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POSTDRAMATIC RESONANCE IN THEATRE PRACTICES

There Is No Empty Space on Earth

Zhao Chuan

Two years ago, I worked with the Korean director Lee Kyung-Sung. We were doing a workshop in Seoul, together with a Japanese director. I have the habit of starting workshops, my own *Grass Stage* included, with self-introductions. It doesn't have to be long, just so that we have a basic understanding of one another on this first encounter. The three of us were collaborating with a Korean theatre troupe called Yohangza, a big theatre company in Korea. They have 70 to 80 actors. However, those actors are not salaried employees. When they have a new play, suitable actors are chosen, and they get paid for the project. Senior actors enjoy greater stability, economically speaking, since they are chosen more often. However, in the first few years, a new member fresh from the theatre academy might not have many tasks throughout a year. So many of them still need other jobs to make a living, unless they come from a wealthy family.

When we sat together for self-introductions, they started by introducing their occupation: "I'm an actor." Some earn a living by working at McDonald's, some by manual labor, babysitting, and all sorts. But they don't see their occupation as a McDonald's staff or a worker. They all said that they were actors, although none of them actually lived from acting.

In *Grass Stage*, even now, most of us will never say: "I'm an artist" or: "I'm an actor." They tell you the job that they make a living with. So we have teachers, photographers, and people working in all kinds of occupations. The job comes first in the introduction. I find this very interesting. I discussed it with the Korean actors. The first reason might be *reality*, which I will talk about later. I think what Kai Tuchmann does in his dramaturgy and documentary theatre has a lot to do with the question of reality. The thing about reality is that it is there, but somehow, it's not very certain. So when you assert that you are an actor, it is, to some extent, true. But there can be deviations, because this identity might not explain you or introduce you very well. So what is real? When we work together, it is all about the question of how people connect. In the first place, we are different human beings. And we realize the differences. We recognize how we are connected in our real social relationships. Only then comes the question of how we work together as theatre-makers, which is easier. The first question is more difficult. A theatre troupe often seems united, powerful, and organized. But all problems sur-

rounding people in the real world still exist in the world of theatre and the creative arts. In the end, it all comes back to the problem of people.

I've been making theatre for more than ten years. When people ask me what I do, I reply that I make theatre. The truth is, all these years, I haven't found an entrance to proper theatres or to a drama academy. Thanks to Kai, I've come to a drama academy today to hold a lecture for the first time. So let's talk about the issue of entering spaces. I don't know if you've read the book *The Empty Space* by Peter Brook. It was quite a hit and sold very well after publication. Young people fond of culture and the arts love to refer to its definition of theatre, which states that theatre is something that happens when one person watches another, who is walking across a space, and so on. But from the beginning, I had some suspicions. His claim was very different from my notion of theatre. A theatre space is not empty; just like this room: it's not empty. There are traces. Look at the walls. There were many props when we entered the room this morning, and we removed them from the room. Even if we all leave the room until our next entrance, it's still not empty. It does not only exist because you walk in. It is already there. This room, together with the new, somewhat vacant campus which sits in Changping that I walked across this morning—all this space, it is not empty. There are many things, lively things happening in the space.

Generally speaking, in the environment of China, to enter a theatre, you will need a ticket. Tickets for shows in Shanghai, Beijing, and Tianjin cost about the same. In the last few weeks, we participated in China's biggest theatre festival in Wuzhen, where a ticket is more expensive, and transportation and accommodation costs have to be paid in addition. This kind of expense is no big deal for our country's middle class. They can afford it. But how many of the population can afford these theatre tickets? My point is, you need to be economically qualified to go to the theatre. I don't think more than ten percent of the citizens in our country are willing to spend money on an evening in the theatre. Right? Also, one doesn't show up at the theatre for no reason. It's not like having a meal. One needs to be intellectually qualified, educated, and cultivated, or hoping to become cultivated and investing in it. Think about it this way: Theatre is the top layer of a cake. It's the cream. These are what we call grand theatres or city theatres today. So it's not an empty space. It has various intricate tensional relationships with the society, culturally and economically.

