Waiting for Meaning: The Joint Venture of Robert Wilson, Jingju, and Taiwan

The story of the production of Orlando in Taipei might be captured in the following playlet:

ACT I (August 2007, Watermill Center, New York)

A: Let’s go.
B: We can’t.
A: Why not?
B: We are waiting.
A: Waiting for whom?
B: We are waiting for Bob.

ACT II (the Knee)

Scene 1 (May 2008, Taipei)

C: I can’t go on.
A: Why not?
C: I’m waiting.
A: Waiting for what?
C: I’m waiting for meaning. Meaning will come tomorrow.

Scene 2 (August, 2008, Taipei)

A: Let’s go.
D: We can’t! We are waiting, waiting for the stupid light!

Scene 3 (January, 2009, Taipei)

E: We are still waiting...
A: What are we waiting for this time?
E: We are waiting for the f***ing tree!
ACT III (February 2009, Taipei)

A: Let’s go!
F: Yes, let’s go.
A: No more waiting?
F: There’s no time to wait! We have to let go.

Confusion, frustration, endless waiting, and, in the end, compromise and resignation: so runs the playlet, and such were the experiences of the Taiwanese participants in Orlando, a joint venture bringing together Robert Wilson, Wei Hai-Ming (Wei Haimin), jingju, and Taiwan. As a “flagship” production of the NTCH (National Theatre and Concert Hall) and the 2009 Taiwan International Festival, Orlando premiered on 21 February 2009, in Taipei’s National Theatre. In this chapter, by playing with Wilson’s notion of “knee” structure, I attempt to elucidate the negotiations that went into the making the intercultural Orlando and the results these negotiations yielded. As a participant in the early stages of the project and a close observer of its progress, I can offer some inside stories of this intercultural and international collaboration, which lasted from 2007 to 2009. My academic training also allows me to approach the performance itself from a healthy distance and with a relatively objective lens. By moving in and out of the project, I approach the subject of this chapter alternately as native informant, anthropologist, audience member, and theatre scholar. I also interrogate the validity, effect, and future possibilities of this type of grand international production.

The stakes of international and intercultural grand collaborations

Although displays of cultural hybridity have been a key element in the performing arts throughout history, it seems that it was the artists of the twentieth century who really discovered the meaning of international and intercultural “collaboration” between East and West. From the early experiments of the drawing room “noh plays” of W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and the celebrated Japanese dancer Michio Ito,1 to the grand “Oriental” spectacles of Ted Shawn and Jack Cole of Depression-era Hollywood,2 from Meyerhold, Artaud to Brecht, the East has provided abundant inspiration for Western “intercultural theatre” in the first half of the twentieth century, either in theorization or in stylization. However, in the second half of the twentieth century, as more international grand collaborations became possible, more problems cropped