

Performing among shadows and screens: Reflections on teaching aesthetics and theatre in Southeast Asia

by

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the relationship between teaching aesthetics in theatre and engaging with performance forms as strategies of interaction within formal classroom contexts. It draws on the writer's experience of teaching theatre in contemporary Singapore, where local art forms are marginalised in relation to the Western canons, and a particular experiment using PowerPoint and the notion of *Wayang Kulit* (Shadow Puppetry). It suggests that theatre teachers need to develop an aesthetics of teaching that embodies the forms and cultural contexts that generate and inform an understanding of aesthetics and art.

Abrégé

Cet article réfléchit sur la relation entre l'enseignement de l'esthétique au théâtre et l'engagement avec des formes d'interprétation en tant que stratégies d'interaction au sein de contextes de classes formelles. Il est basé sur l'expérience de l'auteur d'enseignement du théâtre dans le Singapour contemporain, où les formes d'art locales sont marginalisées par rapport aux canons occidentaux, et une expérimentation particulière utilisant le programme PowerPoint et la notion de *Wayang Kulit* (marionnettes dans le théâtre d'ombre). Il suggère que les enseignants de théâtre doivent développer une esthétique de l'enseignement qui incarne les formes et contextes culturels qui génèrent et informent une compréhension de l'esthétique et de l'art.

Sumario

Este artículo reflexiona sobre la relación existente entre la enseñanza de estéticas en el teatro y la interacción con formas de actuación como estrategias para actuar dentro de contextos formales en las aulas de clase. El artículo se basa sobre las enseñanzas teatrales del autor en el Singapur contemporáneo, donde las formas artísticas locales son marginalizadas con relación a los cánones occidentales. El autor presenta un experimento particular usando el programa PowerPoint y la noción de *Wayang Kulit* (*Shadows Puppetry* — Sombras de Marionetas). El artículo sugiere que los educadores teatrales necesitan desarrollar una enseñanza de las estéticas que incluyan las formas y los contextos culturales que informen y establezcan un entendimiento de las estéticas y de las artes.

Author's biography

Charlene Rajendran is a Malaysian teacher, writer and theatre practitioner who currently teaches theatre in the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. She has been involved in young people's theatre since she was a teenager as a performer, director and producer, working with Janet Pillai, Malaysia's pioneer youth theatre practitioner. She gained exposure to traditional and contemporary theatre via interdisciplinary and integrated arts

processes developed by artists such as Krishen Jit, Marion D’Cruz, Leow Puay Tin and Wong Hoy Cheong, working with Five Arts Centre, Malaysia. She continues to examine improvisatory and experimental work that forges contextual fusion within a plural space. Her current research interests include the politics of difference in theatre-making, a semiotics of location in arts education, and Southeast Asian performance practice.

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Introduction

To teach theatre in contemporary urban Southeast Asia is to engage in several issues of culture, tradition, modernity and history. Rapid changes in society that have stemmed from varying levels of industrialisation, degrees of globalisation and multiple aspects of colonisation have led to interesting and complex questions about culture and identity, nationhood and memory. In that terrain, theatre offers a valuable lens through which to view and becomes a space of opportunity to review these concerns — perhaps most particularly in formal education.

In a postgraduate module that I taught recently at the National Institute of Education (NIE) in Singapore, entitled Aesthetics and Performance in Southeast Asian Theatre, I was challenged to develop a means of engaging with contextually based aesthetic discourses without becoming intimidated by the dense vocabulary that often characterises the field. I sought to find ways to talk about aesthetics in a manner that would be useful and practical to the six students who signed up for the course. Aware that most students in Singapore do not study culture formally, it was important to introduce an aesthetic of traditional and contemporary theatre forms in accessible ways while retaining a sense of the complexity that underpins their importance in the current world. This led to questions about how dialogue concerning theatre can lead to a grounded understanding of culture and context. It also created a desire to explore how aesthetics generate dialogue about the liminal spaces that exist between meaning, experience and understanding.