There is no empty space on earth, not with our ever-growing human desires and overlaying histories. So—this is very important—when we talk about theatre and drama, we should talk about our relationship with the space when we walk in and about what this space means.

When we sit here today, a power relationship exists in this space. You have left this generous space for me and have crowded in the corner around the front door, because I am the invited teacher. The space is reserved for me. It would obviously violate the common power relationship if you would push me into the corner. When we talk about theatre, we shall recognize these aspects and we should be sensitive about them.

I know you have politics classes; do you also need to learn party history? Drama played a big role in our politics and culture in the past. The Anti-Rightist Campaign in the 1950s started from criticism of a play called *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* (*Hai Rui Ba Guan*). Many political movements before and after were connected with plays in those years. Because earlier than that, many leftist cultured youths were making theatre, went to Yanan later on, and became important cultural officials when the Communists came to power after 1949. In contrast to literature, theatre is much more practical and spatial. So the theatre space has never been simple.

In the ideology back then, the theatre stage had to serve workers, peasants, and soldiers. For instance, if I had wanted to study acting, I wouldn't have succeeded. I don't look good. According to the 1970s standard, I am too slim. The workers, peasants, and soldiers should be strong and loud, have a square face, and look powerful on stage. But do actual workers, peasants, and soldiers look like this? They have all kinds of looks and maybe are not pretty. Today—when you walk on the campus of the theatre academy in Shanghai—everywhere you look, the boys are handsome, and the girls are always very beautiful. They will be in television, commercials, movies in the very near future. The ultimate goal is to sell. So all these pretty looks are eventually for sale. Far from the old workers, peasants, and soldiers, we have left the ideological space for the commercial space.

So there is no empty space.

An anecdote: Eugenio Barba was the honorary president of a Chinese theatre festival. The artistic director of this festival, who thought of himself as a qualified master, wished to organize a conversation between master and master. Barba's assistant once came to a performance by *Grass Stage*, liked it very much, and became a friend of ours. He told me about this conversation between the two "masters." When the two men sat down, Barba asks the other master: "We make theatre because of an interior lack of something. What is yours?" The other master was lost for words and beat around the bush. So this other master was somewhat looked down upon since he couldn't even answer this fundamental question—what do you lack? So I want to ask you. You come here to study theatre, do you lack anything? Does what you study and what you do have anything to do with your lack or your deficiency? (Student: I think I lack life.) You lack life. You think you are not living. Anyone else? (Student: Time.) You lack time. You come here to study theatre-making. Has this question never occurred to you even you're not a master? (Student: self-cognition) Self-cognition. (Student: Connection with the world) Connection with the world. Good. No hurry. Take your time to think about it. This is a master-level question. Think as if this senior master in his seventies sits opposite you and poses this question to you. I think it's a question of some weight. You can save it for later. I'll give you my answer. I began thinking about it after hearing this story.

I never studied in a theatre academy. As I told you at the beginning of this lecture, I haven't found the door to theatre and its academies. When I was young, I went to the Fine Arts School, which is affiliated with the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts. I studied painting. I also spent over ten years on literature, writing fiction and movie scripts. More than ten years ago, almost by accident, I made my first play. I found it very interesting and since then have worked in theatre for almost 15 years. So, to answer this master question, I began wondering why. I think in the very beginning, the reason I made theatre was due to dissatisfaction. There was a lack of reality, a deficiency of truth where I lived. I grew up in Shanghai and also spent over ten years overseas, but I'm not specifically referring to one place when I talk about the lack of truth. So for me, the theatre became a way to the real. Last century, we believed workers, peasants, and soldiers should look like that on stage, because we believed that was true. When the five or six Korean young people sat together with me, introducing themselves as actors, they were not trying to deceive me. They only said what they believed to be true. But what I expect, or what I seek, is another form of truth, which I think is more real than what they told me.

