

Presentation for ADSA conference. Sydney 2015

My work in the last ten years has been concentrated around developing research by practice to create a rehearsal praxis which utilizes the cultural context of the performer in training and production. Discriminatory and marginalizing ideologies and behaviours mean that for many the theatre remains an elitist and difficult world to penetrate. I believe practice can effect change. My presentation outlines briefly my observations and work in this field and talks through key points of my methodology through two excerpts of a master class that I conducted in 2013 via video conferencing with six NIDA students and four industry professionals in the UK.

It is my contention that many training courses and rehearsal room practices ignore and disavow rather than engage with the cultural context of the actor. I have observed that it is the culture of these environments and their pedagogical frameworks that are not always in step with the needs of the Indigenous or diasporic heritage actor. Actors from these backgrounds can often find themselves at a disadvantage where a more nuanced and subtle negotiation around issues of culture and identity is required in order for them to do their best work.

Negotiations can be fraught where there is a lack of understanding around how to navigate difference in a rehearsal room and I have been working on a methodology that opens up a space where the nuance, breadth and complexity of each individual can be fully explored, and as a result act as a dramaturgy of its own.

My work is as an intracultural practice which uses the cultural context of the performer as the catalyst to help actors work experientially and I refer to it more as an embodiment of a theory of selfhood rather than a science of acting.

Intracultural is a word coined by the Indian academic and practitioner Rustom Bharucha. Bharucha coined this word as he sought to differentiate intercultural relations across national boundaries, and the intracultural dynamics between and across specific communities and regions within the boundaries of the nation state. Bharucha's intracultural enquiry began when he asked the question "how could one presume to talk about interculturalism, when one had not begun to encounter the diverse social and ethnic communities inhabiting one's own public space?"

Bharucha's intracultural is in opposition to the intercultural approach which he says erases all distinction through an assumption of a shared universality. Bharucha argues that:

In the empty space of the *intercultural* meeting ground, which assumes the point zero of an authentic first contact between essential human beings, there is a total erasure of the participant's ethnicities in favour of their universal human identities, creativities and potentialities. The *interculturalist* is above ethnicity; he/she is always already human. And therefore he/she can afford to propose universality for all, cast in an invariably white, patriarchal, heterosexist image.

(Bharucha, R. 2000 p.35)

I have been greatly influenced by Bharucha and his theoretical position is reflected in the critical points of my methodology which are:

1. The establishment of the culture and language of the rehearsal room and the imparting of an understanding of praxis which means:

- tackling cultural contexts head on by using very straightforward language in conversations around culture and context.
- assisting the actor in their understanding of the value of using themselves and their particularities and cultural and historical narratives in the crafting of work for performance.
- bringing to the actor's attention that an intracultural approach contests the centre which in turn creates the possibility of new narratives being born out of the interplay of the intracultural dynamics of the rehearsal room.
- giving confidence to the actor by helping their understanding that in intracultural practice the process begins with the actor and not the text or a notion of character .
- Demonstrating my own understanding of the issues involved and developing language that can speak to concerns from the actors.

2. The application of working intraculturally on the floor with the actor which means

- employing role play and uncensored improvisations that encourage cultural interplay and conversation in the rehearsal room
- encouraging actors not to second-guess what is being asked of them or indeed to mimick something that they feel is closer to the cultural authority.
- encouraging the actor to work with languages besides English and to work with their own english showing the power that this brings when language and cultural context are used as a hinterland for exploration of work for performance.
- establishing how to help the actor find complicity with her fellow actors as the tool to achieve bodymind engagement
- the positioning of the actor as expert.

I am now going to show you two excerpts from my masterclass lasting nine minutes. After the movie clip I will tease out a few key characteristics of the methodology which I hope will prompt discussion in the Q and A part of this panel.

To refer to the clips used please visit:

<http://kristinelandonsmith.com/intracultural-thesis>, password:

thesis: See clips 1a and 5

Excerpt 1 shows me working with a NIDA student of a Fiji/Samoan background and her scene partner, a British Punjabi actress in the UK. This is an example where there is some resistance from the principal actor to play through her cultural context and you will see that the negotiation is slow and careful. I bring other actors in to ease the process

and they are both NIDA students, one from a South African background and the other from an Ethiopian background.

