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# Elephant Head on White Body: Reflexive Interculturalism in *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich*

Marcus Tan

In Scene 9 of Back to Back Theatre's *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich*, an intellectually disabled actor, Scott Price, abruptly interrupts the fictional rehearsal process involving his fellow performers, Simon Laherty, who plays a Jewish boy and Adolf Hitler, and David Woods, who plays the 'director' in the meta-narrative. Price asks a provocative question about the powers of representation in art, its unrestrained tendencies to appropriate, and the ethics of such dramaturgical actions. Referring to the company's intentions and process of staging a play, which itself is also called *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich* (hereafter *Ganesh*) Price declares his discomfort with his Australian colleagues performing as Jews, German Nazis, and Hindu gods.<sup>1</sup>

1. All actors are Australian, apart from David Woods who is English. Woods, however, emigrated to Australia in 2004.

SCOTT Not all the actors seem to understand the gravity of what they are playing.

I'm concerned. Brian's playing an Indian deity.  
Do you think that's OK?

DAVID Yeah. I think anybody can play anything.

SCOTT Really?

DAVID Isn't that what's exciting about doing what we do?

SCOTT I'm not seeing it that way.

Simon, do you comprehend what it is to represent a Jew in the Holocaust?

SIMON Fuck off Scott.

SCOTT If you mess with the Holocaust ...

DAVID You add fuel to the deniers.

SCOTT No, you will offend a lot of people.<sup>2</sup>

2. 'Ganesh Versus the Third Reich Script', in *We're People Who Do Shows: Back to Back Theatre, Performance, Politics and Visibility*, ed. by Helena Grehan and Peter Eckersall (Aberystwyth: Performance Research Books, 2013), pp. 159–96 (p. 170).

This punctilious self-consciousness about theatrical representation, appearance and (its impact on) reality is what characterises one of Back to Back Theatre's most acclaimed and provocative productions. It stimulates an interrogation of the audience's own subject positions on issues of rights and representation and rights of representation; the raw and seemingly unfiltered exchange confronts the audience with the power of performance and theatre to appropriate material from other cultures, histories, and traditions, masked as creative compulsions and given artistic sanction. *Ganesh* employs a play-within-a-play structure to dissolve the borders of fiction and reality, and in so doing reify the power of theatrical representation even as it simultaneously seeks to deconstruct it. In the 'inner' narrative, or what Helena Grehan terms the 'mythic story',<sup>3</sup> Ganesh, the famous and well-loved elephant-headed Hindu god, is sent by his mother Parvati to reclaim the ancient Sanskrit symbol of the swastika, which has since been violently appropriated by the Nazis; its subsequent meaning a blasphemous perversion of the symbol's authentic values of well-being and good luck. The swastika is also the primary symbol of Ganesh and it is a sign that expresses, in its form, the interconnection between inner and outer realities of human existence. In the mythic story, Ganesh travels across Germany and befriends Levi, a young disabled Jewish boy who has been kept alive because the infamous Schutzstaffel physician Josef Mengele finds his disabilities amusing. With Levi's help, Ganesh faces Mengele and eventually confronts Hitler to reclaim the sacred symbol. The 'outer' narrative is the 'rehearsal story' – a meta-theatrical performance of the company rehearsing for a staging of *Ganesh*.<sup>4</sup> The spectators, not expecting such autoreflexivity, become witnesses to "the fictional real" of the rehearsal process<sup>5</sup> as the actors play 'themselves' with, according to Bruce Gladwin, the artistic director of the company, many scenes and lines taken verbatim from their devised processes.<sup>6</sup> The production alternates both narratives in a self-reflexive practice where, before the audience becomes enchanted by the illusion of the mythic story, they are violently brought back to the 'reality' of the rehearsal process that in turn weaves its own illusion predicated on the dialectic of performance and 'real life'.

What results from these intersecting and irruptive narratives (the mythic and rehearsal stories) and the complex layering and interplay of appearance and reality is an acutely self-reflexive performance that is laden with political intent and embedded with textualities of power and representation that solicit spectators' deeper reflection and self-questioning. Consequently, reflexivity underscores the performance's own performativity and this reveals consciousness of the artifice of representation: *Ganesh* is a performance aware of its own fictionality and act of creating theatrical fiction; it is acutely conscious of its (mis)representation of historical, cultural, and ethnic Otherness even as it seeks to interrogate and deconstruct these processes. Placed in the interstice of these shifting tensions, the spectator becomes cognisant of his/her own act of seeing and his/her own gaze. Interweaving Hindu mythology with history, fiction, and meta-fiction, performance alongside meta-performance, the production opens an ethical space for probing theatre's attitudes towards representation, discourses of normativity, cultural appropriation, and the

3. Helena Grehan, 'Irony, Parody and Satire in *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich*', in 'We're People Who Do Shows', ed. by Grehan and Eckersall, pp. 197–208 (p. 198). I will use these terms interchangeably in the course of this article.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., p. 202.

6. See 'Vikrant Interviews Bruce Gladwin (Director, Devisor & Designer) – *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich*', *YouTube*, 3 October 2011 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARlqZ4tuOpM>> [accessed 28 May 2015].

7. Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 101.
8. Jane Goodall, 'Preface', in *We're People Who Do Shows*, ed. by Grehan and Eckersall, pp. 5–7 (p. 5).
9. See the company's website for Back to Back Theatre's production history and list of awards <<http://backtobacktheatre.com/about/performance-awards-history/>>.
10. *Ganesh* premiered at the Melbourne International Arts Festival in 2012 and has since toured extensively via festivals such as the London International Festival of Theatre in 2012, the Edinburgh International Festival, Zagreb Theatre Festival in 2014, and Festival Tokyo in 2013, among others. A full list can be found on their website <<http://backtobacktheatre.com/about/performance-awards-history/>> [accessed 12 November 2015].
11. Fiona Mackrell, '*Ganesh Versus the Third Reich*', *Arts Hub* <<http://www.artshub.com.au/news-article/reviews/all-arts/fiona-mackrell/ganesh-versus-the-third-reich-185896>> [accessed 11 May 2015].
12. Theron Schmidt, 'Acting, Disabled: Back to Back Theatre and the Politics of Appearance', in *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political*, ed. by Karen Jürs-Munby, Jerome Carroll, and Steve Giles (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 189–208 (p. 199); emphasis in original.

obligations of an audience. It fractures the binaries ontologically located in theatrical representation: performance/rehearsal; fiction/non-fiction; simulation/real; non-disabled/disabled. In its complex and layered meta-theatricality, *Ganesh* interweaves varieties of Otherness to interrogate the right of performing and speaking for (and as) the Other. It confronts attitudes inherent in theatrical representation and, in common with post-modern performance, questions how 'some representations get legitimised and authorised'.<sup>7</sup>

Based in Geelong, Australia, and founded in 1987, Back to Back Theatre has become increasingly recognised internationally due to the provocative and subversive nature of their devised works that can unsettle spectators. Composed of members who are socially defined as having an intellectual disability, and being recognised as a company that shares 'the outside experience of being excluded from the norm through being perceived as people with a disability',<sup>8</sup> Back to Back Theatre's productions have continually challenged assumptions of normativity and normality in their performance of experiences that are underrepresented in the public sphere (particularly connected with issues of disability). Having started off with community performances, the company's more prominent productions such as *Small Metal Objects* (2005) and *Food Court* (2008) have garnered positive reviews.<sup>9</sup> Funded by the Australian Government via the Australia Council for the Arts, *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich* is their most ambitious production to date and it has since travelled along the festival circuits and attained various theatre awards.<sup>10</sup>

In *Ganesh*, four of the five cast members are categorised 'disabled' when placed on the spectrum of intellectual disability. In performing as their disabled selves, the unstable frames of fiction already present in the intersections of the inner and outer narratives, and their relationships with reality, are further underscored. Such qualities in performance threaten the suspension of disbelief required by engagement in fiction because one is never quite sure the performers are 'acting' (as non-disabled actors performing disabled characters would be if cast in the same roles). One is continually led to ask 'what is [the] *real* story?'<sup>11</sup> As Theron Schmidt observes,

the reality of who they [the intellectually disabled actors] are is on display: their unusual body shapes in all their imperfections, their unique physiognomy, their blank stares. *These people are really disabled. This is what disabled people really look like.*<sup>12</sup>

*Ganesh* utilises the phenomenological presence of the disabled body to advance a politics of theatrical representation. More significantly, it exploits these spectatorial uncertainties to elicit reflective responses to the performance of Otherness.

While much can be (and has been) said about the performance of disability in *Ganesh*, this article will focus, instead, on the politics of meta-theatricality as an approach to representing cultural Otherness on stage. Such an examination necessarily entails a discussion of the politics of intercultural practice since the fictional performance of a Hindu god journeying across Nazi Germany, intersected with the performance of a

- company rehearsing for this play, framed by the reality of Back to Back Theatre as an Australian theatre company composed of white men performing these fictions, would necessarily inspire questions on assumptions, appropriations, rights, and representations. Unlike the archetypal examples of other ‘Hegemonic Intercultural Theatres’,<sup>13</sup> *Ganesh* presents a possible alternative to intercultural negotiation through its reflexive processes. Its multiple frames of reflexivity unsettle any affirmative spectatorship and provoke questions about issues of adaptation and the ethics of (and in) performance. As such, *Ganesh* performs an alternative interculturalism, one associated with Rustom Bharucha’s proposition of intercultural performance as that which interweaves aesthetics and ethics.<sup>14</sup>
13. See Daphne P. Lei, ‘Interruption, Intervention, Interculturalism: Robert Wilson’s HIT production in Taiwan’, *Theatre Journal*, 63.4 (2011), 571–86. This term will be further explicated in the next section.
14. Rustom Bharucha, ‘Hauntings of the Intercultural: Enigmas and Lessons on the Borders of Failure’, in *The Politics of Interweaving Performance Cultures: Beyond Postcolonialism*, ed. by Erika Fischer-Lichte, Torsten Jost, and Saskya Iris Jain (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 179–200 (p. 181).
15. I will use last names when referring to the actors and first names to indicate the characters they play in the outer narrative/rehearsal story.
16. ‘*Ganesh* Script’, p. 169.
17. *Ibid.*

