

Introduction

It's 4 p.m. on a hot, humid Saturday afternoon in August 2018 and I'm sitting with other guests at a table in the air-conditioned ballroom of the Bayview George Town Hotel in Penang, Malaysia. The room is decorated for a wedding reception, which it presumably hosts with some regularity on Saturday afternoons, and this event has all the trappings of one. But it is in fact a production at the International George Town Theatre Festival by an intercultural collective of sixty women from Malaysia, Indonesia, and Australia, featuring twenty-six women-identified performers of various races, ethnicities, religious affiliations, sexualities, ages, abilities, and national identities. The women parade into the room among the assembled guests in a grand entry to open the show. Many are dressed as bridesmaids – except that one lovely dress sports a dozen or so oversized cockroaches, another woman wears rubber gloves, curlers under her fascinator, and an apron, and another is in military camouflage gear. After the parade a woman crawls from her wheelchair onto one of four platform stages on each side of the hall and sings, beautifully, a song about love and marriage before telling her story: her father had beaten her mother when she was pregnant with her, and she was born legless. Others have various autism spectrum and developmental disorders. One 'proud Muslim woman' wearing a hijab and both signing for and performing in the show, is, she tells us, Deaf.

Say No More (Figure 1a), a devised show, addressed the women's personal experiences of gendered violence, marriage ('family is important; marriage is not'), sex ('they say we shouldn't talk about sex but fuck it! I'm going to talk about sex'), body shaming, and domestic labour. Most of the performers were amateur and the show was unrelentingly testimonial, but that was its point. It was also multilingual: almost everything was delivered in English and one other language. Multilingual, transcultural, transnational, trans-ability, feminist, and normalizing the act of women visibly helping women. And despite how harrowing much of the subject matter was, the tone, overwhelmingly, was mutually celebratory.

2 International Theatre Festivals and Interculturalism



Figure 1 *Say No More* (1a) exceeded the national promotion mandate represented by the photography exhibit, *Stripes and Strokes*, by Mooreyameen Mohamad (1b), in which Malaysians of various genders, races, ethnicities, and ages were variously draped in ‘the flag that unites them’. Photograph of *Say No More* by Sam Oster, courtesy of Tutti Arts; photograph of images from Mooreyameen Mohamad’s *Stripes and Strokes* exhibition by Ric Knowles

Introduction

3

Say No More, presented by Tutti Arts, Australia, in collaboration with Perspektif, Indonesia, and ACS Stepping Stone, Malaysia¹ – billed as ‘26 Women, 3 Countries, One Wedding’ – was not typical fare for the George Town or any other International Theatre Festival, but it did make apparent the kinds of opportunities for intercultural collaboration, solidarity, negotiation, and exchange that such festivals can enable in spite of sometimes overwhelming pressures to the contrary. The month-long George Town Festival was founded in 2010 explicitly to celebrate George Town’s position (population ca 800,000) as a UNESCO designated World Heritage Zone. Its ideological role within an English-speaking former British colony with a mixed population of Malay (mostly Muslim), ethnic Chinese (mostly Buddhist), ethnic Indian (mostly Hindu), and Indigenous peoples is to promote an overarching governing vision of ‘one Malaysia’, a country with an elected monarchy operating under a British parliamentary system in which there are fraught racial, ethnic, and religious tensions, press censorship is broadly exercised, homosexuality is prohibited by law, and a married woman’s legal rights to ‘maintenance’ are conditional on her obedience to her husband.