In the 1970s, the famous Italian leftist filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni was invited by Premier Zhou Enlai to come to China and make a documentary film that is called *Chung Kuo Cina 1972*. Today it's very precious since we don't have many documentaries about the seventies in China—plain scenes of people in Beijing, Shanghai, of the social life back then. But after the film was done, a political movement raged across the country, in which it was condemned to nothing. We didn't see it then; the screening was not allowed in China, but it was shown in Europe. The environment shown in the film is not the modernized version as in propaganda; it also shows the ragged clothes. The criticism was led by the government, and there were debates in Europe, too. One passage in Susan Sontag's *On Photography* discussed this film. She took the side of Antonioni, making many criticisms of the Chinese. My argument is: what is the reality of people? If you go into a village and ask to take a picture of an old granny, she will refuse, saying that she's not tidy. She needs to clean herself up, dress up in her best attire and sit before the camera with a smile because she thinks that is her true self, although she usually might look menacing. A casual photo of her is untrue, or in another aspect, not pretty. Pretty is one kind of truth we are after, like the good look of workers, peasants, and soldiers we pursued on stage.

There is another experience of mine: I went to Kinshasa, Congo. People there refused to be photographed, especially by foreigners. You raise your camera, no matter how far, someone will instantly come and demand you to stop. My intention was to photograph everything interesting as it was my first time in Africa. I was confused in the beginning but understood later on. They thought their daily life was dirty and indecent. They felt harmed by being photographed. The other reason is that they thought the foreigners were taking the photographs to sell. That is unfair for them. So, the truth is not as simple as Ms. Sontag or Mr. Antonioni thinks. There is something else in it—dignity.

In an era in which visibility is almost the only belief, this is somewhat difficult to understand. The real seems to be based on what is exposed to our eyes, but it is not completely identical with what is right before our eyes. The truth is a complex process of exploration, and the real includes our inner world, thus forming a more complex reality—that is, our existence. Therefore, the real is not only about what has happened, but also about the future. Our existence has a future. It is for the sake of existence that we have to fight forgetting.

I have no intention here to judge what is right or wrong with what I mentioned above. Just that there is a doubt, and I think these doubts are part of the real that I seek in my theatre-making.

I now want to present something from my own practice and talk about how it connects to this topic. Kai has already introduced you to my group or my collaborators. We are called *Grass Stage (Caotaiban)*. We started in 2005 and met weekly for discussion, reading, theatre workshops, and small seminars. During these discussions, we formed something, a consensus about how to make theatre. We worked a lot in a place in Shanghai called the Downstream Garage (*Xiahe Micang*). Some of you might have heard about it. It's gone now. It existed for nine years and played an important role in supporting independent, experimental, and rather marginal theatre-making. We were based in the Downstream Garage and made theatre pieces. Then a question occurred to me. If we go on staying here, would it be too safe? Of course, academies and universities are also very safe places. Well maybe not—with all the CCTV cameras indicating it's not that safe. Back then, we felt safe. And I thought this was a problem. Safety cuts us off from the outside world. How do we find something unsafe? How do we explore our connection with the space? So we decided to leave the space where we met every week. We decided to enter communities, get in touch with different people, and bring our theatre to many different places, to see whether our so-called artistic creation could endure the sunshine and the crowd. We went on and started the project *Field Maneuvers (Lalian)* in 2009. Kai may have shown you some documentary footage of it. We produce one or two new plays and tour with them for one month. We take trains only, not airplanes from one city to the next. We stop, we put on the show, we leave. One tour covers 5000–8000 kilometers, 5–7 cities. We arrive at one place, put on 1–3 performances, and move on to the next place. We've done this five times since 2009. In this way, we've been to many new places. The plays were experimental and thematic small theatre pieces. We've been to Xining, Yinchuan, Neimenggu, Guiyang, and other second- and third-tier cities. All this is connected to the notion of tension in the space.

I have a question to ask. Who can tell me what politics is? After all these years of politics class. [Student Feng Taojing: human relations.] Excellent. This is also my understanding. Politics is how people connect. A suggestion or a proposal about how people should connect is a political idea. To implement it is political action.