### Elephant Head on (White) Body

On the stage, seeing and performing *Ganesh* can be an uncanny and disconcerting affair. Beyond the need to materialise, give ‘body’ to, and embody a deity, the juxtaposition of man and beast, in and as one, accentuates the strangeness. In countries where Hinduism has a following, such (re)presentations of elephant head on human body are not uncommon in images and icons. Yet the materiality of such a representation in performance underscores the visual hybridity of this probable impossibility. Earthly and divine, Ganesh always draws attention to himself. In Peter Brook’s *The Mahabharata* (1988), Ganesh’s head is regally adorned but beneath the elaborate headdress is an artifice of white plaster and painted eyes. His trunk is conspicuously narrow and short and his ears distinctly undersized. Such representations of godheads are inevitably held in comparison to existing iconographies. Purposefully or unintentionally citing and reacting to Brook’s sternly critiqued production, Brian Tilley, who plays Ganesh in *Ganesh*, wears a head that has greater verisimilitude to that of a real elephant. Here the conjoining seams of man and beast, mortal and divine, are unmasked by Tilley’s exposed and shirtless (human) torso.<sup>15</sup> This visual hybridity becomes a strategy of reflexivity consistent with the performance as Tilley makes distinct references to his own representation of oddity and performance of a god.

In Scene 8, entitled ‘Speech Impediment’, where the outer narrative or rehearsal story takes place, having just rehearsed a scene from their play, Brian, the character, looks at ‘his’ elephant trunk curiously and asks Scott if the latter thinks his ‘trunk here needs to be longer’.<sup>16</sup> Scott replies that ‘it’s a good normal size, nothing to worry about’.<sup>17</sup> The comment on the proportionality (or disproportionality) of the trunk brackets, starkly, the imperfections of representation. Materialising a Hindu deity is not only a seemingly impossible task, performing the god of the removal of obstacles can result in a performative travesty. Beneath that comical autoreflexion, the inadequacies of representation in performance and the hybridities and odd ‘couplings’ of cultures in intercultural performances are underscored and powerfully interrogated. In another example, Scene 3, performed as a dreamscape that straddles history and myth, Mengele encounters Ganesh and comments on his head: ‘Dein Kopf ist faszinierend (I am fascinated

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 162–63.

by your head). Sag, welcher Arzt hat das getan? (Tell me what doctor has done this to you?) [...] How have you an elephant head?’<sup>18</sup> The constant reference to Ganesh’s physical oddity compels one to reflect about the thorny issue of representing Otherness in performance – as gods, as (cultural, racial) Others, and as gods of Others.

This self-consciousness of Ganesh’s physical peculiarity – as a being that is both man and beast – is further amplified by the fact that, in the production, the Hindu deity is played by a Caucasian male. As a performance that questions the ethics of cultural representation and is itself ‘intercultural’, by virtue of subject matter and narrative concerns, this elephant head on white body becomes, aptly, metonymic and metaphorical of the tensions that exist in intercultural performance: Back to Back Theatre’s Ganesh speaks a South Australian accented English (even to his mother Parvati), in a low tremulous register that mimics the deep resonances of an elephant’s roar. The visual and oral–aural confrontations become a performative statement of the disconcerting ‘fusions’ in intercultural theatre. The discomfiting experience of performing an ethnically and organically ‘hybrid’ Hindu deity, as corporeal form, and spectating such an odd material phenomenon accentuates, in an autoreflexively parodic fashion, the anxieties of interculturalisms on the stage.

In ‘Interruption, Intervention, Interculturalism: Robert Wilson’s HIT Productions in Taiwan’, Daphne Lei coins the term Hegemonic Intercultural Theatre (HIT) to describe contemporary intercultural practice as ‘a specific artistic genre and state of mind that combines First World Capital and brainpower with Third World raw material and labor, and Western classical texts with Eastern performance traditions’.<sup>19</sup> Such forms of interculturalism characterise much of twentieth-century (and contemporary) practices that attempted to use art as a means of cultural ‘exchange’. Artaud’s admiration for oriental theatre and simplistic reduction of such eastern forms (specifically Balinese) as primitive ritual; Grotowski’s search for ahistorical essences; as well as Barba’s pursuit of universals in pre-expressive movements, have led to indiscriminate adaptation of Asian traditions and a removal ‘of [these] elements of performance from the social, cultural and theatrical or ritual contexts that produced them and where they produce meanings’.<sup>20</sup> These theatres participate in the ‘commodification of the “other” and thereby the perpetuation of the colonial project, in which the raw materials of the world (including its cultures and peoples) were and are grist for the colonial mill of western industry and capitalist production’.<sup>21</sup> While such means and methods of appropriation remain identical, HIT productions are further characterised by ‘[e]litism and vast capital’ equated with ‘international festivals, master directors, traditional artists with the stature of “living national treasures”, academic sponsorship, and intellectual discourse’.<sup>22</sup> This is interculturalism marked by ‘a rapacious “First World” global capitalism’<sup>23</sup> that seeks to purloin ‘the surfaces of other cultures in order to attain the greatest market share, by reaching out for the largest common denominator of mythologised cultural icons’.<sup>24</sup> Such forms of HIT, according to Lei, include the works of Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine, Robert Wilson, and Richard Schechner, and also their eastern counterparts Suzuki Tadashi, Wu Hsing Kuo, and Ong Keng Sen.