The festival’s intended purpose is to bring this fractured postcolonial nation-state together, literally, under one flag as a single ‘imagined community’ (B. Anderson). The festival’s featured opening show in 2018, *Kelantan: A Living Heritage*, was framed by a lobby display, part of the festival’s exhibition series, entitled *Stripes and Strokes* (Figure 1b), a series of photographs by Mooreyameen Mohamad of Malaysians of various genders, races, ethnicities, and ages variously draped in ‘the flag that unites them’ (George Town 64). The opening show itself celebrated the north-eastern state of peninsular Malaysia as ‘an ancient and traditional stronghold of Malay culture’ (George Town 16) and featured a cornucopia of ‘authentic’ symbols of Malaysian nationhood: giant traditional drums (*rebana ubi*), dance (*Aysik*), dance-drama (*mak yong*), group trance song and movement (*dikir barat*), shadow puppetry (*wayang kulit*), and shimmering handwoven *songket* fabrics. Another exhibition at the festival, *Grit and Grace: The Grandeur of Monochrome Malaysia*, by S.C. Shekar, featured huge, high-resolution, and loving black-and-white photographs celebrating the beauty of Malaysian landscapes and peoples. As the programme indicated, *Grit and Grace* was ‘a reminder that Malaysia has much to offer, be it her rich natural resources, environment, or the diversity of its people’ (George Town 65). Nevertheless, by virtue of it’s *being* international and a festival, George Town, like many other festivals, has often inadvertently exceeded the mandates and intentions of its sponsors and hosts; *Say No More* was, perhaps, one of those occasions.²

Festivals, the New Interculturalism, and the Definitional Field

From the 1990s to 2020 there has been an exponential increase in the number and type of festivals taking place around the world. Events that used merely to be events have become ‘festivalized’: structured, marketed, and promoted in ways that stress brand identities, urban centres as tourist destinations, and the corporate attractiveness of ‘creative cities’, all participating in the so-called ‘eventification’ of culture. These corporate, municipal, and state practices and the critical literature surrounding them have paid little attention to the actual content and impact of international festivals that draw from and represent multiple cultures, and what roles they play in one of the most urgent processes of the times: intercultural communication and exchange. This is the goal, and challenge, of this book: how, and how well, have international theatre, performance, live and combined arts festivals contributed to and shaped intercultural conversation, representation, and negotiation in the first two decades of the twenty-first century? Are there models of festivalization that might do these things more effectively? And how, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic that shut down festivals and other gatherings in early 2020, revealing and intensifying systemic inequalities and injustices based on racial and cultural differences globally, can such festivals learn from and build upon their record to date when they resume operations in however modified a form?

Once before, in the mid twentieth century, festivals resurfaced in the Global West and North in the wake of disaster after the Second World War as repositories of European high culture. They subsequently developed as what I here call ‘elite’ or ‘destination’ festivals in the second half of the century as the seemingly natural homes of the work of the great European directors, exemplifying what those festivals and their mandates have promoted as ‘excellence’. Many of those directors – Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine, Robert Wilson, and others – were also key theatrical players in the ‘intercultural turn’ in theatrical practice in the 1980s and 1990s, in which charismatic westerners, lamenting the moribund state of Euro-American theatre, raided the performance forms of other cultures, usually in the Global South and East,³ appropriating and decontextualizing them in search of a vibrant, ‘primitive’ universalism that was thought to precede and transcend cultural difference. This work has been rightly criticized as colonialist, but many destination festivals have proceeded apace with what I think of as a global trafficking in cultures.

Introduction

5

It is the purpose of this book, however, not simply to critique the cultural colonialism of festivals past and present, but to try to find other paradigms, exploring ways in which festivals can and have begun to engage more closely and critically with multiple cultures in context and in conversation with one another. Are there twenty-first-century festival models that eschew universalist aspirations in favour of what I have elsewhere called

a new kind of rhizomatic (multiple, non-hierarchical, horizontal) intercultural performance-from-below that is emerging globally, that no longer retains a west and the rest binary, that is no longer dominated by charismatic white men or performed before audiences assumed to be monochromatic, that no longer involves the urban centres (in the west or elsewhere) raiding traditional forms seen to be preserved in more primitive or ‘authentic’ rural settings, and that no longer focuses on the individual performances or projects of a single artist or group[?] The new interculturalism . . . involves collaborations and solidarities across real and respected material differences within local, urban, national, and global intercultural performance ecologies. (Knowles, *Theatre & Interculturalism* 59)

