

2023 ITI Research Project Year End Report
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This report will attempt to encapsulate, from a research perspective, the work done in ITI in 2023. It will highlight the milestones achieved by students and the faculty in both training and performance.

Last year presented the first real opportunity to return to the pre-pandemic norms and standards of studio work and class delivery. It also afforded us the possibility of fulfilling without compromise the aims of ITI training set out in the founding vision. The work in 2023 also doubled down on some of the paradigmatic tenets of intercultural practice in ITI. These being Flexibility, Translation and Distance¹

ITI's primary aim is to train professional actors and performers capable of working in a range of Contemporary Theatre genres and forms. To this end it conducts research to monitor and develop its comprehensive, systematic contemporary actor training programme. The ITI programme combines classical Asian theatre traditions with modern and contemporary theatre practices; emphasising active, practical modalities of studio work without neglecting theory underpinning the field.

A fundamental premise is that current training of contemporary actors must draw from the available craft, techniques and formal grace of traditional theatre forms. The idea is to understand these formal traditions through deep, intensive immersions guided by master teachers, and work off the experiential knowledge gained to create original contemporary theatre. In ITI the process of recombining traditions and repurposing them for contemporary theatre practice takes place in an intercultural crucible stoked by fires of critical understanding.

The Return of Noh

At the start of 2023 we welcomed back to ITI the Noh master teachers Kanze Yoshimasa

¹ INTERCULTURAL ACTING AND PERFORMER TRAINING. 2019. Ed. Phillip Zarrilli, T. Sasitharan, and Anuradha Kapur. Oxon: Routledge.

(観世喜正) and Kuwata Takashi (桑田貴志), after four years. Yoshimasa Sensei rejected all attempts to teach Noh over Zoom during the pandemic years.

Simultaneous Japanese-English-Japanese translation for all the Noh classes was provided by Ms Mio Nakano. The process of translation, generally speaking, is an integral part of intercultural actor training in ITI. This is an aspect of teaching technique which goes beyond that of just verbal language, although that is certainly important in a context of working with international faculty and students.

As Indian theatre scholar Prof Anuradha Kapur points out, “Translation makes mobile performance grammars and repurposes them for different needs and contexts. The body bears these changing grammars.”² This goes to the heart of ITI training, where students are actively taught to translate what they’ve learned from the traditional forms to contemporary theatre and performance through the Post Modular Labs (PML) and Final Year Individual Project (FYIP). We look more closely at PML, FYIP and translation later.

After nine weeks of intensive Noh training, ITI students, including returning graduates from the class of 2022, and visiting students from the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) presented Shimai (仕舞) and excerpted segments from Noh plays including *Chikubushima*, *Kantan*, and *Momijigari*.



Students preparing for Noh presentation



Senseis Kanze Yoshimasa and Kuwata Takashi (centre) with the ITI students at *An Evening of Noh*

² Ibid, 9.

The presentation of students' work for, entitled *An Evening of Noh*, was held on 15 Mar 2023 at the Goodman Arts Centre. In his opening address of the event ITI Director, T. Sasitharan said:

“If you are wondering why in ITI we take such pains to try and recover traditional theatre, it’s because it makes a huge difference to the practice and the working of a contemporary actor. The simple truth is that traditional theatres like Noh are a compression of understanding and knowledge about performance which simply cannot be replicated today.”³

Interculturality, Translation and PML

Interculturality, a brute fact of Singaporean life for centuries, is also the norm that organises theatrical consciousness and identity here. Therefore, the question is not why an understanding of the intercultural is essential to actor training, but how teaching actor training can even be possible unless it is intercultural.

The terms “intercultural” and “interculturalism” have been associated with theatre practice and performance for more than 50 years and have long since been accepted as part of the theoretical and descriptive framework by practitioners, critics, and audiences. US performance theorist Prof Richard Schechner first used the terms to differentiate local or regional theatre practice from “international,” or “trans-national” theatre work. “Intercultural” was then used to refer specifically to theatre work produced by the meetings or collaborations of artists identifying with different geographies or cultures.