19. Lei, ‘Interruption, Intervention, Interculturalism’, p. 571.

20. Ric Knowles, *Theatre & Interculturalism* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 19.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

22. Lei, ‘Interruption, Intervention, Interculturalism’, p. 571.

23. Brian Singleton, ‘Interculturalism’, in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance*, ed. by Dennis Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 628–30 (p. 628).

24. *Ibid.*

*Ganesh* could easily be perceived as yet another HIT performance, one in which an Australian company, empowered by First World capital and sanctioned by international festivals, forages in the myths and mysticism of India for artistic material to create an intercultural narrative of universalist proportions. Enticed by the desire to not merely gaze upon disabled bodies in performance, I was also motivated by a compulsion to witness yet another western theatre company appropriating a narrative or form from ancient, 'exotic' Asia. It was the lure of scrutinising a white (disabled) man performing an elephant god, and a readiness to critique the orientalist tendencies of a (simplistic) Eurocentric story of good and evil, that led me to the Edinburgh International Festival in 2014. Yet, the production thwarted any such preconceived (mis)perceptions through its autoreflexive strategy that inspired an interrogation of my own subject position. By consistently exposing the means and methods of representation and theatrical illusion, and with the mechanics of the performance situated in these interstices, the production laid bare the callous tendencies of cultural 'borrowing', as a means to interrogate the rights of such artistic reinventions.

Such a poignant moment of reflexivity is evident in Scene 8 with Scott expressing his extreme discomfort about what the company is attempting, in particular the right to represent and perform racial and cultural Others.

25. 'Ganesh Script', p. 169. The film *King Kong* was produced in 1976 and not the 1980s as Brian mentions.
26. Richard Schechner, 'Intercultural Performance: An Introduction', *The Drama Review*, 26.2 (1982), 3-4 (p. 4).
27. Ariane Mnouchkine, 'The Theatre Is Oriental', in *The Intercultural Performance Studies Reader*, ed. by Patrice Pavis (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 93-98 (p. 95).
28. As postcolonial scholars have made clear, the 'East' is not a geographical entity but an ideological construct created as the Other to the West. It is the imagined 'Orient', as discussed in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). The west here also refers to First World, Western Europe and North America and not simply the western hemisphere. Lei adopts such a distinction in her article when she discusses HIT. See Lei, 'Interruption, Intervention, Interculturalism', p. 571, fn. 1.

SCOTT [...] Hey, I am concerned about Simon and Mark  
 BRIAN What?  
 SCOTT They have no idea about the content.  
 BRIAN What content?  
 SCOTT Simon's playing a Jew and he has no idea about Judaism. Doesn't that strike you as wrong?  
 BRIAN He looks Jewish to me.  
 SCOTT That's my point; he's been cast but has no connection to the material he's presenting.  
 BRIAN So? He looks like someone from Eastern Europe.  
 SCOTT Brian, what do you think the Hindus are going to think about us using their gods in this show?  
 BRIAN Have you seen the 1980s version of *King Kong*? When these guys took King Kong from the Island to New York City Jeff Bridges' character says we actually took their God.<sup>25</sup>

The conversation between Scott and Brian exposes the mentalities and mechanics of HITs. Specifically, it alludes to postcolonial criticisms of western intercultural theatre-makers, such as Richard Schechner who, in a 1982 issue of *The Drama Review*, notably claimed that 'the more we [...] can perform our own and other peoples' cultures the better',<sup>26</sup> or of Ariane Mnouchkine who declared that 'the theatre is oriental'.<sup>27</sup> In these declarations, western practices, sanctioned by artistic liberalism, have a seeming right to purloin eastern<sup>28</sup> performance modes and styles to create new 'fusion' forms of surface play that are consequently regarded as 'natural' artistic evolutions. Brian's reference to *King Kong* characterises the actions and attitudes of directors such as Wilson,

29. See Patrice Pavis, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*, trans. by Loren Kruger (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 1–23.

Mnouchkine, and Brook: in their intercultural works, they take the gods of Others and make them their own. The foreign east is merely, in the words of Patrice Pavis, explaining the throughflows of the intercultural process, a ‘source’ for the enrichment of the western ‘target’.<sup>29</sup> In the age of international festivals, this critique must also encompass other Asian HIT directors who use their own gods, made Other, for the consumption of the First World, often western, global spectator.

Artfully, the mythic story, or inner narrative, challenges such attitudes of appropriation by having Ganesh journey to the west to recover the sacred Sanskrit symbol. Instructed by his mother Parvati who fears that his father, Shiva the destroyer, would annihilate all of humanity, Ganesh’s mission and confrontation with the *germanischer Führer* can be read as a performative response to HIT productions, a political and aesthetic reclamation of one’s cultural and symbolic power from western imperialism. The company’s own ‘whiteness’ and the materiality of the Caucasian body, performing on behalf of Hindus, and as Hindu gods and goddesses, in a story about the repossession of a religious symbol that in turn represents cultural authority and identity, underscores the performance’s problematisation of issues of representation. The performance relentlessly interrogates its own representational authority and furthermore, makes no attempt to resolve the inextricable dilemmas of performing Otherness. In so doing, the performance compels audiences to ponder on their complicit acts of spectating the ‘exotic’.

