasings created points of confusion and incompleteness that affected my experience of the performance. This barrier emphasized the difficulty in navigating works of art produced in a country with such a complex and volatile colonial history as India. How can an audience member engage with a play that involves such a complex interweaving of histories when one cannot even understand the spoken language? This also raises the question of how to navigate similar barriers in the context of an academic series of transnational events.

The Wife’s Letter is written in the first-person voice of a female character by a male author. It is not “My Letter” but “The Wife’s Letter,” and the title’s positioning of Mrinal as “the wife” reflects the primacy of that role in Indian society as well as Tagore’s simultaneous distance from and identification with his character. In the post-play discussion, Chowdhry discussed the potentially problematic aspects of such a narrative strategy. Is this text a man “speaking for a woman” or perhaps a kind of “imaginary ethnography”? The use of a male actor in the role of Mrinal was an exemplary method of making this contradictory narration and subjectivity manifest, and it also points to traditional Indian and British theater

traditions in which male actors played the parts of female characters on the stage.

In the post-performance discussion, the first audience question addressed the nontraditional casting. A member of the audience asked whether the all-male casts of Shakespearean theatre influenced the director's casting. Asking whether an Indian theatrical company's choice to cast a male actor in the role of a young bride was influenced by British stage history is a loaded endeavor. Chowdhry's response explored the influence of British colonial history in India as well as India's own theatrical traditions, and the interaction and blending of both over time. Referencing the historical role of female impersonation in Indian theater and performance, she said her intention was to avoid the stereotypes and external clichés, such as exaggerated gait and lipstick, often associated with those traditions. In the program's directorial notes Chowdhry explained, "the male actor who is playing Mrinal is not constructing the role as a female impersonator, nor is he playing androgynous. He is creating a de-gendering of his role, leading perhaps to a more egalitarian approach to performance."

It would, however, be disingenuous to ignore the fact that England also has a tradition of men portraying female characters and that this English tradition is well known in India. Making this complex interplay explicit, Chowdhry asked, "[If a male actor] can be Lear, why not Cordelia?" She

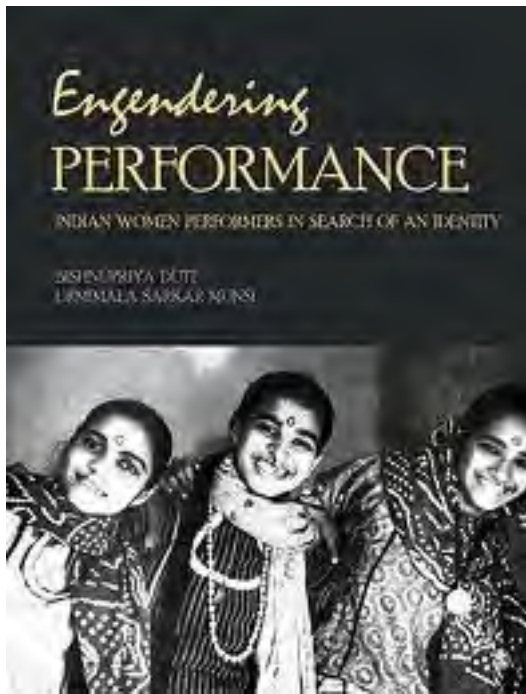
insisted that her casting choices were also simply practical: these actors worked well together and were able to express the bond between the two characters that forms the primary focus of the piece. Further, Chowdhry stated that she wanted the play to function as a commentary on a reprieve from social codes and from traditional concepts of gender. "What does gender and age mean on the stage?" she wanted to ask. "Is gender constructed performatively? Is [gender] biological?" She also intended to explore the ways in which everyone "dips into stereotypes of what it is to be your gender." The act of a female director casting a male actor in the role of a woman that was originally written by a male author speaking for her is simultaneously very unexpected and daring while also hearkening back to traditional practices.

In her seminar held on October 11, Bishnu-priya Dutt further elaborated on India's theatrical history in relation to colonialism and post-colonialism. The seminar focused on the history of dance and acting as separate and interrelated arts in India. Dutt began with an overview of some of what are generally acknowledged to be clear periods in India's colonial history as it relates to theater—though she emphasized the indistinct, muddled nature of time and history and the problematic practice of breaking up time into distinct sections. She discussed pre-colonial theater traditions dating back to the *Natya Shastra*, an ancient

treatise on the performing arts written between 200 BC and 200 AD; colonial theater between 1789 and 1930, in which certain types of dancers were banned; the ban of "nautch," a traditional northern Indian dance style performed by traveling group of girls who often wore very little clothing, between 1920 and 1934; post-Independent modernity between the 1950s and 1970s; and post-colonial reception from 1980 onward.

