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Interview with Ho Tzu Nyen

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JW: The King Lear Project *shares some of the documentary aspects of works like* Looking for Richard, The Lear Diaries, Richard II in New York, *but it is unique, and very unusual in that it draws from a selection of key* Lear *essays. Why have you chosen this approach, and what draws you to these three particular essays?*

HTN: Good theoretical writings are self-reflexive, in the sense that they are highly aware of the field of forces that constitutes their playing field, but they are also performative, in that they are designed strategically to act upon their respective fields. In the case of *The King Lear Project*, I wanted to see if it was possible to 'return' written texts about performances back onto the stage – to embody them, to give them flesh and blood and hence render them to the unstable play of passion and human frailty, ugliness and beauty. The concepts become scaled to the human and can be listened to, challenged, defied on that scale. So I chose these essays not because they were the 'best', but because they seemed suitable to my dramatic intentions.

Did you have any trouble mediating the essays between the confines of the page and the stage?

I would say that this 'trouble' forms the core of *The King Lear Project*. But rather than 'mediation', I am more interested in attempting a montage between page and stage, word and flesh. Hence chunks of text from the 'academic' essays are preserved in their original style and channelled through the various actors, without any attempt to theatricalize or naturalize them. This lack of fit, this awkwardness, constitutes the drama of *The King Lear Project*.

Is there such a thing as a 'perfect' Lear *production? What do you say to those who think and use the Nunn–McKellen* King Lear *to gauge their understanding of the play?*

The so-called 'perfect' *Lear* production must be the least interesting. I don't think I have anything interesting to say to those who use any one version of *King Lear* as their only gauge.

How much does the audience play into your writing of the project? Are they audience members in a literal sense, or do they figure as characters in the plays?

Without an audience, there is no theatre. And I believe that without an audience, tragedy is really not possible, because in the last instance, the tragic hero is the primary 'audience'

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of his own misadventures. After all, the classical form of tragedy is characterized by the hero's view and review of his life. He must play the spectator to his own spectacle. But I believe that this kind of self-consciousness in a hypertrophic state is in itself tragic. When self-awareness takes on a form of 'outside looking in', it paralyses. It is like being really uncomfortable at a party full of strangers, assaulted by the gazes of others – both real and imaginary.

Do you feel that you have been misunderstood in the reviews, in Singapore and Europe?

I think that if a piece of work can be perfectly understood, it would mean that it is not very interesting to begin with. Still, misunderstanding should be differentiated into productive and unproductive types.

Reviews tell us as much about the reviewers as about *The King Lear Project*.

So maybe I can answer you best by discussing a specific instance. In Europe, some of the strongest reactions are from people who feel offended by what they perceive to be the heavy-handedness of the project's 'didacticism'. I understand these objections to be in a sense, 'political' in nature. As such, objections of this type do not make me too unhappy, because they are at least indicative of some signs of life.

On the other hand, there are a number of reviews in Singapore that are mainly 'aesthetic' and expressions of 'taste'. So their problem with the 'didacticism' of *The King Lear Project* is that the 'academic' tone of the utterances is 'un-naturalistic' or 'un-theatrical'. These are reactions based solely on preconceptions of what theatre is, and as such, these reviews are prescriptive in nature – a list of what we should or should not do in theatre.

Ultimately, I would say that the charges of 'didacticism', lack of naturalism and theatrical finesse are all valid, but only as mere observations because *The King Lear Project* is somewhat obviously designed as such – a crude, bungling, didactic machine – oppressive, but also a little sad and funny . . . like King Lear himself.

The audience seems to have very strong reactions to The Lear Universe. *What do you make of it? What ideas are you trying to convey in this play?*

Our performance of *The Lear Universe* took the form of a post-show discussion that paradoxically alienates the audience and negates dialogue. For me, this is a manifestation of the profound absence of communication that defines the barren world of *King Lear*. Throughout the play, extremely low and high frequencies that can be felt but perhaps not consciously registered were pumped into the theatre for the entire duration of the performance, hence secreting an air of claustrophobia that amplifies the endlessly looping structure of *The Lear Universe*. These factors materialize the oppressive purgatorial vision that permeated Wilson Knight's reading of the play in his essay of the same title.

I find audience reactions to this piece extremely fascinating. Some are genuinely pissed off, and others find it hilarious. Some angry reviewers literally demand that 'genuine' audience participation be allowed, which is of course completely against the nature of *The Lear Universe*.

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As the author of all three plays, do you identify yourself with any roles in your work (i.e. audience, dramaturge, director)? Do you think any characters in the plays represent you, the playwright?

I don't think that this is a play with any 'characters' or any 'roles'. It is just a situation populated by a number of actors and designers, all of whom are in some form of tension with what they are required to do. I like my collaborators too much to want them to become anybody else, the same way that I respect the audience enough not to want them to identify with any 'roles' of my making.

While I don't think any of the characters or roles represent me, I think that in hindsight, I can perhaps identify with the work as a whole – its self-consciousness, its awkwardness, its heaviness, and its setting up of itself for some kind of comical self-destruction. It is similar to how I sometimes feel at a party full of strangers.

The character played by Paul Rae, fictional dramaturge of The King Lear Project, *is a curious one. Is he a mouthpiece for a specific community, or even several different communities? What is his relation to the audience?*

He is mostly positioned in the stalls, together with the audience. Thus he takes on the role of speaking for the audience, which is, of course, the most 'offensive' role possible. To make things worse, he speaks in a mélange drawn from a variety of academic essays, hence doubly alienating the audience that he is supposed to represent. My intention is to create a situation whereby the audience is cut off from any kind of psychological identification with whatever is going on onstage, because all access is blocked by this fictional dramaturge. As such, my hope is that the audience can become second- and third-degree observers of the situation, and thus have the possibility of grasping the structure of the performances as a whole.

Where, amongst other Lear*-proper productions (in film and onstage) do you place* The King Lear Project?

I guess *The King Lear Project* is a kind of bastard – an Edmund to the 'proper' *Lear* productions.

HO TZU NYEN *is an artist whose works traverse the fields of film, visual arts and the performing arts. In May 2009 Ho Tzu Nyen presented* HERE *– his first feature film, at the 41st Directors' Fortnight, Cannes International Film Festival. Tzu Nyen's short films have competed in festivals such as the 30 Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival and the 53rd and 54th International Short Film Festival, Oberhausen. His 2006 video,* The Bohemian Rhapsody Project, *received a Special Mention at the 5th Vienna Independent Short Film Festival and the Grand Jury Prize at the 4th Pris de Courts, International Short Film Festival in Paris. As a visual artist, he has presented his works at international exhibitions such as the 26th São Paulo Biennale (2004); the 3rd Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale (2005) and the 1st Singapore Biennale (2006). In June 2008 he conceptualized and wrote* The King Lear Project, *which he codirected with Fran Borgia.* The King Lear Project *was co-commissioned by the Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels and the Singapore Arts Festival.*

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