In its meta-theatricality, the rehearsal story calls into question the simplistic (and naïve) responses of the 1980s and 1990s to cultural exchange on the stage: it discloses the ethical contentions of performing an Other’s culture, race, and religion, and does so not only by its evident framing of these issues but through a recurring parading of parody. Whenever David, the Director, performs Vishnu, he purposefully adopts a stance easily recognised and commonly seen in Indian dance forms such as Bharatanatyam and Kathak. The performativity of this popular posture – legs half-bent and open, knees and toes pointed out, along with bent arms and flat open palms facing away from the body – underscores yet again the surface appropriations of Asian forms in western intercultural theatre. Such a performativity is made salient in a rehearsal scene where the company prepares ‘new bits’ for the performance. As David attempts to both direct and act, he gets into character quickly by displaying these gestures of ‘Indianness’, in an awkwardly self-conscious fashion. Along with mimicking the artificial reverberations of his voice over the audio system, there is a heightened moment of self-reflexivity that not only triggers laughter from the audience but also compels them to witness the artifice of the rehearsal process and the cultural Otherness David is performing. Such an autoreflexive and parodic performativity inadvertently mocks similar intercultural dramaturgies that have been based on simplistic appropriations of visual forms and ‘cultural “tokenization”’.<sup>30</sup> Ironically, by engaging the audience with laughter in what is regarded as a comic act(ion), the scene elicits an afterthought of the audience’s own complicity in deriving pleasure from such trite and vacuous signifiers of ‘Indianness’.

This voyeurism is explicitly evoked in a provocative scene in the rehearsal story where David the Director confronts an ‘imagined’ audience about the gratifications derived from watching aberrations – the Other –

30. Lei, ‘Interruption, Intervention, Interculturalism’, p. 575.



- on the stage. In Scene 17, Scott insists that Mark should be removed since, having the mind of a goldfish, he ‘doesn’t understand what is fiction and what is not’.<sup>31</sup> While the rest of the cast become agitated by Scott’s insult, David exploits the situation by claiming that exciting moments in performance are derived when ‘somebody, an actor, [doesn’t] know what’s real or not’.<sup>32</sup> To exemplify this, David addresses an ‘imagined’ audience in their seats, which are, in reality, actually there. As David walks close to the edge of the stage, he turns to face the audience, stares intently at individual spectators and claims, ‘you, yeah you people, you have come here because you want to see an aquarium yeah or a zoo. You, you, have come to see a freak show, haven’t you?’<sup>33</sup> Scott reacts angrily as he believes David is referring to the rest of the cast as ‘freaks’. David justifies his provocation by claiming he is merely challenging the empty seats in front of him and demonstrating how he is ‘accusing them of being, ah, perverts [...]. Like this person sitting here, this person sitting here. You are a pervert. You have come here because you want to see a bit of freak porn.’<sup>34</sup>

31. ‘*Ganesh* Script’, p. 182.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., p. 183.

34. Ibid., pp. 183–84.

The meta-theatrical sequence punctures imagined fourth walls and distorts fiction and reality as it pulls the audience into an ethical space by compelling them to examine their own ‘perverse’ voyeurisms of the disabled body. While this scene provokes the audience to examine their own gaze of the disabled Other as possibly queer and different (as ‘freaks’), the invitation to look turns seeing into a self-conscious act. In responding to this invitation one also becomes attentive to one’s gaze towards the cultural Other. Ganesh bridges the two forms of Otherness (physical and cultural). He lies in that continuum of strangeness because he embodies both Othernesses in performance. Watching the ‘freak porn’ of disabled bodies is underscored by Ganesh’s presence as, literally, a ‘freak’, exemplified by Mengele’s curious questioning of the origins of his elephant head, earlier mentioned. When gazing at the disabled body, one is reminded of one’s gaze towards Ganesh, and vice versa. As David reproaches, the spectator is there to see the intellectually disabled body on the stage, to observe how they can ‘perform’. But they are also there to see the Other ‘freak’ of cultural difference. It was, for me, not merely the lure of these disabled bodies that was powerful here, but also the effect, consequent of this meta-theatrical sequence, of gazing at these Others performing other Others – a cultural, religious, and transcendental Other.

## The Intercultural Auteur: Director’s Theatre, Director Dictator

In critical discourses on film, auteur theory is explained as the singular creative intervention of the director that evokes an expression of the film; the vision and voice of this ‘author’ pierces through the collaborative parties and processes of film making such that the work becomes marked with his / her signature, ‘stamp[ing] his or her personality on studio products’.<sup>35</sup> First advocated by Francois Truffaut in 1954 and later developed further by other film critics such as Eric Rohmer, Jean-Luc Godard, and Andrew Sarris, the auteur theory has since been adopted by many film-makers who believe that

35. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 8th edn (China: McGraw Hill, 2008), p. 461.

a film should be an outcome of the director's absolute vision and authorial style – how a film 'looks' and 'feels', its interior meaning, must be attributable to this singular vision. While the theory has been criticised as an almost absolutist and dictatorial hegemony that disregards and belittles the creative (and imperative) roles of the screenwriter, producers, and camera crew, it has nonetheless characterised much of World Cinema as well as a significant proportion of mainstream Hollywood blockbusters.

