

ARTS EQUATOR ASIA TOPA REVIEW

Transcript – Part 1

Nabilah Said (NS): Hello and welcome to the ArtsEquator theatre podcast. We are having a very special edition today, we're actually at Asia TOPA in Melbourne. I'm Nabilah Said and I'm with Carolyn Oei.

Carolyn Oei (CO): Hello everyone.

NS: Me and Carolyn, we have spent about five days in Melbourne and we've watched quite a few shows, and we'll be talking about some of them today. Essentially Asia TOPA is a festival that happens once in every three years in Melbourne. And for us at ArtsEquator we've been watching quite a few of the Asian works as well as some other shows.

So firstly, we wanted to talk about *Black Ties* (20-29 Feb, Arts Centre Melbourne), which is an Australia-New Zealand partnership between two theatre companies. One is ILBIJERRI Theatre Company and one is Te Rēhia Theatre Company – and I'm very sorry if I mispronounce any of those. Essentially, it's actually a romcom between a Maori woman called Hera and an Aboriginal man from Australia called Kane, who are in love and want to get married. But as a lot of these romcoms do, their families, basically object to this marriage on the grounds of them not being from the same family or background.

CO: And so drama ensues.

NS: And this is actually a play that takes the form of two parts. So in the first part of the play, it's the two families meeting the other half of the couple for the first time. And you see the tensions that might crop up and in the second part of the play after the interval, it actually switches to become a wedding scene where the audience are actually wedding guests. Alright, so, Carolyn, can you start off with telling us how you felt about *Black Ties*?

CO: Well, first of all, what I appreciate most about *Black Ties* was the fact that it gave us a good introduction to what the relationships between the migrants and the indigenous people are. That's one – because every performance starts with an acknowledgement to the land that they're on, it depends on which community this particular piece of land belongs to, and there's that acknowledgement to that.

NS: And this is every performance in Asia TOPA.

CO: Every single performance, correct. So that's a very refreshing thing for me – for us–

NS: –for us as Singaporeans.

CO: In Singapore – who do we thank, sponsors, right? So along those lines, I was really thankful for being given new knowledge through *Black Ties*, primarily that I didn't know there was so much animosity between the Maoris in New Zealand and the Aboriginals in Australia. And this came through in several points throughout the play, through the shouting and very emotional conversations that they were having. But yeah, there were very obvious allusions to this tension throughout the play, for example, Kane was meeting with Hera's mom. The scene in New Zealand was very tense because Hera's mother was asking all sorts of questions like, "Is he Maori?" for example. And then you thought, "Oh, is that going to be a problem?"

NS: And you might think It sounds like a serious drama. But it's actually a romcom. It's billed as a romcom but with First Nations characters and families. So that was kind of interesting for us. Like there's a lot of serious issues that Carolyn was talking about. There's also things about like abandonment of fathers leaving, that seems to be a big issue in the community, a sense of injustice that happens to these communities as well. But there were so many moments of comedy and levity–

CO: And shtick. Just pure shtick.

NS: There was quite a lot of shtick, you're right.

CO: Primarily with the musicians – there were three musicians who would come on and off the stage. And I suppose they were: a) providing musical accompaniment to what was going on, but they were also providing perhaps some comic relief. And I think sometimes it worked, and sometimes it didn't work for me. Especially not if the shtick came in the midst of something that was particularly dramatic. And if there was a particularly emotional discussion going on, then you know, you don't want that unnecessary levity lah.

NS: Yah. And we kind of talked about one particular scene where there's like a Maori welcome ceremony and before the ceremony was gonna happen, I think the two boys – the Australian Aboriginal boys – they were scared of the ceremony they were like, "What's going to happen?". And you think it's going to be a serious warrior-esque welcome, and it becomes... it's played as like a physical gag, almost right?

CO: With a broken broomstick–

NS: –with a broken broomstick and a slipper, instead of weapons basically. And you know, it drew some laughs. But then I think what happened after that was that the women came out and instead of singing maybe a more–

CO: –traditional Maori tune–

NS: –the song they sang, "It's Raining Men".

CO: Yes. And they sang it really well.

NS: It was like, I love the way it was like contemporary and traditional at the same time. So that was very, very enjoyable. But one thing to talk about is that this show took 150 minutes to tell this story. And after a while, there were moments that you felt were a bit–

CO: Draggy.

NS: A bit draggy, there was a bit of padding that didn't need to be there. Some scenes or some exchanges felt like they were in a totally different play almost. Because they were played so broadly or almost like slapstick.