During the colonial period, Dutt explained, British forces shunned traditional Indian dances for other types of performances, directed to a specifically male audience, in which French dance and burlesque traditions were the norm. During the rise of Indian nationalism and subsequent post-Independence modernity, these types of theatrical performances were marginalized in favor of nationalistic, political narratives. Viewed as an exemplification of Indian culture, "classic" Indian dance reemerged. It was during this time that Tagore worked and wrote *The Wife's Letter*. The period from 1980 onward, which Dutt calls the post-colonial reception period, was typified by an embrace of capitalism and the death of alternate ideologies, where dancers (frequently middle- to upper-class urban women) performed "classical" dances that were reconstructed, cleansed, and removed from geographic and social contexts and others (often lower-caste women from villages) performed "folk" dances as showcases of "Indian-ness."

Dutt screened filmed performances of modern



***Engendering Performance:
Indian Women Performers in Search
of an Identity***

**Bishnupriya Dutt and
Urmimala Sarkar Munsri**

SAGE Publications Pvt. Ltd, 2010

plays in India to show different forms of contemporary theater performance. These pieces exemplified some of the problems and triumphs of international conferences and events, such as *Global Flashpoints*. One clip was from *Draupadi 1981*, a play in which a northeastern Indian woman living on the border of India and China is brutalized by men and eventually confronts them with her own naked body as a form of resistance. There are clear thematic connections of female oppression and resistance between this performance and *The Wife's Letter*. According to Dutt, *Draupadi 1981* was controversial and in 2004 led to demonstrations in northeastern India by women opposed to the state's military and political abuses. Apparently the actress from *Draupadi 1981* was invited to participate in *Global Flashpoints* but was, according to Dutt, wary of problems of language and misunderstanding, in part because she only speaks Manipuri, a language that none of the other visiting scholars and performers speak. This instance of language as a barrier mirrors the barrier created with the use of subtitles during *The Wife's Letter*, which brings up the larger question of trying to understand local issues internationally and across the boundaries of nation, language, politics, and personal knowledge and experience.

During Dutt's seminar, Professor Case noted that one of the greatest challenges to feminism remains the difficulty of "understanding issues of violence against women collectively." Addressing

these unavoidable and problematic issues of exoticism and the politics of "the subject" and "the other," Dutt responded that she sees potential in smaller strategies in which individuals attempt to make personal connections across differences in order to create positive expressions of resistance and cooperation. My experiences attending *The Wife's Letter* and Dutt's seminar were, I think, a version of this strategy. Acknowledging cultural difference and areas of similarity, exploring it among ourselves, and working through the varying gaps and wellsprings of knowledge of specific traditions created bands of understanding and confusion that I found simultaneously exciting and frustrating. Most of all, these bands make clear the necessity of organizing such events as *Global Flashpoints* in contemporary academia.

Linda Juhász-Wood is a first-year graduate student in the Cinema and Media Studies Program at UCLA. She received her BA from Mount Holyoke College in 2008, majoring in Film Studies with a minor in Art and Theatrical Design. She is particularly interested in feminist film theory, queer theory, and portrayals of girlhood in various forms of media.

Note: All photos courtesy of The Company.

DIRECTOR

Kathleen McHugh
PROFESSOR, ENGLISH AND CINEMA AND MEDIA STUDIES

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR

Rachel Lee
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, ENGLISH AND WOMEN'S STUDIES

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

Julie K. Childers, Ph.D.

MANAGING EDITOR

Brenda Johnson-Grau

ADMINISTRATIVE SPECIALIST

Erma Acebo

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT

Emily Walker

STUDENT ASSISTANTS

*Chitra Guru, Maryssa Hall, Linda Juhasz-Wood,
Angelica Lai, Lindsey McLean, Josh Olejarz, Alice Royer,
Ben Sher, Cathy Son, Michael Witte, and Stacy Wood*



UCLA CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WOMEN

1500 Public Affairs Building/Box 957222

Los Angeles, CA 90095-7222

campus mailcode: 722203

310 825 0590 / 310 825 0456 (fax)