

Editorial: International Relations

PAUL RAE

Do you remember when US president Donald Trump met Kim Jong-un, supreme leader of North Korea, in Singapore in June 2018? That was just after Trump had berated the G7 and EU for treating the US like a ‘piggy bank’, and a little before he locked horns with Canada over trade tariffs, questioned the core NATO value of mutual defence of all members, lectured British prime minister Teresa May on Brexit, and cozied up to Russian president Vladimir Putin in Helsinki. By the time you read this, these too will be distant memories, as Trump shows no sign of letting up on his warp-speed assault on diplomatic protocol, *realpolitik* and the world order as we thought we knew it. At the time of writing, the jury is still out on what the Singapore summit achieved. The wording of the final joint statement on North Korean denuclearization was vague. Negotiations continue behind the scenes, but the signals are mixed. The US cancelled military exercises with South Korea, and North Korea returned the remains of American war dead. But news reports indicate that North Korean action on disarmament is uneven, if it is happening at all, while the US has continued to enforce sanctions and to insist on the need for other states to do the same.

If there is one thing that people can agree on about the summit, it’s that it was a massive global media event and a most peculiar spectacle. Indeed, the relationship between the distinctiveness of the imagery and the indeterminacy of the outcome is largely the angle that commentators – at least in the anglophone West – took in their evaluation of the summit, many resorting to the well-worn trope of ‘style over substance’ to level their criticisms. Certainly, there is some merit to this, which bespeaks a larger concern about both Trump and Kim’s proclivity for the grand – and potentially catastrophic – gesture, over the painstaking work of negotiation. North Korea is notoriously secretive and fickle, and its tangled relations with China, Japan and South Korea make any substantive negotiations mind-bogglingly multidimensional. Meanwhile, Trump’s adventures in Singapore and elsewhere were reported against a persistent narrative about the hollowing out of diplomatic and foreign policy expertise in the State Department, as well as the wanton dismantling of more carefully crafted non-proliferation agreements, such as that with Iran, brokered under the Obama administration.

And yet, as performance scholars, we should not be so quick to reject the Singapore summit as mere flummery. At the very least, we might say that uncertainties over what was formally agreed at the event are entirely consistent with the nature of the event itself. Trump’s decision to ride roughshod over concerns that giving Kim equal billing would legitimate a murderous tinpot dictator produced some intriguing performative outcomes. The world was at liberty to observe at close quarters striking similarities in

the men's self-fashioning: tailoring and coiffure were much commented on. And while the 'promotional' film released just ahead of the summit by the White House framing both leaders as world-historical figures able to 'change the course of history' was much ridiculed, it is nevertheless a fascinating intercultural document: an attempt to adapt the genre of the American blockbuster trailer (or, more properly, a simulacrum of one, pieced together from a bewildering array of stock footage) for North Korean reception. Singapore itself played a significant role in the staging of the event that should not be overlooked, not least because access to the main players was so tightly controlled that the thousands of journalists present were forced to turn their attentions to the surrounding environment and its inhabitants. That said, Trump very much took on the role of host, glad-handing Kim and guiding him around during photo ops with one hand attached solicitously-cum-coercively to Kim's back. And then there were the telling details, like when Kim was invited to sign the final statement with a pen gold-embossed with Trump's signature; a gesture that, after some confusion that involved an aide wiping the pen down with a cloth, was declined in favour of an alternative from the North Korean team.

Without more specialist knowledge or behind-the-scenes insight, it is hard to go very much further in an analysis of the summit here. But I hope I have said enough to suggest not only that performance knowledge does have *some* role to play in thinking through what takes place at such events, but that understanding them is a task particularly well suited to those committed to tracing the multilateral nuances of cultural connection, intercultural protocol and power play. This is perhaps all the more important at a time when walls are being erected and borders secured with ever greater zeal and indeed cruelty. As a result, this is on the one hand driving people, communities and cultures apart. On the other it is leading to new and sometimes perplexing geopolitical alliances at the formal level, and new challenges for community formation at the ground level, as people find ever more ingenious ways to cross borders nevertheless.