In 2014, we made a play collectively called *World Factory (Shijie Gongchang)*. The original version of the play took around four years of research. During those

years, I spent one or two months on research every year. I traveled to different regions and countries and met a lot of people: from scholars and workers in leading-edge industries to factory owners and entrepreneurs to understand industry, industrialization, and the current conditions of workers and the factories. When these people from different social backgrounds, occupations, identities, and ages join in creation, how do we cooperate?

In the beginning, I had this belief that after a long, long time, we would come up with a unifying idea on which to build a play. Basically, it's the strategy this country adopts: to unify thoughts. If there is a good idea, at least when they think it is, our thinking need to be unified under it. Only when thoughts are unified can things be done. But when I began, I quickly realized that what's more interesting and important than a unifying concept are the different opinions that people have. These differences form one of the foundations of drama and theatre: conflict. People think differently. But how do people connect when they think differently? And how does the difference transform into a clue, into a force of the play? This seems to have become my main aim in work. Not to unify ideas but to let different opinions be, grow, and connect.

Reflecting on this, I will introduce the basic working method we have used for more than ten years since 2005. In the beginning, we believed in collective creation. We started working collectively with our first production, *38th Parallel Still Play* (*38xian Youxi*),¹ which lasted one to two years. In collective creation, we gather and discuss the issue again and again. From the discussion, we extract valuable materials and transform them into something suitable for the stage through workshops. Then we weave the materials together.

This is our method of collective creation. We did this for almost three years. In the process of collaborative creation, a problem gradually appeared. When 90 percent of the twenty people here in the room raise their hands in favor of something, it's also what people on the street will mostly agree on. The opinions that are too marginal, too radical, or too conservative are wiped away. What's left is the chaos in the middle, the mainstream. So the outcome of this collective creation is too soft. This seemed to us to be a problem. So after a year or two, I thought about changing this process. I realized that each individual had great initiative and creativity. How can we sharpen this creativity instead of blunting it in endless discussions? So on the basis of collective creation, we started individual creation—solo performance. You have an idea, then the rest of our collective helps to push forward your idea.

The Japanese theatre maker Daizo Sakurai also makes tent theatre in Beijing. Daizo has this method called “self-rehearsing.” What we do sounds similar but is

1 38th Parallel: The Military Demarcation Line (MDL) is the land border or demarcation line between North Korea and South Korea. The DMZ runs near the 38th parallel, hence the name. “Line 38” later refers to a forbidden line, for example, on the classroom table between two students.

in fact very different. In his method, the director works with you, one on one, for two or three days. The process is very private. The purpose is to incite something in the performer. By contrast, our individual creation is formed between the performer and the rest of the troupe. We use collective discussion as a basis on which we interact. But by the end, performing a solo piece is physical and personal. You need to accomplish it by yourself.

We started from collective creation. Years later, we promoted solo performance for personal development. And how do individual elements become a play and end up on the stage? This is mainly my job. My job is to reintegrate the results of collective creation and individual performances. Usually, after the first phase of creation, I have one or two weeks to form all materials into a script. Something might be developed, something reduced, something pushed further. For the final script, the question is: How to create a connection among different opinions on the same subject from different people? Me and you, we can have very contrasting views on the same issue. So what is the connection on stage under a common narrative? How to present the connection, the inner tension of different opinions to the audience? How to form the play out of the differences? So we came from collective creation to individual creation and now to what I call the comprehensive method. The status of the power relationship is clear and known by all in *Grass Stage*. It is collective creation, as a foundation, plus individuals, plus Zhao Chuan. There are three parts. And they integrate to accomplish our goal.

Have I made it clear? Any questions?

[Student Xu Li: So the collective creation incites the individuals who make their performances. Then you filter the materials and form a play on stage. Can I understand it this way?]