In subsequent nuances, “interculturalism” came to refer to a way of working with (or working out) differences. Primarily to processes of working, to praxis principally and not product. There is a deliberate shift of the focus from the obvious and highly visible aspects of production to microlevel of the training grounds, studio, and/or rehearsal room where face-to-face/body-to-body/consciousness-to-consciousness transactions ‘between’ are taking place.⁴

Undeniably, “interculturalism” implies a tension between identifying and recognising differences on the one hand and seeking commonality on the other. Differences must be acknowledged first

³ Edited excerpts of *An Evening of Noh*, including the post-show dialogue, can be viewed [here](#). Programme notes [here](#).

⁴ INTERCULTURAL ACTING AND PERFORMER TRAINING. 2019. Ed. Phillip Zarrilli, T. Sasitharan, and Anuradha Kapur. Oxon: Routledge.

so that the “Other” can be named as “culture,”. A transcendence of difference must then be found through the working process to enable the creative interaction that results in new theatre work.⁵

What is the working process and how does it work? In ITI the process consists of the translation and transcription of the “mobile performance grammars” of the traditional forms onto the student’s body. The experientially intensive immersion of students in the four traditional theatre forms (Noh, Beijing Opera, Kutiyattam and Wayang Wong), cultivate, engender, perhaps provoke the awakening of a “historical sense”; T. S. Eliot’s claim that the artist must possess this imaginative capacity to sense the deep timelessness that permeates all mutable realities in history.⁶

The “historical sense”, this sense of “timelessness within temporality”, is clearly an act of the imagination - the possibility of eternity palpable in the present. A sense that is instantly apprehensible in all great works of art - poetry, painting, sculpture, music or theatre. The ITI curriculum is predicated on the notion that contemporary theatre is no different. To produce great works of contemporary theatre the actor must have the “historical sense”.

The student trains daily and learns, gains by great labour, through constant repetition and sometimes through conflicting, concurrent exercises. The practical, immersive, experiential, intensive physical work of traditional theatre is juxtaposed with deep training in contemporary acting techniques, disciplined, rigorous, systematic training in craft and technical skills like Voice and Speech, Movement, Mask Work, Corporeal Mime and para-theatrical bodily disciplines like Taiji, Yoga and *kalarippayattu*.⁷

The recombination of these variegated elements in the body of the students enables the translation of the traditional form; ancient mobile performance grammars are gradually repurposed for different needs and contemporary contexts.⁸ The process is grounded in the

⁵ Intercultural Expectations I La Galigo in Singapore by Jennifer Lindsay; TDR: The Drama Review 51:2 (T194) Summer 2007.

⁶ T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921), 43.

⁷ *Kalarippayattu* is the traditional martial art of Kerala in South India, circa 10th Century CE.

⁸ Intercultural Theatre Institute: Dialogue of Forms; 26m showreel on Immersions in Theatre Traditions [here](#).

performative and situated in both the doing and the being. It is exhaustively experiential and existential, as in both “being in” and “doing of” bounded by a fixed space-and-time matrix. There is thus a radical corporeality (Kantian sense) to the ITI process, recalling Toni Morrison’s “the body as the real and final home.”⁹

The treasures of this process are first revealed in the Post Modular Lab (PML) and Final Year Individual Project (FYIP). While it is compulsory for students to participate in both modules, the work is ungraded and is factored in the awarding of the diploma. It is also entirely student initiated and driven with teachers acting only as mentors or guides.



Final Year Individual Project (FYIP) 2023: (from left to right) Cheng Kam Yiu (Yolanda) and Abinaya Jothi

The PMLs happen during the terms following the teaching of a traditional form (Terms 2, 4, 6 and 8) in the first two years, and FYIPs in the Third and final year. For PMLs students create and show, in camera, a six-minute performance of an original contemporary work they make over 9 weekly 2.5 hourly sessions consisting of devising, improvisation, writing and rehearsal work of materials drawn from their personal experience of the traditional form. Students receive summative and formative reviews, critiques and feedback during the making and showing.