It is all too easy, of course, to overstate the case for performance scholarship in such circumstances. Except when, often quite suddenly, events conspire to throw performance into relief as carrying unanticipated force or significance. The Trump–Kim summit is one such concatenation: the articles gathered in this issue of *Theatre Research International* present a range of others. The title and starting point of Charlotte Canning's 'If "The World Was Ruled by Artists"' gets to the heart of the matter. Canning's article turns on the coincidence of two events that took place simultaneously in New York over a week early in June 1967. The first concerned intense deliberations at the United Nations over the Arab–Israeli War (also known as the Six Day War), and the second, the Twelfth International Theatre Institute (ITI) World Congress. As Canning points out, events at the UN inevitably seemed to be of greater moment and significance. And yet, without ever drawing, as she puts it, a 'facile equivalence' between the two sets of debates, Canning argues that patient attention to both the context and the texture of the discussions under way at the ITI congress testifies to the massive changes under way in a world that had recently experienced rapid decolonization. Theatre stood to make a major contribution to the

formation of national identity and the emergence of a world order that, in the context of the Cold War and the development of the Non-Aligned Movement, was in flux. Neither the voices of the Soviet Union, nor of liberal American values, prevailed at the conference, notes Canning, who instead painstakingly traces the threads of contributions from a much more diverse selection of participants, as well as the fate of those conversations in subsequent years.

The Cold War also provides the backdrop to Jonathan Bollen's 'As Modern as Tomorrow', which focuses on quite a different kind of theatre than that being debated by the ITI, but which was just as much a vehicle for the expression of cultural identity and the pursuit of national interests in intercultural contexts. Drawing, as Canning does, on archival sources, Bollen reconstructs the fate of two Australian impresarios who, from 1957 to 1968, sought to bring Japanese cabaret revues to Australian audiences. The varied factors that played a role in these endeavours and their Australian reception are fascinating. They include Australia–Japan trade policy against the backdrop of regional Cold War alliances; Japanese entertainment corporations such as Toho, which was closely linked with the celebrated Takarazuka revue; the kinds of talent and content available in Japan at the time; and the distinctive personalities of the entrepreneurs themselves, Harry Wren and David N. Martin. What emerges over the course of the article is a powerful narrative of how the revues reflected fast-changing Australian attitudes toward postwar Japan, which themselves reflected transformations in cultural practices within Japan.

As Bollen also shows, however, Australian commercial interest in Japanese performances did not come without an unpleasant strain of racism, traceable in part to lingering resentments over the Japanese treatment of Australian PoWs during the Second World War, but in some ways more striking for the almost casual ways it inhabits the headlines of the archival sources Bollen cites, and the attitudes expressed within. It is perceptions of a similar kind of banal anti-Japanese racism, and ensuing responses, that provoked both protestors and counterprotestors in Michelle Liu Carriger's 'No "Thing to Wear"', which focuses on the controversy that arose in 2015 over a weekly opportunity for visitors to Boston's Museum of Fine Arts to try on a kimono like the one depicted in Claude Monet's 1876 painting *La Japonaise*, on display at the museum. 'Decolonize Our Museums' (DOM) was a diverse group of protesters concerned that 'Kimono Wednesdays' legitimated orientalism, though their weekly protests were met with a mainly Japanese-American group supporting the initiative. While the protests were heated, they were never massive, but it is precisely the relatively small scale of the contretemps, argues Carriger, that provides an opportunity to work through the positions adopted and rhetoric deployed in order to gain some insight into a number of intriguing issues. While Carriger remains studiously non-partisan in her adjudication of the debates, she gradually unpicks the escalation of DOM's rhetoric, and queries its relation to claims of cultural appropriation that turned specifically on the trying on of the kimono. By working through the highly transnational history of the kimono, and the distinctively theatrical provenance of the garment provided at the museum, Carriger is able to reflect on questions surrounding the distinctively charged – and also uniquely

multivalent – nature of performative acts, and the performative protests they are capable of provoking.