Not entirely. For example, most of you are the only child in the family, right? Suppose we want to tell a story about the “only child.” We discuss, which forms a foundation, meaning we understand one another’s view on the subject. And you return to your own view. What you present on stage is your view. This is what we called individual creation. As for my part, I don’t mainly do “filtering,” but connecting. You express your thought on the same subject differently than someone else; how do these ideas connect? Individuals work on their opinions, but what’s shown on stage is “we.” When “I” becomes “we,” the context is the whole society. This is my hope. “I” is not isolated. There is always a tension between “I” and “we.”

In the first couple of years of *Grass Stage*, we used many physical techniques. In the first version of *World Factory*, for example, the actors worked hard on stage, creating great tension and force. In 2006 we came to Beijing and staged the play *Madmen’s Stories (Kuangren Gushi)* in the small theatre of National Theatre Company. Tao Qingmei, a good friend of ours, came to see the show. She asked me: “Could you let them move less on stage? They move so much that it’s hard to hear what they say.” Actually, at that time, it was impossible for the actors to move less.

I could put it this way—they were excited. It's a sudden acquisition of power and a release. Most of our participants might have never thought, a few years ago, that they could be acting on stage one day, loudly speaking their thoughts and stretching out their bodies to let others realize their existence. They could not imagine it a few years earlier because they had no professional training. Some people weren't even interested in acting. But they had other interests and focuses, which led them to *Grass Stage* and onto the stage. So when they finally enter the stage, the force is spectacular.

People often, especially in academies like this, discuss the acting in a play, whether it's good acting or not. I mentioned Eugenio Barba, the European master. I had the honor of being invited to see his workshop at Shanghai Theatre Academy. He is renowned for his cross-cultural performance studies with an anthropological approach. He wrote books about how acting works, how an actor gains energy by simply standing on the stage, where the energy comes from, how the body should move to attain the strongest existence and tension. His workshop was related to this. He had invited two Brazilian performers specializing in Brazilian folk dance, one Chinese Yu Opera performer, and a dancer of Bali traditional dancing from Indonesia. The performers dressed up in traditional costumes and danced, one by one. After the performances, he commented "very beautiful" and asked if we all agree. These traditional arts, of course, contain both dancing and singing, so there was a libretto in every performance. First, they were asked to leave out the libretto by Barba. Then to leave out the costumes. They danced again with casual clothes on and no singing. He asked again: "Do you think they're beautiful? I still think they are," he answered himself.

He wished to establish some basic rules about physical movements in performances. He explained that it's this or that way of moving that makes acting work. I quite understand this approach—but there's a big problem here. When he introduced the performer as a Peking Opera actress, the performer (also a teacher in traditional opera) corrected that what she performs is not Peking Opera, but Yu Opera. Barba said to all of us: "Well, it doesn't matter, they're the same!" In our traditional opera, stories are told in the libretto. This says something about why people put it on stage in the first place. Maybe for rituals, maybe to educate. It gradually evolved into the performance it is now. The costumes are identities. *Sheng, Dan, Jing, Mo, Chou*. These roles roughly suggest the genders and social status. A man can be a general, a king or a servant, a clown, all with different costumes. When we take out the historical context and identities—you can't say you understand it without all these. I think it's impossible and rather rude. How can you understand the performance when you don't even care whether the character is male or female? It doesn't work, in my opinion. Acting, what we do on stage, is about the people. We discussed dignity and reality.

I had this substantial doubt, or even criticism about the master Barba, how he cut out all the contexts and claimed to understand the performance. I told you what our participants at *Grass Stage* thought of their occupations when they introduced themselves. None of them came to *Grass Stage* to learn acting, but most

of them start practicing and studying acting in *Grass Stage*. Their stage experiences begin here. Is this a paradox? In standard acting classes in theatre academies, actors are asked to “empty themselves,” right? We hope the freshmen can learn, through exercises, to empty themselves and open up their bodies. Then, you are brand new; you are a fairy. Who you are doesn’t really matter. You’d better not be yourself. Actors are empty vessels. The director can, at any time, pour in something new. The academies teach them, in the Stanislavsky system, for example, to attain an inner self through inner experiences. Within the Stanislavsky system are many acting techniques that help to fulfill the director’s requirements. The directors also learn the techniques to know how to let the magic happen.