I perceived my role as a tertiary teacher of aesthetics to enable these students to begin a journey of aesthetic inquiry that would support their teaching of theatre and enrich their own arts practice. This included developing frameworks that would help students analyse and appreciate theatre-making — process and product — in relation to socio-political aesthetic frames. It also entailed developing a shared vocabulary that encouraged us all to become more literate in theatre practice — both contemporary and traditional.

On completion of the module, I asked the students for some feedback, and three of the six kindly responded. I refer to some of their responses in this article. (It is unfortunate that only three of the six students responded. The other three students replied to say that they were overwhelmed with work and thus could not meet the required deadline. During the module, they were not in any way disengaged from the process and participated fully. Thus I read their non-participation as simply a case of unfortunate timing.)

I was curious about how the students perceived themselves in relation to Southeast Asian aesthetics and being Singaporean. I was also interested in their responses to some of the strategies used in delivering the module components. All the respondents are qualified secondary school teachers who have had only a little experience of teaching drama, but intend to pursue it within

their profession. To avoid drawing attention to distinctions of gender and ethnicity in the responses, I name them AB, CD and EF, with AB being the oldest and EF the youngest.

The PowerPoint of doing *Wayang*

In several classrooms and lecture theatres where the PowerPoint presentation or other forms of ‘screening’ are used as ‘teaching aids’, the illumination from the projector often relegates the teacher to standing in the shadows — highlighting the information screened rather than the ideas shared and spoken. As educators, we have grown used to performing amongst shadows and screens, literally and metaphorically. Yet perhaps we forget the possibilities that avail in these spaces between.

One of these possibilities is to play with the idea that the information on the screen is simply a shadow of meaning — not definitive but suggestive; not prescriptive, but provocative. After all, a shadow is a mysterious and magical thing. Whatever its size or shape, a shadow always points to something other than itself because a shadow is created by something that intervenes, blocking rays of light. It is something standing in between yet never being seen. It simply needs a surface on which to fall, and a source of light to interrupt.

In traditional Malay and Indonesian theatre, *wayang* refers to the ‘image’ or ‘shadow’ that appears in performance. It is a difficult word to translate, as it also refers to the workings of the imagination — the notion that our perceptions and ideas are concepts that exist as non-concrete substances between the material and supernatural world. This is not unlike Plato’s idea of images from the cave, and the Indian concept of *maya*, a Sanskrit word that refers to the play of illusions which mark our perceived existence.

Wayang kulit refers in particular to shadow puppetry. *Kulit* is the word for leather or hide, from which the puppets are intricately carved. Traditionally performed after dark in the outdoors beneath an open sky, *wayang kulit* is a form that stretches across Southeast Asia, having had its origins primarily in the Indian subcontinent, with influences from China as well. It has since transformed and been adapted to local contexts, developing styles that create differences as much as they tend to be similar.

Most stories performed are taken from the Indian epics of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, but these are often reworked to reflect current concerns in the community. These are performed by a solo puppeteer called a *dalang*, a highly skilled storyteller who sits behind a translucent white screen and manipulates several puppets as he narrates each episode. He uses many voices to depict the various characters in the story. The *dalang* is also responsible for cueing the ensemble of musicians who are seated behind him on the raised stage. Between the *dalang* and the screen hangs a light source.

In common Malay parlance, *wayang* now refers to the cinema. Not surprisingly, the traditional outdoor screen for shadow puppets has become rare in most parts of Southeast Asia. In urban Southeast Asia, it has been massively overtaken by digital and electronic screens, from the television to the PC, and the palmtop to the digital billboard. Images on screens are primarily electronic light projections and very rarely made up of shadows from puppets. In dialogues about theatre in Southeast Asia, I asked students what they understood by the word *wayang*. These were the responses I got:

- *Wayang* is used in the army to mean trying to impress the boss.
- *Wayang* means flirting with someone.
- *Wayang* means Chinese Opera.
- *Wayang* means shadow.