CO: Precisely. But we were also talking about the fact that given the length of the show, you as the audience member, you almost feel invested in it. It's like – and I don't know whether this was the intention of the playwright's – but it was like really being at somebody's wedding. Some random wedding where you could be expected to spend about two and a half, three hours and a lot of it is sitting there going, "why are we here?".

NS: Yeah. Which sometimes you feel at a family wedding. Right? And you know, so I kind of feel that because you spent so much time with these characters and I felt like the actors play them prepared really well. You do believe some of the chemistry between the characters, you will kind of can forgive sometimes some of the slack in the storytelling. Overall, I felt that it was a very important story to tell this kind of like a First Nations romcom. I'm very sure it's one of the rare kind of like performances Australia New Zealand partnership as well yes, I think it's very important to tell the story.

Ok moving on to *HuRu-hARa* (20 Feb-1 Mar, Abbotsford Convent). Okay, how do I start with *HuRu-hARa*? Essentially what "huru-hara" means in Bahasa Indonesia or Bahasa Melayu is riot or chaos, right? And it was one–

CO: It was. And to which I would add, so is it meant to be organised or disorganised? Yeah.

NS: So when you go to *HuRu-hARa* which is set – where they do it is in the Abbotsford Convent, which is a–

CO: It's a disused convent which is now an arts space.

NS: A cool arts space. So when you first go into this indoor space, it's like an exhibition with many different components. There was installation art, there was a dive bar, there was street art. There are artists still making things when we were

there, people selling t-shirts and it was like everything that you could think of. But essentially, you don't really know what's what sometimes – you're like, "is that part of the artwork? Are they done with this? Are they not?" There was a sense of unfinished-ness that you feel that, if you come tomorrow, it will change.

CO: In fact, you can pretty much expect that because they do say that the installation is just going to take on new dimensions as the time passes.

NS: Yeah, because it's a week-long thing. So that was indoors and outdoors they're different performances every night. And we caught two, one was a kind of a performance art, that was done by a solo performer, performing with batik cloth – like wrapping it and unfolding it, getting people to touch it and play with it. And for that one, I think it kind of eluded us a little bit.

CO: Yes. That performance was by Nila Choo who's an anonymous artist from Singapore. And it's meant to be a funerary rite. And obviously it was programmed to take place every night of *HuRu-hARa*. Obviously we haven't had the benefit of seeing any other of Nila Choo's performances. So we don't know how that funerary rite has evolved, if at all. But what we saw, yes, it did escape us as to what is this about, what was the point. I know performance art can be a little bit difficult to understand sometimes. But as Wayang Polah proved to us immediately after that, there can actually be a point, and there can be context.

NS: Yeah. So Wayang Polah is actually – they're Javanese interactive mural artists from Jogja. But what we saw was the kind of a live DJ set, and there was also a dancer-performer who was bound in "Fragile" tape, right and then moving in a very animalistic, non-human type of way. And you don't actually see the DJs, because they're covered by their mural art, and they're making all these sounds. And actually because I was watching it from afar, I didn't know that they were making sounds live, I thought they were – you know, sometimes DJs just spin music. Yeah, but this one was like very live and very, almost ritualistic sounds that they were making.

NS: There's a lot of things that you could get from it, I felt, and a lot of context that you could get from Wayang Polah, which I think for Nila Choo, we didn't really get that as much.

So I think with *HuRu-hARa*, I get the sense that it's this amalgamation of different things that you know, Nusantara, avant garde artists can do, but also a sense that it can get messy real fast. But within the messiness, you could get something very surprising and very beautiful as well.

CO: Yeah, absolutely.

NS: Yeah. So I think that promise of it, that's quite something that I think *HuRu-hARa* does really well. And I think it's best if you can actually revisit it if you can.

CO: Yeah, it does require investment from the audience though because if you do want to see how the entire installation evolves, you would have to go more than once.

NS: Yeah, Carolyn tell us about *Chinese Square Dancers* (24-28 Feb, Melbourne Museum Plaza).

CO: So #IsItBecauseI'mChinese. But I will oblige. So *Chinese Square Dancers* – basically a bunch of people in a square formation, doing movements with their arms and their legs, synchronised movements and square dancing. Mass dancing as many Singaporeans would know. So, this is so important for so many reasons, because one: the participants were all roughly in the 60s, some even looked like they were in their 70s but they were spry, they were slim. Nobody looked like they were about to keel over from a heart attack.