Grass Stage is the opposite of this practice. I hope all participants are very clear about who they are. I hope they build a connection between the issue and themselves during the discussion, but not between the issue and their roles. Whether you live in Changping or Beijing, what is your connection to the issue? Who are you? Who are they? What are the social relationships among you? We always have this premise. The participants come to *Grass Stage* to make theatre, and they always have different motives, as small as doubts about themselves, about daily life, as big as questions about society and history. The study of acting goes along with queries into these issues and the expansion of vision. So acting comes from subjectivity and doubts, comes from the motives of queries. It’s very hypocritical how we keep telling actors to build a strong inner self while not caring about their true inner selves at all. The actual inner self lies only in the actor as a person.

The word “lively” is often used to praise an excellent imitation. “Lively”, however, should not be an adjective but an action. It means inner vitality. Acting comes from subjectivity and is a result of the motives of your queries. It is not about merely displaying yourself. This is why I like to learn acting from performance art. In performance art, everything is about exploring an issue, not performing a performance. Why do we make theatre? Not to show others our capabilities of acting, but because we have issues to discuss. This year I’ve found another approach to acting—other than performance art: acrobatics. I met this gentleman artist named Ueli Hirzel in Europe two years ago. This summer, he, Kai, and I were in France together and watched some performances. Through acrobatics, I gained a further understanding of acting: It is the actor’s challenge and adventure. Every single performance is a challenge, an adventure. Nothing is easy or simple. The energy and vitality on stage is spectacular. In 2015 and 2016, we continued to work on a new version of *World Factory*. It seemed more polished but less edgy. We have changed inside. We went deeper into the issue, worked together, and had similar experiences. As a result, however, our attitudes converged. For years, the workers’ brutal living surroundings have impacted me and the other constant participants. Presentations of *World Factory* have unconsciously transformed into giving voice to the workers. We’ve also changed from come-and-go researchers to close friends in the worker communities and have been involved in other worker campaigns elsewhere. Inside, outside, acting, prac-

ticing, these interweaving elements are changing. In this sense, for some people, life and art synchronize.

In short, the acting exercises and the creation process of *Grass Stage* are about connecting ourselves to what we wish to discuss. In *Grass Stage*, life, earlier and current work experiences, physical characteristics, behavior, and habits are all essential materials. I call it “theatre from people” (*yinren chengxi*). Above all, it’s based on a general respect for humans. Only then can one make deep intellectual inquiries and convey one’s opinions. A quick example: One participant with whom we’ve worked for three or four years has been a policeman for about twenty years. I don’t know what led him to *Grass Stage*. He loves acting. He said he wanted to study dramatic literature here at the Central Academy of Drama but failed the exam. Then he was assigned to a police school, where he stayed. So he was a student fond of acting in the police school. He had a very different eye than others. The professional eye of a twenty-year-long policeman. Cold and fierce. He participated in several plays with us, and it was very interesting. He is a drama himself. He’s afraid of height and many other things, fire, water. But he looks very strong with fierce eyes. My job is to incite everyone’s sensitivity and mobility to learn, dig, discuss or reflect upon themselves, understand and imagine, and, most importantly, seek the connection between the issue and oneself and face it truthfully. So that acting is not about knowledge anymore. Participants are subjects of action. If we think of acting as a metaphor, it might refer to how one wishes to clarify one’s relationship with the world.

The theatre that I believe in is not constituted on aesthetics but rather on ethics, which includes the goodness of the body. This goodness emerges on the path of our existence. Such an aesthetics of ethics realizes itself through practice, through an infinite approximation towards good deeds. It can never be just a copy of good values. The Good is not reproducible.

My theatre is a theatre activity with the least amount of accessible resources in today’s city life. In this almost *poor theatre*, we take the liberty to use the body, text or image, and so on, wishing to open a brand-new space to communicate ideas. For more than ten years, I have worked on this margin that has been growing under the oppression of Chinese mainstream theatre and acting techniques. Its aesthetics, therefore, are constantly returning to the most basic human needs.