This combination of responses is probably only possible in Singapore and parts of Malaysia — where Malay, Indian and Chinese cultures have coexisted for several centuries. It indicates an interesting evolution of a Malay word about an art form that originated in India, which over time has come to mean quite different but related things, including reference to a traditional Chinese art form. It also highlights the manner in which cultures — like languages — continue to shift and change according to the needs of community. However, this process is often difficult to quantify or describe formally, and thus suffers exclusion or marginalisation.

My attempt to draw on local forms as a resource for dialogue and not merely as content led to the use of the notion of *wayang* to generate discussions on aesthetics. The aim was to explore contextually based cultural choices in theatre by embodying some of the cultural practices. Thus I occasionally employed the simple technologies of a projector and PowerPoint software to create projections on a large screen in the teaching space, specifically The Performance Space in The Nanyang Playhouse — a teaching and performing venue at NIE. I consciously used the large screen and projected images in the dark, sometimes with a soundscape playing softly in the background to generate an atmosphere of reflection and provoke discussion among the students. My intent was to ‘perform among the shadows’ whilst allowing students to interrupt images on a large screen and thus create their own ‘performance amidst the screen and shadows’.

In this paper, I reflect on how that simple device led to enriched insights on culture and aesthetics for the group. In exploring ‘uncommon yet local’ forms of theatre via ‘common yet foreign’ teaching tools such as the projector and PowerPoint, inaccessibility and unfamiliarity were reduced. Also, the dialogues that drew on the experiences and stories of the students established incentives for critique and skills to appreciate the value of local cultures in an increasingly globalising world that strives to minimise local particularities through hegemonic cultural production. Teaching theatre in Singapore, an economically affluent but culturally impoverished society, has made me more aware of the need to create opportunities in which students are led to their own excavations of history and tradition by making simple links with contemporary culture. Despite being located in ‘the East’, students here are more often aware of the ‘ever-present West’. This raises issues about how to make theatre that resonates in an environment which is partial to the electronic screen when it would perhaps derive much pleasure and benefit from engaging with the screen of live shadows as well.

Teaching theatre in urban Southeast Asia: The politics of context

Formal education in Southeast Asia is plural and diverse. Several systems operate in each nation, according to history, economic status and location. Most government schools are funded by the state, and thus promote a notion of ‘national’ culture and values within a ‘national’ curriculum. Teachers are trained within a system that is based primarily on a system of schooling that emerged during the colonial period in nations such as Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines. Hence formal education in most parts of Southeast Asia has been directly influenced by colonial powers. This has meant that the form and content of schools has been modelled on

non-indigenous systems that were established during colonial rule and continued to gain prominence post-independence. This, sadly, has led to the marginalisation of local forms of ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’, and consequently to a lower status accorded to ‘vernacular’ knowledges.

Post-independence, neo-colonial governments have continued to reinforce the values of the dominant world order in their race to attain progress and achieve ranking as developed nations — to shed the ‘Third World’ label that reduces their attractiveness. In the name of nationalism, histories have been written and rewritten to demonise colonial powers, yet the imperialist forces of global economy continue to be allowed to exercise their swords in the social systems that effectively feed the rich and enslave the poor.

Living in postcolonial modernising and cosmopolitan societies often means knowing more about the politics and history, the culture and artistry of the ‘outside’ world than about one’s ‘inside’ traditions. Hence the process of constructing a grounded and decolonised identity entails unlearning and reworking some of the categories and values that have been embedded in the formal education system. Unwittingly, subjects of a colonial past ‘learn’ that what is of value is what is validated by the seats of foreign power that bestow prestige and status to the works of art that are included in the syllabus, be they literature, visual art, music or drama.

Local art works have only recently been seen to be of equal worth and value to a local public. Not being accorded world recognition, these works — particularly in small nations where the traditional arts have often been relegated to heritage sites that perform the task of being preservers of culture and attractions for tourists — occupy an in-between space that is marginalised by both the contemporary aesthetics of the international market, and the more established network of the local arts mafia.