NS: Maybe me.

CO: And that's the thing. We tried it out as well. And the movements are not simple. Yeah. I mean,

NS: They are simple–

CO: And they're low intensity, but they require coordination. Yeah. And the repetitive nature of the movements actually do start to put some stress on the muscles – you start to feel a dull ache in your your upper arm or you feel some kind of strain on your forearm because you are clenching a fist. But these are such essential bodily movements that you know, they are only doing your body a whole world of good by actually moving them. Then the other thing is because it requires coordination, and if it's accessible to older people, it means – I'm sure – it keeps dementia at bay. It must do, because it just keeps your mind working. It's like Sudoku or doing a crossword. And then of course there is the community aspect that is just so important because these ladies – most of them were ladies, as is the case with most communal exercise programmes – most of them were ethnically Chinese and migrants to Australia. It's so important that as a migrant in a foreign country, you do need that sense of community, you do need a support network, and I'm pretty sure that if any of them had any issues or needed some help, other members of the community will jump in to assist.

NS: I think I really felt that sense of solidarity. So I tried to stay for as long as I could doing the exercises, right. And after a while you see passersby look at you or take photos or sometimes they are laughing or you know, trying to make fun of some of the movements. And it made me really think about what it's like to be these women, to be in this community, and there's a reason why, in a sense, they cling to this regular activity with each other.

CO: Yeah.

NS: And I like that it's part of Asia TOPA, because you don't think about Chinese square dancing as something that you find in a contemporary performance festival, right. But the fact that it is, I felt like it's very... welcoming? Like there is space for all of us – in Australia, in the world. I really got that sense being part of the group.

CO: To me, Chinese square dancing is the epitome of a community arts event. And you know, arts policymakers the world over are falling over themselves trying to incorporate the idea of community arts into their policies, into the events, into their programming, because they know exactly how important it is. And this is a very, very good example of that in action.

NS: Next we actually saw – well, I didn't see it, I saw it in Singapore actually at the Esplanade – *The Seen and Unseen* by Kamila Andini (20-29 Feb, Martyn Myer Arena). How was that?

CO: I really enjoyed this, because first of all, I enjoy dance. And I especially enjoy dance that is performed well. By that I mean dance that requires and is executed with a high level of technical skill. Now of course, they have to be the accompaniments, like a good set, lighting design, rich soundtrack, in order to flesh out all of the spectacle, and I believe *The Seen and Unseen* really had all of these. The set was minimalistic but it really did the job. There was a nest of hair that was made by Eugyeene Teh. And then the soundscape was essentially naturalistic sounds, butts chirping, dogs barking, rivers flowing. And of course there was actual live singing, it just added to the magical beauty of Bali that one has already come to expect, whether from watching movies or having been there themselves, right. But as far as the dancers were concerned, they performed their parts with a great deal of soul particularly the child performers from Komunitas Bumi Bajra, which is an arts academy of sorts where artists are trained from the young age in vocalisation, dance, theatre, percussion. The children displayed a whole series of vocalisations from howling to hissing to shrieking. And these vocalisations are so primal, so so primal that I wonder if they actually helped the performers to dig into their beings for direction. The sounds of vocalisations that the children were making, were not just children playing at making noises–

NS: Animal noises—

CO: It's not just "let's do a cat's mew" or something. This is something really deep, deep, deep inside. So there's an example of Tantri who is one of the protagonists. So, essentially the story is about Tantri and Tantra who are twins, but Tantra falls seriously ill and Tantri has to deal with his illness, and the knowledge that she is losing him very, very slowly but surely. And there is a scene where she – I don't even know what to call it, whether it's a shriek or a yawp, or something else – but it just came from her belly somewhere. And it's so far beyond her 14 years. She's only 14 years old. The dancer's name is Ni Kadek Thaly Kasih, and she played Tantri in the movie (version of *The Seen and Unseen*) as well and actually won an award for it.

NS: Wow. Something that I remember was actually from the nest of the set design, there was actually an IV drip that falls and is alluding to the boy's illness as well. And I remember when I watched it last year, I was kind of annoyed by it because it was so jarring from the more organic nature of the set and the dancing and you know, just this very natural world. And to see this one very jarring thing that comes from a clinical space. I was annoyed by that at a time. And then does another thing where I think there were some eggs that dropped and broke, and then a towel comes on stage to wipe it away. And I was like, "Ugh!", you know? But after thinking about it a bit more, it kind of makes sense in the world of the play, because you were mentioning how "Oh, everything is beautiful" and all, right. And I feel like you can't just have beautiful things all the time – you can get tired of it quite fast. But because there was this sharp contrast it was like "yes, like this is about real world issues, real world problems". And now I can understand the directorial choice of having those things onstage.