Such a phenomenon has also defined much of western theatrical discourse from the mid-twentieth century in which the 'director's theatre' became the dominant mode of theatre-making. This was a consequence, as Hans-Thies Lehmann explains, of an 'autonomisation' of theatre and an assertion of a performance-oriented theatre (as opposed to a literature-oriented one) that would address the 'crisis of theatre' of the late nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup> The period between the late nineteenth-century 'autonomisation' and the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s saw an increasing emphasis on self-referential theatricality, as reaction to other means of representation such as photography, film, and literary forms, which further entrenched the predominance of the 'director's theatre' through such a 'retheatricalisation'.<sup>37</sup> Prominent HIT directors, such as Brook, Mnouchkine, and Wilson, belonged to this generation of the 'director's theatre' – Brook's *Titus Andronicus* (1955) was an archetype of such a theatre where 'the vision of a master metteur en scène reign[ed] supreme'.<sup>38</sup> David Selbourne describes Brook's apparent libertarianism in the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1970) as masking a more 'fundamentally authoritarian, market-centred ideology: all the energy and technical accomplishment added up to [what] was a "director-shaped commodity"'.<sup>39</sup> Such auteurial attitudes continued into these directors' intercultural experiments, that have been rightly characterised by Lei as hegemonic. As Knowles observes, it is Brook's 'assumption of power and ownership'<sup>40</sup> and his notion of theatre as an 'empty space', devoid of social and cultural predeterminants and power relationships, which led to fierce criticism of *The Mahabharata*.<sup>41</sup> Writing about Robert Wilson's collaboration with leading jingju performer Wei Hai-Ming on a Taiwanese *Oulanduo* (2009), a monodramatic adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando*, Lei describes how Wilson's oppressive, singular vision of the performance stifled the potential of an egalitarian intercultural relationship. Wilson first rejected an original script based on jingju logic and Chinese historical background, and chose to use a loose translation of Darryl Pinckney's English script instead. Where acting was concerned, subjected to his authoritarian direction and 'artistic authority', Wei was unable to express her jingju virtuosity and repertoire because Wilson demanded that 'the grammar, logic and aesthetics of jingju had to submit to the priority of lighting: stylised singing was randomly chopped up and recitative passages were needlessly repeated so as to fit the lighting's tempo'.<sup>42</sup> What resulted was a performance produced 'in rigid conformity to Wilson's intercultural formula'.<sup>43</sup> Today, the success and prominence of HIT performances are often predicated on the reputation of the director-as-artist; ticket prices are pegged to the international standing of the director and/or the global quality of a company which is, in turn, managed

36. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge), p. 50.

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 51–52.

38. John Elsom, *Post-War British Theatre Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 1981), p. 71.

39. Cited in Robert Shaughnessy, *Representing Shakespeare: England, History and the RSC* (New York: Routledge, 2013), ch. 2, n.p.

40. Knowles, *Theatre & Interculturalism*, p. 21; emphasis added.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Lei, 'Interruption, Intervention, Interculturalism', p. 577.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 575.

and directed by such an auteur. Brook's new production, an adaptation of the Kurukshtra War in *The Mahabharata*, which premiered in Singapore in November 2015, was advertised as 'Legendary Director Peter Brook's *Battlefield*' – the possessive noun markedly proclaims Brook's auteurial presence – this is Brook's battlefield, Brook's (version of) *The Mahabharata* and Brook's product.<sup>44</sup>

44. See the advertisement on the Singapore Repertory Theatre's website: 'Battlefield', *Singapore Repertory Theatre*, 2015 <<http://www.srt.com.sg/materials/186-productions/current-season/1625-peter-brook-s-battlefield.html>> [accessed 12 November 2015].

In *Ganesb*, the imperious role of the director and the phenomenon of the 'Director's Theatre' is interrogated and unmasked in the outer narrative; the rehearsal story performs the power relations inherent in any process of theatrical creation. As the rehearsal story progresses, the audience witnesses David becoming increasingly dictatorial not only in his efforts to mould the play according to his vision but also in his attempts to appease the conflicts between his actors. He instructs them on how to act, how to speak, where to move, when to listen, when to 'shut up', and, at times, employs what could be regarded as patronising sardonicism. In Scene 15, Scott, whose ethical interrogations about the company's approaches have by this point annoyed David in the extreme, expresses his dissatisfaction with David as the director:

DAVID Do you want, in your own words, to say what you've been saying to me?

SCOTT Yes, I think you have been doing a crap job directing and the show is a piece of filth.  
[...]

DAVID You said as well you feel like I'm manipulating the group.

SCOTT He's manipulating all of us.  
[...]

DAVID The question is: Do you feel you are being manipulated? Are you in control or not?

SCOTT We think he's God, but he's not.

DAVID No, I'm not God; I'm just me. Scott, have you got it off your chest now?

SCOTT Yeah, I have.

DAVID Thank you for that and I want to say thank you for sharing your true feelings with us. That's important.

And, Simon, when I say 'sharing truth' you are doing that beautifully. Yeah. That is the essence of your being, and that is special and I want to thank you for that. Brian you started us all with this idea.<sup>45</sup>

45. 'Ganesb Script', p. 180.