So to develop an aesthetic for local arts is to acknowledge there is no canon, and thus there is no unifying criteria of evaluation that applies. This destabilises outdated but prevalent notions of education that cling to unitary narratives and explanations. Despite belonging to a post-structuralist postmodern world, formal education still operates largely along conservative, modernist paradigms of positivist truth. Thus local aesthetics, which is little researched and documented as a discipline, suffers the ambiguities of being evasive and inexplicable — and is thus rendered inadmissible in ‘formal’ contexts.

In this environment, I believe arts educators would be empowered with greater agency if they developed an aesthetic of their own teaching which is informed by skills of local artistry and the techniques of indigenous creativity. This would contribute to a grounded theory of knowledge and inquiry. Theatre teachers in particular need to enact and embody local cultural practices in order to make learning relevant, resonant and culturally dynamic within an increasingly globalised world that seeks to homogenise through hegemony. As Arjun Appadurai (1996) rightly points out, ‘global flows are contested by localized counter-flows’, and within the profession of teaching there is potent opportunity for teachers, and thus students, to counter the unsavoury effects of homogeneity through simply engaging in local knowledges that add currency and curiosity to learning.

Engaging the self through aesthetics: A discourse of theatre and identity

Aesthetics, as thoughtful taste, relate to identity and socio-political frames of power and validity. A ‘grounded aesthetic’ (Willis, 1990) must be informed by a historicised understanding of context to empower people with a sense of their roots. Who we are is linked to the telling of our stories as well as the performing of our power and priorities. The discourse of aesthetics — in their demystified form — provides a powerful space within which teachers and students can explore and learn about:

- the vocabularies and structures that construct culture;
- the politics and histories of a cultural environment; and
- the value of sensuous and affective experience.

But first aesthetics need to be demystified. They have to be extricated from the European tradition of a Kantian sublime that tends to suggest a circularity of argument and they need to be released from the elitism of cultural institutions that sanction only certain canons of artistic production. Aesthetics need to be recognised as a discourse that entails more than just criteria and classification, referencing time and again the power centres of the hegemony.

Ellen Dissenayake (1988, 1990) looks at art-making from an ethological or behavioural point of view. She notes that all human societies have demonstrated artistic production and that human beings as a species, seem to *need* to produce art — not just for instrumental reasons, but for intrinsic ones as well. This is not merely to embellish or enhance life, but to contribute towards survival and quality of living. Her argument locates art-making processes as equivalent to learning languages and fashioning tools. This places art-making on par with these aspects of formal education that are seen as necessary and central in comprehending and dealing with society.

She also defines art-making as a behaviour, and not a product, which develops thinking, feeling and engaging — albeit in different ways, dependent on culture, environment and history. In this way, she identifies what is artistic about art as the process of ‘making special’, which includes attention to form or shape (e.g. rhythm, repetition, balance and verisimilitude) as well as content or story (e.g. image, sound, narrative, history).

In conjunction with this idea of ‘making special’, I also want to suggest that it is equally important to ‘make ordinary’ the often intimidating vocabularies within which aesthetic discourse occurs — an idea that evolved in a conversation with drama educator Professor John O’Toole, about the aesthetics of teaching. I think we can do this by simply drawing attention to what is common and accessible, and then discussing these in ways that give value to their presence and layers of symbolic meaning.

An obvious starting point is the construct of self and the function of identity in the politics of theatre. Theatre as an interpretive activity is also a sensuous medium that draws on critical and conscious engagement to elicit thought and emotion. The sense of self becomes even more important in processing performances that resonate deeply with tacit knowledge and cultural memory. This affects choices for making and consuming theatre, whilst reflecting perspectives and prejudices in evaluating their worth.