This new interculturalism is no longer necessarily tied to cooperation (or diplomatic relations) between nation-states but is ‘increasingly drawn from intercultural creativity and located in multicultural milieux’ such as global, festival cities (Um 1). And it is increasingly intersectionalist, considering the inter-imbrication of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and ability as well as globalized, immigration, and diasporic considerations. The ‘new interculturalism’, according to Charlotte McIvor, ‘is directed almost entirely towards investigating culture’s individual and collective multiplicities, as mediated through performance in both local and global contexts’ (2). This book’s project is to contribute to the emerging sub-field of scholarship on the new interculturalism by examining the role of international theatre, performance, and live-arts festivals as key sites where that mediation can occur.⁴

But first, what is an international theatre festival? At a moment in history when everything from aardvarks to zorillas has been ‘festivalized’,⁵ when the discipline of performance studies has taught us to treat everything as performance, and when there have been increasing attempts to sever ‘nation’ from ‘nation-state’, it is necessary to provide some parameters.

This book concerns itself with international theatre festivals understood as ‘meta-event[s]’ (Schoenmakers 28) in which a larger, multifaceted cultural performance has embedded within it other instances and genres

6 International Theatre Festivals and Interculturalism

of performance that might otherwise have been free-standing; in which the individual performances it incorporates are set apart from everyday life as theatre, dance, live art, or aesthetic performance broadly understood; and in which performances derive from or represent more than one nation (with 'nation' understood to mean a more-or-less stable community based on shared culture). Briefly, to unpack the terms of my title, 'theatre', for my purposes, refers to public artistic events in which a separate performance space/time is demarcated, along with a distinction of some sort between performers and audiences, both local and visiting. 'Festival' refers to an event that is durational – though its duration can be measured in days, weeks, or very occasionally months – and takes place in an identifiable festival space, be it a venue, city, or geographical region.⁶ 'International' is more complex. I use it in my title as a kind of catch-all around which festivals that cross various types of border come together in common parlance or in their own names and promotional discourses. Elsewhere, however, I use it in a more precise way in reference to traffic and diplomatic relations between post-nineteenth-century nation-states that are naturalized as autonomous. 'International', then, is distinct from terms such as 'global' and 'transnational' in tending to respect and reify the borders between states that are understood to be sovereign. 'Global' invokes globalization and refers to a late twentieth-century neoliberal development associated with economic measures and bodies such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, bodies that have eroded national sovereignties and supported the unrestrained circulation of global capital in a world understood to be postnational. 'Transnational', however, I use to refer to cultural forces that transcend rather than reify national borders in ways that are resistant to globalization *and* to the suturing of culture, legislation, and geography effected by the concept of the nation-state that underlies nationalisms of various kinds.⁷ 'Interculturalism', my key term, exists in the contested, often unequal spaces between cultures that are variously understood as differently homogeneous communities – sometimes nations, sometimes not – within, between, or transcending nation-states.

These thumbnail definitions are practical, and roughly workable, but it is necessary to acknowledge that they do not apply equally to everything I consider in this volume: in the case of some festivals, for example, that present only in the evenings over a period of several weeks in venues spread across major metropolitan areas targeting primarily local audiences, the durational experience for festivalgoers, and especially performers, is weakened. Some festivals present live arts that can only loosely be called

theatre even in my capacious definition, and which often blur the distinction between actors and audiences. Some of the events staged by festivals, particularly curated live-arts festivals, now happen or have an impact outside of 'festival time'. Some events are organized across other than national borders, rendering the understanding of festivals as international events dubious. Indeed, each type of meta-event that is discussed here under the heading of 'festival' constitutes the terms 'international', 'intercultural', 'theatre', and 'festival' somewhat differently, and one of the main goals of this volume is to explicate the mutually constitutive nature of the forces that play themselves out around the assemblage of live events that my book systematically classifies for the first time, and that coalesce around the contestable, if practical phrase, 'international theatre festival'.

Liminality, Transformation, and Critical Cosmopolitanism

Scholars differ on the key characteristics of festivals, and their arguments circulate most relevantly, for the purposes of this book, on their potential transformational qualities at both the individual and social levels, and on the degree and kind of their cosmopolitanism.

Theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte identifies 'four dimensions that are characteristic of festivals' (*Routledge* 174). The first two interdependent dimensions are the *liminal*, which she characterizes as 'the unique temporality that constitutes a festival as an in-between time' (174), and the *transformative*, in which 'new identities can be tried out or adopted or an existing identity can be strengthened'. This, in turn, produces 'a strengthening of the feeling of *communitas* and sense of belonging among participants' (175). I am most interested, not in festivals' transformational functions at the level of individual or even individual community identities, but in the potential for such events to contribute to the formation and transformation of newly intercultural communities across acknowledged and celebrated differences. And significantly, Fischer-Lichte notes that 'a liminal and transformative dimension might be particularly strong in international theatre festivals, when during the course of the performance a community between the spectators and actors from another culture may come into being' (*Tragedy's* 355). The liminality of festivals, however, is more variable across different types, sizes, and configurations of festivals, and the degree to which they can constitute liminal space has a direct bearing on their potential to be transformative: the liminal, the destabilizing, the unsettling, create the conditions in which transformation is possible. That possibility depends, in turn, on such things as the

8 International Theatre Festivals and Interculturalism

relationship between a festival's duration and its immersive experience (how long the festival lasts and how intensely festivalgoers are removed from their quotidian routines), and the degree to which the individual performances cohere or clash in constituting the festival as meta-event.

Some festivals require travel for most visitors to unfamiliar locations; some involve intensive immersive experiences that have the potential to challenge taken-for-granted ways of thinking and being, and to unsettle even settler societies. Some, on the other hand, offering evening and weekend performances dispersed throughout a large city over the space of a month or more, are unlikely to be experienced in any material way, especially by that city's residents, as moving them into a liminal zone very far outside of their regular routines, and are less likely to be experienced in any immersive or durational way by visitors or to place artists from different cultural locations and theatrical cultures into productive conversation. Still more important, for my purposes, is the degree to which the festival experience is liminal insofar as it shifts the normative ground under audiences' feet and moves them outside of their comfort zone. This is less a question of scheduling than of programming, and particularly the programming of difference. This book will be concerned with how and to what degree festival organizational structures, planning, procedures, and programming enable festivals to function as generatively unsettling meta-events, but also with how specific works within those festivals help to constitute them as genuinely transformative spaces. Most festival scholarship deals effectively with festivalization, festivalscapes, and festivals as meta-events at the expense of the cumulative, show-by-show experience that actually constitutes the event for most festivalgoers, and at the expense of detailed attention to the cultural work performed by individual performances within that larger context. It is, I propose, the push, pull, and tension between individual shows and between each show and the festival 'as a whole' that constitutes the experience of most theatre and live-arts festivals for most audience members, and most importantly for my purposes constitutes that experience's interculturalism.

For Fischer-Lichte the third and fourth dimensions of a festival are also interdependent, consisting of a *conventional* dimension in which the festival's regulatory system is imposed and, in a *cathartic* dimension, disrupted. The temporality of festivals consists, in part, of rigid scheduling, in which audience members prepare by poring over sometimes extensive and complex festival programmes, timing the space between events, and curating their personal festival timetables, while, particularly at the world's busy fringe festivals, theatre companies adhere to rigid set-up, run, and