Throughout the meta-narrative of the rehearsal process, David is seen to impose his vision and intentions and as the play progresses, tensions between the cast and David escalate. He employs various ways to command their attention and do his bidding. At times, his contrived reassurances, praise, and acknowledgements, as seen above, are masked acts of passive aggression. Yoni Prior observes how

David 'The Director's' platitudinous comments act to reframe and sanitize the chaos and conflict that have emerged in the improvisation/debate – to subdue the combatants with anodyne affirmations of their value, and to

46. Yoni Prior, “‘Scott’s Aired a Couple of Things’”: Back to Back Theatre Rehearse *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich*, in *‘We’re People Who Do Shows’*, ed. by Grehan and Eckersall, pp. 209–17 (p. 215).
47. Ibid.
48. In a question-and-answer session in Belgium, an audience member stood up to declare that he did not believe intellectually disabled people could act. He said, ‘I don’t believe these actors are capable of creating this. I’m not convinced they made this show. I know these types of people and I don’t think they can do it.’ See Brigid Delaney, ‘*Ganesh Versus the Third Reich*: Do We Have the Right to Perform This?’, *Guardian*, 8 August 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/aug/08/ganesh-versus-third-reich-edinburgh-festival-2014>> [accessed 9 April 2015].
49. In Scene 15, for dramatic purposes, David repeatedly demands Mark, as Ganesh, say the words ‘I love you’ to Levi as the latter attempts to leap across a ravine. Mark continually refuses as he feels uncomfortable with such expressions. When Mark eventually recites them, he does so with limited conviction.
50. See Prior, “‘Scott’s Aired a Couple of Things’”, p. 216.

firmly wrest control of the moment from ‘The Actors’. His banal comments carry an infinitely subtle resonance of totalitarianism.<sup>46</sup>

In Scene 19, the climax of the play that threatens to break down the fourth wall of the meta-narrative further, the friction between Scott and David sparks a physical skirmish that ends up with the crew mutinying against their director and casting him out. Here, David attempts to rehearse a scene with Scott who is to be shot in the head by Mengele (played by David). He stands, towering over Scott, as Scott is asked to kneel in front of him. When David verbally replicates the sound of a gunshot, instead of collapsing ‘realistically’, Scott ‘spins’ on his back, launches his legs forward before falling back. This occurs several times and it infuriates David for he fails to comprehend why Scott would refuse to die more ‘realistically’. When David tries to demonstrate how it should be done, Scott retaliates and tells him to ‘go and get fucked cunt’.<sup>47</sup> The intensity of the rebellious retort enrages David who becomes physically violent with Scott; David drags Scott to the mat to demand he try his death scene yet again. As this happens, the skirmish escalates on the stage. The soundtrack shrieks with chromatic strings and heavy basal reverberations as David chases Scott across the stage while the other cast members try to hold the evidently physically superior director back. Scott’s wails and screams of distress intermixed with the soundtrack create a soundscape that shatters the fourth wall; the violence makes one wonder if this is where the mirrors between fiction, meta-fiction, and reality are broken. The ‘real’ violence and levelled framings of fiction and meta-fiction lead one to ask if one is still watching the rehearsal story or if that wall too has been smashed. The fact that non-disabled audiences, unfamiliar with the (limits of) abilities intellectually disabled people possess, and possibly not being able to recognise (or reconcile) if such actors are ‘acting’, would add to the persistent doubt about the narrative boundaries erected by the proscenium arch.<sup>48</sup>

The performance closes with no affirmative resolution; there is no fairytale ending as the mythic story alludes to. The actors revolt against David’s dictates: Mark refuses to play Hitler; Brian is unwilling to say, ‘I love you’ with conviction;<sup>49</sup> Scott vehemently denies David’s vision of a good, ‘realistic’ death, and what David believes is good acting.<sup>50</sup> In this penultimate scene, David is expelled from the set and the remaining cast abandon the production. With that irresolute ending, Ganesh seems to iterate that collaboration and cooperation, traits of a democratic creative process, are necessary in the act of producing intercultural works or any theatrical piece; the autocracy of the auteur-director spells doom for a certain kind of theatre-making.

## Reflecting (on) Reflexivity

When reflecting on Back to Back Theatre’s strategy of reflexivity, one becomes conscious that the performance that one is witnessing is itself a theatre production and its accompanying rehearsal processes have helped shape the outer narrative of the rehearsal story. In the same way that the inner narrative reflects

the outer with its patterns and processes, the outer narrative mirrors the ‘real’ processes of Back to Back Theatre’s rehearsal of *Ganesh* in ‘real-life’. In this ‘reality’ frame, the politics of staging Otherness is likewise revealed: Back to Back Theatre’s *Ganesh* is, similarly, directed by a non-disabled, intellectually and physically abled white man – Bruce Gladwin – who works with a cast of intellectually disabled Caucasian males (with the only difference being in this reality frame, there is one non-disabled actor, David Woods). The team is similarly fascinated with Hindu mythology and likewise attempts to devise a performance that is fraught with identical questions of ethical responsibility and proper representation. Viewed from this doubly meta-performative process, one can easily critique Gladwin’s production as no less hegemonic than Peter Brook’s attempts at staging *The Mahabharata* and performing Hindu gods Vishnu and Ganesh – with the materiality of white bodies as the most evident signifiers of cultural (mis)appropriation. This, however, is undoubtedly intentional as well for Gladwin as director is critiqued and interrogated through that reflexive process.