With the three respondents, it became clear that a sense of theatre was variously moderated through a sense of identity. AB deals with identity as a dichotomy of the body and mind/spirit, reflecting a fairly pragmatic materialist notion in the politics of being Singaporean:

Being a Singaporean gives me a sense of security and stability. In terms of being a creature of comfort and economic benefits, I've a lot to be thankful for. However, in terms of the inner soul or the intangibles that concern the heart, there is a discernible sense of sterility, lacking in warmth and depth. This could possibly be the way things are done here: with sterile deliberation and quick fix-it solutions. (AB)

Significantly, AB values the less materialistic aspects of cultures in the region and appears to be akin to its traditional sensibility, signalling a desire for more 'soul' in Singapore:

Theatre in Southeast Asia is characterised by a great sense of history and very much associated with the traditional. The common elements found in the theatre in Southeast Asia give an impression that the different countries are part of a greater whole — similar yet different ... The traditional is valuable for its sense of 'drama', a certain degree of grandeur, a strong sense of ritual and strong exaggerated movement. (AB)

In contrast, CD refers to identity within a gravitas of location that stems from formal education and the study of official history:

What does it mean to be Singaporean? It's first and foremost an attachment to the land — to this little lump of earth called Temasek. From school, I get the idea (mostly from authorities) of a deep struggle that because we are just a negligible red dot, we have to work extra hard in everything we do, leading to the kiasu (fear of lack) characteristic that is often associated to being Singaporean. But I don't identify with that kiasuism or feeling we are just a lump of insignificant earth. I think being Singaporean has to do with destiny — that sense of higher calling. (CD)

However, CD's strong sense of being Singaporean does not reduce the struggle encountered when trying to bridge the gap between cultures that are seemingly local but in fact feel more 'foreign':

Theatre and society in Southeast Asia? I am sorry to say that I don't know a lot. I was able to train in ballet and classical European music, which allows me to identify better with those traditions. As a girl, I felt alienated from Chinese Opera for instance. Pretty splashes of colour no doubt but noisy clanging of cymbals that was more like cacophony to my ears. I was afraid of wayang kulit and those scary shadows played out on the screen ... The study of SEA history in school left me with fuzzy ideas of poverty, struggle and oppression — realities that are sorrowful but distant from my life. Funny how SEA can be so near and yet so far. I know the theatre of SEA will allow me to understand the people and culture better but the effort is huge and the linguistic barrier is daunting. (CD)

Alternatively, EF engages with theatre as a more fluid culturescape and senses the challenge of its survival in an increasingly mediatised society:

With the Singapore media's past and present portrayal of theatre and staged art forms (i.e. dance, performance arts) as something unknown and mystical, sometimes even

offensive and banned, it has shaped the Singaporean psyche that theatre either means a part of the elite or part of the marginalised ... Theatre has not been a big part of my growing up experience, and I only stumbled upon it quite by accident during my late teens but its power has transformed my outlook on it as well as its place in society. (EF)

Theatre for EF is viewed as a site for retrieval and restoration, which enables an ongoing dialogical connection between the present and the past, the local and the global:

I am more interested in the contemporary forms of theatre which explore the shifting cultural landscape in Southeast Asia. Those that are able to excavate the value of our traditional past and help the audience make sense of its value in society, what it means to us, where it is going and how we can still 'own' it as part of our identity would hold particular interest for me. (EF)

The three respondents indicate diverse means of negotiating local cultures in relation to their identity and their perspectives on theatre. This reflects the socioscape that needs to be taken into consideration when developing dialogues on theatre and aesthetics. It also provides the starting point from which to forge a space for aesthetic discourse.

Developing the dialogue through shadows: A screening of ideas and images

Formal education has become increasingly about information and competition, reducing the place of ideas and imagination to a secondary role. There is little room for feeling and sensing. Despite the rhetoric of creativity and innovation, assessments are still largely about regurgitation and reproduction, with little opportunity for reinvention and interrogation. Arts education is perhaps one struggling alternative. Thus, amidst learning environments which are becoming increasingly depersonalised and indifferent, I sought to create a space where students could become engaged with the material we were examining whilst relating these ideas to their memory, experience and cultural values.


