Introduction: Modernity, Interculturalism, and Hybridity

Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation.

—Homi K. Bhabha

Put simply, intercultural theatre is a hybrid derived from an intentional encounter between cultures and performing traditions.

—Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, in semicolonial Shanghai, emerged a hybrid theatrical form that was based on Western spoken theatre, classical Chinese theatre, and a Japanese hybrid form of kabuki and Western-style spoken theatre called shinpa (new school drama). Known as wenmingxi (civilized drama), this form has, until recently, largely been ignored by scholars in China and the West as it does not fit into the current binary “traditional / modern” model in non-Western theatre and performance studies.

Under this binary schema, “traditional” is a grab-bag term of all indigenous performance genres while “modern” means exclusively spoken theatre since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that adopt modern Euro-American dramaturgical (since Ibsen), performance (since Stanislavski), and production (since Duke Saxe-Meiningan) principles. However, this dichotomy is porous at best. To start with, what is considered traditional performance has often been active long past the onset of
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modernity and the decisions to turn these active theatrical forms into icons of traditional and/or “national” theatres were often ideological responses to the indigenous countries’ modernity projects, as Joshua Weinstein has demonstrated in the case of *jingju* (Beijing opera) during the 1920s–1930s when it was turned into “national theatre,” or as James Brandon has argued concerning kabuki during WWII when it was an active cheerleader of the empire’s war efforts and in its immediate aftermath when the Shochiko company made a conscientious decision to claim kabuki’s museum identity to resist democratic reform pressures from the U.S. occupation authorities.³

Similarly, while most non-Western modern theatres did indeed result from the indigenous countries’ interaction with Euro-American powers, often as a result or in the shadow of global colonialism, these speech-based theatres frequently exhibit uniquely hybrid features reflective of indigenous performance even though they are often assumed to be based on the same modern dramaturgical, performance, and production principles. As Craig Latrell reported in the case of an Indonesian production of Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* by a leading Jakarta company, the “acting departs so radically from what we recognize as realism as to constitute an entirely new genre, raising the possibility that each society deems for itself what can pass as realistic, depending on such things as societal attitudes toward emotion and pre-existing performance styles,” leading him to conclude that “the whole apparatus of realistic acting has been subtly transformed into something distinctly Indonesian.”⁴ Similarly, as Miller himself discovered to his amazement while directing *Death of A Salesman* in Beijing in 1979, the Chinese spoken theatre form *huaju* (spoken drama) differed—from acting to design—from his experience with American companies, a difference he sought to compensate by asking his actors to speed up their delivery and by repeatedly turning down designs of prosthetic noses and flamboyant wigs aimed at making the Chinese actors look American.⁵ While the Indonesian and Chinese actors had undergone training in Stanislavski and modern canons, Latrell’s and Miller’s experiences underscore the fact that even after a century of attempted integration, modern theatres in non-Western nations today are themselves hybrid theatres, a fact that is often ignored in contemporary studies of these forms.

Furthermore, the neglect of the hybrid nature of these non-Western modern theatres has left no room for their even less “pure” beginnings, as evidenced by the current practice that defines modern drama in Japan and China as socially conscious, speech-centric, and commercially untainted realistic plays, as opposed to a melodramatic and performance-based dramaturgy that also includes singing, dance, and female impersonation,