strike times to accommodate other shows in shared venues. On the other hand, festivals, in their cathartic, festive dimension, especially when they involve an intense, immersive durational experience, can consist of a temporal break from daily routines, a carnivalesque release from habits and hierarchies that generally regulate lives. Whether this release is ultimately culturally transgressive or reproductive, dangerously discharging chaotic energies or providing safe outlets for such energies within strict temporal and spatial boundaries prior to a return to regulatory norms, has been a matter of debate for decades. Fischer-Lichte herself sees these functions as sequential, 'first destabilizing and then reaffirming collective identity' (*Tragedy's* 108). Michelle Duffy, however, argues that 'th[e] capacity to transform arises out of affective relations facilitated by the festival between people and place' (229) in ways that exceed the festival's temporal and physical boundaries 'through memories, emotion, and personal relations. In this way', she argues, 'belonging is mobile – it moves from place to place, it moves in time – and at the same time is immobile, as it is attached to particular bodies, to our actions, feelings, and our experiences' (245). In other words, a festival's 'time-out-of-time'-ness (Falassi), rooted in the local, can potentially create transformations that endure, transcending both place and time. The different festivals and types of festival explored in this volume have different festival temporalities, some effectively setting themselves temporarily apart from daily life (often through opening and closing ceremonies), and ultimately invoking a kind of closure, while some stage events outside of festival time and/or aim to have long-term, year-round social impact. In any case, while it endures 'the festival', as Fischer-Lichte says, 'seeks to prevent the intrusion of the mundane' (*Routledge* 174).

Among the features of festivals that resist 'the intrusion of the mundane' are what Motti Regev, discussing the capacity for festival audiences as 'cosmopolitan omnivores' to 'engage in practices of cultural consumption that transgress the conventional boundaries of their own ethnic or national cultures' (111), calls their 'isomorphic rites' (118). These include, following Alessandro Falassi (4–5), rites of purification, rites of passage, of reversal, of conspicuous display and consumption, ritual dramas, rites of exchange, and rites of competition. Regev focuses in particular on rites of conspicuous display (the sheer number and range of events available, 118–19), rites of conspicuous consumption (the number of events each spectator attends, 119), ritual dramas ('special events just for the festival', 119–20), rites of exchange and reversal (the juxtapositioning and revaluating of 'masterpieces' and their challengers, 120–1), and rites of competition (the awarding of prizes, 121–2). Regev is less expansive about rites of

10 International Theatre Festivals and Interculturalism

passage, which strike me as having a greater capacity for transformation than the more consumerist rites of conspicuous consumption and competition, neither of which is inherently cosmopolitan and both of which adhere to the most conventional and culturally reproductive models of festival. Regev, however, does find in the intensity of programming at international festivals the potential for an aesthetic, border-crossing cosmopolitanism that doesn't exist in the 'occasional, unfocused pattern of cultural consumption or production' that obtains in the 'unorchestrated' day-to-day world of most national cultures (113), and it is perhaps this purposeful border-crossing that constitutes the rites of passage to which he refers. Many of the most generatively intercultural festivals examined in this volume have at their roots a distrust of the boundaries, borders, and barriers between disciplines, cultures, and epistemologies by which society routinely regulates itself. And it is this type of mistrustful, border-crossing, critical cosmopolitanism that the most interesting festivals in the twenty-first century seem to be moving towards.⁸

Gerard Delanty, writing in 2011 about 'the cultural significance of arts festivals' (190), perceptively identified a shift 'from internationalism to cosmopolitanism in the cultural logic of the festival' (196) that I would suggest began around the turn of the twenty-first century. Delanty argued that 'internationalism is increasingly being reworked as a cosmopolitan condition in which the national context is of diminished importance, and in place of being an organic experience the festival is rather a sphere in which a multiplicity of voices seek to be heard' (190). I would question how 'organic' the national context might be but the experience and recognition of 'a multiplicity of voices' – both intra- and internationally – can certainly denaturalize the nation-state as a stable 'organic' or imagined community in potentially generative ways. There is little doubt that the shift from internationalism, which has historically reified the status of the nation-state as a unit coercively suturing the cultural, legislative, and geographical, towards a new, critical cosmopolitanism at events that continue to be called 'international theatre festivals' can only be enabling of a more fluid, multiplicitous, and equitable interculturalism. In any case, it is true that many festivals during the past two decades, as intercultural collaborations and partnerships have increased, have tended to eschew what had previously been common practice in their programmes and publicity, the identification of shows by nation as well as by discipline, and have thereby opened up the potential for a more critically cosmopolitan consciousness while helping to undermine the role of the festival as a site of mutually reificatory diplomacy between sovereign nation-states.