My intention during each session was to create a 'safe and challenging space' for dialogue about theatre and aesthetics that would lead to what Paul Willis (1990) calls a 'grounded aesthetic' — in which 'Style and Content evolve from the ideas and experiences of the participants and where meaning is attributed to symbols and practices that are derived from the process that is resonant for participants'. It was important to connect the notions of aesthetics with the context and the concerns of the students involved.

In a few classes, I projected a series of slides using PowerPoint on to the large cyclorama screen and requested that the students construct dialogues that arose from the images and texts used. The images ranged from stills of traditional and contemporary performances to current popular images of Singapore and Southeast Asia (see slides). The texts included questions about the self, culture and art as well as quotes from theoreticians writing on aesthetics. Some of these images were repeated in different sessions and overlaid with varied texts, to recast how and what they had come to mean. Students were free to move between the projector and the screen (thus creating shadows as they did) or to move behind the screen and around the space. I remained in the background, outside their view, and chose to be only a listener in the conversation. The slides shown here provide an example of the kinds of images and texts used. Due to copyright reasons, in this selection I have only used images shot by myself and thus excluded images taken from

books, journals and online resources of traditional and contemporary Southeast Asian performances.



an-aesthetic




Beauty is no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them, and each mind perceives a different beauty. (D.Hume)




making judgments about 'good' art

THIS CAN BE VERY DISTURBING AND DIFFICULT TO DO... why?

- Art is dependent on ..
- Taste is ...

One obvious cause why many may feel not the proper sentiment of beauty is the want of that delicacy of imagination which is requisite to convey a sensibility of those finer emotions. (D.Hume)

Isn't she lovely?
(S. Wonder)

- How we process art...





In some ways, I began to play the role of the *dalang* — who in traditional terms is not only a storyteller but a shaman, healer, educator and performer. In the selection of material (images and texts), as well as the sequencing and choice of animation on screen, I steered their thoughts and used my position as ‘teacher’ to elicit their participation with the screen by asking them to ‘voice’ their views. In some ways, the students were my ‘puppets’ but with voices of their own, and the shadows they created were the ideological constructs of their worlds. I facilitated their discussion but they responded through their own insight and interest.

In other ways, the process also allowed for the students to become their own *dalangs* — playing with the images and ideas they were ‘screening’ and the ensuing ‘shadows’ of meaning they intended to produce, playing with the light and spoken or physical interventions as a performative pedagogy of their own making. This provided an opportunity for us as a group to gain contextual literacy and cultural insight — informed by multiple voices and diverse experiences.

In response to how this particular kind of work impacted on the study of aesthetics, the respondents analysed what they encountered and how they processed the experience:

The screen and the images provided a mirror which flushed out our initially inhibited sense of aesthetics about things old and new. It also triggered within me a deeper sense of space and time that filled the relatively empty playhouse, for I could see my ancestors, my parents, my country, my culture, my experiences, etc. ... all standing behind my pair of eyes as I filled my mind with those images. (EF)

Immersing us in darkness and having the projected image on the big screen created a great sense of isolation for me — it was just the image and I. Hence all the senses were heightened and keener, and responding in the dark felt much more spontaneous. We were reacting and responding from the gut, not quite an intellectual foray in the bright light of rationality. Yet the big screen had the ability to draw you in and make you part of the image whilst keeping a wide-angle perspective of a detached observer looking in. (AB)

I think those sessions were wonderfully composed and are art pieces in themselves — honestly. You drew responses that were deep within us without lecturing ... Those pictures brought the distant past closer somehow and they evoked nostalgia in me. (CD)

The common thread that runs between these responses is a sense of personal engagement, which generated a range of aesthetic links and personal connections that stemmed from an experience of being both emotionally and aesthetically engaged. Aesthetics in this sense became about the tale of taste and thought. It was about giving value to the sensuous and felt — particularly important in theatre education, which emphasises enactment and embodiment.