Clip 2 shows me working with the two African students from the first excerpt. One of the students is a first year and the other a third year and they have never worked together before this masterclass.

Both excerpts show the actors working with a text. Through the process I move them to improvisations which employ their cultural contexts. The aim is then to move the actor back to the text without losing what has been gained through improvising with their cultural contexts. The first clip does not show the actor moving back to text, but the second one does.

Show Clip

Both clips highlight critical aspects of my methodology.

In the first clip, Japjit, The British Punjabi actress in the UK is improvising in Punjabi with NIDA student Gloria who is from a Fiji Samoan background. Gloria is working on a text from Antony and Cleopatra. Her initial delivery of her text in the early part of the masterclass felt neutral, with her not able to bring her individuality and talent to this Shakespeare text. The clip you have just seen starts at the point where I begin to engage her cultural context as a means of opening up a channel of exploration on this text which clearly feels far away from her own experience.

I ask her to work as Fijian Samoan and I use very direct language : “you are going to be Fijian Samoan”. I ask if she can work in the language and she replies she doesn’t have much language. I quickly move on telling her its fine for her to work with accent only. We begin our work and to accelerate the process I bring the other actors in asking them to work from their cultural contexts with their languages. This multilingual approach not only forces the actors to listen very carefully to each other but it also acts as a reassurance to each actor that to play from one’s own cultural context is a legitimate dynamic and the one that is being asked for.

As the work progresses I encourage Gloria to be “the Samoan woman”. My language is always direct. I point out to her that she needs to relax her work which is feeling too neat and tidy. Perhaps she is trying to act her idea of what the perfect NIDA student should be and I pull her as far away from this as I can. The work progresses and I ask her to use the limited language she has and slowly slowly we sense an ease settling into her performance. I continue to encourage her with very direct language : “ stay with that woman you know so well”.

In the second clip my NIDA students Meti and Thuso are working. Meti is working on a text from Raisin In the Sun. There is no resistance from either actor here to use their cultural context and one can sense a pleasure, assurance and confidence in the way these actors work together. They spontaneously bring a shared nuance and detail to this delicate improvisation imbued with humour and warmth. In this improvisation within the culture of NIDA Meti and Thuso are the experts as they alone hold the knowledge and they can’t be challenged on the detail they bring to this improvisation that is permeated with their own

narratives. I move Meti back and forth from improvisation to text , African context to American delivery and help her to transfer her confidence and nuance when working with her African context back to the American text.

Cross cultural practices contest more traditional practices and ideologies: Lo and Gilbert (TDR pp33-34) speak about frameworks such as two types of multiculturalism small “m” and big “M” multicultural theatre. Small “m” multicultural theatre signals a commitment to cultural pluralism but in reality employs conservative practices that give the appearance of diversity without necessarily confronting the hegemony of the dominant culture. They quote Benny Ambush who argues that colour-blind casting in small “m” multicultural theatre does not allow actors to bring what is special about them to their roles but rather “whitewashes aesthetically different people,” inviting spectators to think that racial and/or cultural specificities do not “matter”. Used uncritically, multicultural casting strategies have the effect of sustaining a familiar view of the world by subsuming the defamiliarizing potential created by the lack of “fit” between actor and role into the normative conventions of Western theatrical realism.”

My work offers practice as an intervention that challenges the hegemony that tries to neutralise and whitewash the actor. My methodology lays out how to engage and play with difference in work for performance . Artists who are free to express themselves and who are given the space and permission to work with the nuance of their cultural context begin to reaffirm their sense of self and find confidence in the agency and currency that their unique perspective has to offer. It is only through a consistent offering of diverse product and diverse artistic practices that

we can hope to open up a space that reflects society as it is today.

Bibliography

Bharucha, R. (2000) *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking through theatre in an age of globalisation*. Athlone Press London

Lo, J and Gilbert, H. (1988-) Vol. 46, No 3 (Autumn, 2002), pp. 31-53
Toward a Topography of Cross-Cultural Theatre Praxis. The MIT Press