⁹ Hassan, Ihab (2008) “Literary Theory in an Age of Globalization.” *Philosophy and Literature*, © 2008, 32: 2

Over two years the outcomes of PML feed into FYIP, which happens over a 7 or 8 week period of 4 or 5 hour sessions of devising, improvisation, writing and rehearsals intended to produce a 20 minute original, public performance for Singapore audiences.

PML and FYIP are structured, supported scaffolds for training, offering each student the possibility of recombining the traditional with the contemporary, the past with the present and discovering techniques to transcend differences in culture, form, language and technique. They offer, in other words, the possibility of making original, contemporary art. It is no wonder then, that every new ITI student starts thinking about his or her FYIP work from the first day of school.¹⁰

Coda

Each ITI student embarks on a personal journey of discovery through and among forms. The journey is never teleological. The end is not known, not even determined. There is nothing like an already composed or built up conclusion to be found. No right answers or correct destinations. The meaning of destination, in terms of training and in terms of practice, needs to be spun around and reorientated.

There is no escalation of skills but contradiction, resistance, traction and chaos. Cognitive dissonance impels a student to cover the distance between forms through her own body and in her own exceptional way. There is no model journey nor is there a predestined endpoint. The journey is the destination.

¹⁰ Programme notes for FYIP 2023 are [here](#).



Final Year Production 1: *The Chair* directed by Li Xie and performed by the graduating cohort of 2023 (photo by Bernie Ng)



Final Year Production 2: *Fall* and *The Music Lovers* directed by Aarne Neeme (photos by Bernie Ng)

The destination is the body-mind of the actor, reached over time spent in the continuous, repetitive, fully committed practice of specific actions, movements, tasks and presences as demanded by a particular form. As Phillip Zarrilli puts it, the experience of specific practices, like the skilled playing of a sport, or acting, or the soldier's execution of drill on a parade square, acquires content regarding the possibilities for action¹¹:

“The actor engaged in certain forms of training builds a repertoire of sensorimotor skills that afford various possibilities of action within the theatrical environment. There is the potential affordance available within forms of training per se as these forms generate a particular kind of Awareness or raise one's energy; however, the forms also exist with a second set of affordances—those for application, namely, the ability to apply one's energy/awareness to multiple performance structures or dramaturgies.”¹²

Each of the four theatre traditional forms taught in ITI are embedded in singular, specific worlds containing paradigms of expression and representation anchored in the body of the actor in a precise and specific manner. These paradigms, seen in the contexts and their own intricate aesthetics, remain significant and relevant by way of rigour and precision, system and discipline, commingling of rationality and emotion, technique and commitment, and humility and grace, to working actors today.

The rub though is to find a key; a reliable way of unlocking or unpacking these monolithic forms so that the actor may plumb, select and draw on the elements — perhaps gesture, voice, movement, expression, rhythm, breath, presentational style, dramaturgy or line — which may be recombined and re-presented according to the needs and customs of their own communities, locales, situations or contexts.

After 24 years of ITI work, we know the key is not to be found in any single form, teacher or director, nor in some acting manual, treatise, precept, tenet or formula.

¹¹ Phillip B. Zarrilli, “An Enactive Approach to Understanding Acting”, *Theatre Journal* 59 (2007) 635–647 ©2008 by The Johns Hopkins University Press.

¹² *Ibid.*

The key is ascesis. A life-long way of being and doing; the actor's craft steeped in precision, discipline, rigour and practice. The key is ascesis yoked to a personality dedicated to the demands of theatre, capable of marshalling the imagination in the service of transforming the culture of a society to bequeath art.

T. Sasitharan
1 February 2024.