While Carriger's article focuses on a localized event whose meanings become increasingly complicated and contradictory as layers of historical and cultural context accrete, Doug Eacho's 'Serial Nostalgia' somewhat reverses the process: in brief, Eacho stayed home, and watched performances from around the world. More specifically, he availed himself of the online archive of the Germany-based company Rimini Protokoll's hugely successful *100% City* series. Presented in thirty-three locations at the time that Eacho undertook his feat of durational spectatorship, each performance follows a template established by the company: one hundred inhabitants of the presenting city arrange themselves onstage according to a variety of demographic categories, and express their experiences and world views for the audience. As Eacho points out, the production has stimulated a good deal of scholarly interest, but most analyses focus on single sites, often the authors' home cities. By contrast, Eacho navigates his way through the entire corpus of performances, observing similarities and differences as he goes. In the process, he elaborates a contrast between the statistical underpinnings of the performance, and the emergence of big data, of the sort that the data and metadata produced, say, by his viewing of the series will have fed into. While arts and humanities scholars have long been critical, in a Foucauldian vein, of the 'disciplinary' dimensions of census data and statistics, by comparison with the algorithmic logics of big data, argues Eacho, *100% City* might be said to express a nostalgia for the ideas of the social and indeed of the individual that nineteenth-century statistical practices inaugurated. This, in turn, raises intriguing questions about whether theatre as many societies understand it today is an expression of those same epistemes about which we might find ourselves increasingly nostalgic, or whether it can keep pace with the anonymous, in many ways non-representational, operations of what Eacho calls 'algorithmic governmentality'.

Thus do the articles gathered here address 'international relations' of one sort or another. They run the gamut from the Cold War, when the seeds were sown of the problems that Trump and Kim were seeking to address at their summit in Singapore, through to both the affordances and the challenges for performance of contemporary media culture, of the sort that made the summit such a striking spectacle. This issue closes with one further text, which extends the theme of 'international relations', albeit in quite different ways. I first saw *Gostan Forward*, a lecture performance by the Malaysian dancer and choreographer Marion D'Cruz, in 2010. As director Mark Teh explains in his introduction to the text published here, the title names a paradox or tension, since *gostan* is a Malaysian English term derived from 'go astern', and therefore meaning 'go backward' or 'reverse'. We might say that the performance itself exemplifies that animating tension, in that it is a memoir that changes each time it is staged, as it continues to be. Several factors make the text an intriguing complement to the articles here. First, by contrast with the inter- and transnational circumstances the articles focus on, this piece retains a strong sense of its locality. In recounting forty years of performance-making, D'Cruz manages to namecheck a large number of Malaysian artists, in an idiom that is distinctively Malaysian. Accordingly,

Mark Teh has provided contextualizing footnotes and translations of the non-English words. Second, while the local flavour of the text is strong, it, too, tells a story of international relations, particularly during the fascinating sequence when D'Cruz recounts her time in New York, choreographing for Mabou Mines and Lee Breuer, and performing for John Cage. She then traces the influence of these experiences on the development of Malaysian dance. Third, there is the timeliness of the text. I had long thought that D'Cruz's text would make for interesting reading in an international context. But with the recent political earthquake in Malaysia, when, in May 2018, a coalition led by former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad finally managed to unseat the hugely unpopular Najib Razak and end the sixty-one-year dominance of the coalition he led, it seemed especially timely to make the text available.

Taken together, the contributions to this journal remind us of the granular level at which all international relations play out, and must be understood. Working across cultures, the authors draw on archives, online media and embodied experience to arrive at their insights. In the process, they disclose the ways theatre and performance have been debated, contested, disseminated and practised. In an age of unpredictability and instability at the international level, characterized in part by striking but idiosyncratic performances, it is all the more important to cultivate an insightful, level-headed approach to researching theatre, internationally.