One of my intentions in creating an ‘aesthetic dialogue’, and not merely a dialogue on aesthetics, was to become more reflexive in the process of ‘teaching theatre’. To facilitate this dialogue, I realised how much more I needed to be conscious of the aesthetics of my own teaching — to forge teaching as an art form and to develop its potential as a performing art. The *dalang* is skilled not only in performing stories, but in communicating ideas that enable audiences to rethink their world and consider options. This is education in the best sense of the word. How do we become better *dalangs* as we attempt to teach theatre? We cannot but be reflexive, as the very thing we discuss often occurs while we discuss it — for, even as we create dialogue for theatre as performance, we perform a theatre of education.

As theatre educators, we contribute to aesthetic literacy by facilitating processes through which students become proficient in an understanding of how and why some theatre works are regarded as they are — why some have greater value and others are more central. The ability to recognise cultural and political factors that influence taste and choice is critical. The task is not to tell students what to choose, but to highlight why art works are not ‘naturally’ beautiful or artistic. They come to be so through intention and selection — an ongoing negotiation between art-makers and art consumers.

To the three respondents, it appears that a combination of aesthetics as a discourse that empowers arts appreciation through vocabulary, as well as an inquiry that engenders insight into culture and history, was what mattered:

The discourses on what is beauty, the standard of beauty, definition of art. I find these concepts useful, though difficult to grasp. I am then equipped with that bit of vocabulary to think and engage in an aesthetic discourse, a weak attempt at academic gymnastics. On a more serious note, the course makes me more conscious and thinks of what shapes my aesthetic preferences. An ability to follow a discourse can also heighten my aesthetic experience. (AB)

What I found out was that behind the aesthetics or beauty that is manifested are the deep-rooted needs of people. They don't dance, for instance, simply because they are happy. They dance because they are dancing for their gods, and there's a commitment that binds them to the discipline. (CD)

The various forms, objects and symbols, rituals and performances of everyday life around me took on a new significance and I began to think about how they have come about. Who chose them and why? What significance do they hold? Other than functionality, why do things look the way they do? (EF)

Conclusion

In a Southeast Asian context — particularly in urban spaces that are constantly under threat of being subsumed under globalised Westernisation, cultural exoticism or nostalgic traditionalism

— arts educators need to reclaim a sense of aesthetics by articulating it in ways that are convincing and clear. We need to think about the naming processes that inform our philosophy and practice. This need not be done in fancy terms, but it needs to be thought through and consciously analysed from a sensuous and intellectual point of view.

It is not an easy space, as the weight of classical aesthetics — be it from the East or the West, North or South — seeks to validate its own. These tend to apply to more ‘pure’ expressions of form. But when fusions and integrations occur, there is a struggle to come to terms with the change and the difference that ensues. Interculturalism is no longer new, but it still gets awkward reactions from those who purport to know what good art is meant to be.

In this paper, I have indicated that, as theatre educators, we perform between shadows and screens in an increasingly digitised culture. However, within that space I think we have options of how to rework the meaning of these projections and shadows, to reclaim their relevance to us and how they may come to collaborate with us and how we can be *dalangs* of aesthetic dialogue. This has provoked me to consider using similar strategies in other modules that I teach, where aesthetics may not be a central concern but is implicitly referred to.

I suggest that art-making, as a behaviour of ‘making special’, enables us to dwell on sensuous activity whilst intellectually processing ideas and experiences. This gives us a deepened understanding of culture and equips us with a better sense of how to deal with change. It prods me to think about how we can make the screen signify something other than the digital world in order to resist the dominance that prevails.

Finally, I link how aesthetic discourse — the vocabularies and structures of thinking — provides useful scaffolding on which to build informed and historicised interpretations of art-making processes and art works as well. Theatre is just one of the arts that does this but, because it is the most inclusive, it threads most succinctly the symbolic representations that embody a sense of self and society woven within an aesthetic.

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