The complexity of the production compels an understanding of the performance as being located in the interstice of the tensions emerging from adversary interpretations. As metaphor, the term ‘Versus’, located in the title of the production, shoulders the dialectics that have permeated this production: real/fictional; representation/reality; theatre/real world; mythic/rehearsal; inner/outer; abled/disabled; West/East. Analysing these tensions in *Ganesh*, Chris Kohn posits that deciphering David the Director is a ‘dialectic internal process’ and one where the artist is grappling with his relationship to power and agency in a complex collaborative environment:<sup>51</sup>

The ‘intellectually able’ artist can be seen (by others or themselves) as a remover of obstacles or deva of wisdom on the one hand, or a kind of autocratic dictator on the other. Naturally, the truth lies not on one side or the other, but in the productive tension between the two.<sup>52</sup>

Likewise, asserting that *Ganesh* reifies HIT productions is a judgement that can only be predicated on the opposite, when viewed reflexively. In Scene 20 of the mythic story, Ganesh successfully reclaims the sacred symbol and requests that Parvati ‘prepare the Gulab Jaman and open the gates of heaven’.<sup>53</sup> This act of reclamation is a powerful performative utterance of the power of art to re-compose the truth-value of history. In its journeys on the international festival circuit, *Ganesh* educates audiences about the religious and historical origins of the swastika and in so doing helps erase the modern stain of the symbol marred by Nazi Germany. Its reflexive processes compel one to look at the white body performing a cultural and ethnic Other as an ethical predicament and posits no assenting view such as those that other HIT performances advocate. *Ganesh* is performed, self-consciously, as an obstacle to the idea of secure representation that even Ganesh himself would possibly find difficult to remove. As the curtain call takes place, and the audience applauds, one is led to the realisation that the play the company in the rehearsal story is attempting to stage, also called *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich*, never occurs – it remains incomplete, abandoned, and the mythic story performed in the

51. Chris Kohn in Alison Croggon, ‘Melbourne Theatre Festival Review: *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich*’, *Theatre Notes*, 7 October 2011 <<http://theatrenotes.blogspot.sg/2011/10/review-ganesh-versus-third-reich.html>> [accessed 5 June 2015].

52. Ibid.

53. ‘*Ganesh Script*’, p. 193.

inner frame is composed merely of rehearsal extracts. The reflections and reflexivities of the inner and outer narratives, and the ‘reality’ in the proscenium theatre evoke an indeterminacy and incompleteness that can be said to be the final image of this particular theatrical looking glass: representing Others is seemingly an impossibility and remains an unfinished, imperfect task. It is an impossibility that Back to Back Theatre’s *Ganesh* itself seeks to embody through its autoreflexivity.

In the state of unease created by its multiple frames of reflexivity, the politics of representation and the ethics of performing Otherness are made salient for the audience. The audience, in turn, are made distressingly aware of their own complicity, or refusal to be complicit, when witnessing the ethical issues of theatre which lie, equally, outside of theatre – of hegemonies, dictatorships, power, and spectacle. Is one merely a voyeur when injustice is performed? Does one take ‘perverse’ pleasure in gazing at the Other? Is one guilty of participating in the circulation of stereotypes reified through artistic representation? In the penultimate scene where Ganesh confronts Hitler to demand the return of the swastika, the Führer exclaims, ‘Dar Mythos zerfällt [...] Das Leben verzeiht keine Schwächen (The myth crumbles [...]. It [the swastika] will always be mine)’.<sup>54</sup> Like many of the forms, styles, and symbols of other cultures that have been ‘borrowed’ by HIT directors, and subsequently circulated on the festival market and international tours, Hitler’s strident declaration is a haunting reminder of how these alter(ed)-representations can (and have) become iconic and normative through the complicit voyeurism of, and celebratory acknowledgement by, the individual spectator. *Ganesh* makes the spectator aware of his/her unquestioning act of applause and ovation, his/her eager gaze towards Otherness, and in so doing underscores how audiences are also responsible for the acts of appropriation and circulation of plasticised cultures on the stage.

*Ganesh* compels one to assume an autoreflexive gaze as it dramaturgically distorts and dismantles the frames of theatricality, meta-theatricality, acting, ‘not-acting’, performance, and ‘real-life’. In this interstice of multiple gazes, the point of singularity between the infinite reflections of the *mise en abyme*, the production achieves its political goal to interrogate issues of

not only of who can speak, who can represent and most profoundly who can embody characters but also to how it is that spectators [read mainstream, non-disabled theatre goers, primarily] respond to a work that challenges and deconstructs preconceived categories and frames.<sup>55</sup>

Back to Back Theatre presents *Ganesh* as the possible imaginary purported by Bharucha, one that interweaves aesthetics and ethics for in its *mise en scène*, as an imaginary, the questions one leaves the auditorium with remain of greater importance than the answers absent in the performance itself.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

54. Ibid., p. 193.

55. Grehan, ‘Irony, Parody and Satire’, p. 205.