CO: Right. And the whole premise of the story is dualism. So I think the IV drip was extremely important to remind the audience that this wasn't just some idyllic romanticised view of Bali. But, you know, it's contemporary. Yeah. And then the wiping up of the egg well, several reasons. I look at it from a very practical standpoint, it's like somebody could have slipped on the egg. So it's like, "let's get it out of the way".

NS: Yeah that's true. Actor safety. Fair enough.

To move on to a happier note, *Torch the Place* (running till 23 Mar, Arts Centre Melbourne) is a drama/ comedy about a Chinese Australian family who live in Queensland now. And there's these three children who come and essentially they're staging an intervention for their mum, Diana, who has a very, very serious hoarding problem, right? And, the hoarding problem is basically a manifestation of this migrant mother's hopes and dreams that may not have been realised. And her sense of like, the fact that she's cut off from her roots, almost. And her children who are very English-speaking, very articulate Australian kids – she's alienated from them, basically, right?

CO: Yeah.

NS: But it is a sitcom because Benjamin Law – he’s known as a TV writer. He writes comedies I think mainly. And so it was this interesting mix of these very serious issues, but played within the context of a comedy and it was really, really funny. We were talking about – there’s a Mulan scene, right? Is that a stereotype, Carolyn?

CO: My gut reaction was to say, “Oh, God, please spare me a stereotype”. But when I think about it, the Chinese diaspora actually does appreciate Mulan, I think.

Photo: Jeff Busby

NS: And that was a scene where basically, it’s almost like a musical kind of scene. It breaks the fourth wall or breaks the realism of the story which was very enjoyable and I think the audience was howling in their seats. And I think another thing was that you could actually hear Cantonese language in this play. And they were delivered without subtitles so you know, you might not know what the mom is saying – because it’s the mom can speak Cantonese, the children most of them don’t speak Cantonese and might not understand her, similar to the audience as well. And Carolyn, you understand Cantonese right?

CO: I do. I am not a Cantonese speaker, but I am familiar with how Cantonese should be spoken. And so the minute Diana Lin, who by the way, was also in *The Farewell* and she was bloody good in *The Farewell*. She isn’t a Cantonese speaker. And the minute she started speaking Cantonese, I knew because I could hear that her lilt wasn’t at all Cantonese. And in the Q&A session after the performance, she did admit to this and she said that her language is actually Mandarin and she had discussed this with Benjamin Law, and she had even suggested changing the language to Mandarin from Cantonese to make it a little bit more authentic. Eventually the decision was to keep the Cantonese. Yeah. And maybe Benjamin Law just wanted to be true to what had already been written–

NS: Yah, and I think his own experience as well, possibly.

CO: Yes, I think so. But the end result was, as far as I was concerned, was that that Cantonese was less than authentic.

NS: So I think the question there is, perhaps, who is it written for? Maybe if it’s for an audience who doesn’t understand Cantonese that would not be able to pick up that it wasn’t as authentic as it could be – and I’m from that group because I don’t understand Cantonese. So to me, it was like, “Wow, it sounds so beautiful” you know?, to me, that’s the question to ask.

So moving on to *Metal* (24-27 Feb, Arts Centre Melbourne).

CO: Wow *Metal*. Okay, what is it about indeed? So it's described as a collaboration between Lucy Guerin Inc, which is an Australian contemporary dance company, and a heavy metal choir called Ensemble Tikoro, who are from Bandung in Indonesia. If you were given just that information, you would be forgiven for thinking that this performance entailed a bunch of heavy metal rockers who will be in one corner of the stage, playing their instruments, shouting into their microphones. And then on the other side of the stage, you would have a bunch of dancers dancing to the music. Except that that's not what happened at all. Essentially what was the performance was, yes, the heavy metal choir in their requisite black t-shirt, jeans and long hair covering the face, without instruments other than their voices. The only instrumentation they had was vocal instruments—

NS: Wait, can I do it?

CO: Please, Nabilah.

NS: Essentially it was kind of like *(does a very basic vocalisation with the throat)*.

CO: Yes! That was it. There was like an hour's worth of that sort of throat singing.

NS: But very, very technical throat singing.

CO: Very technical throat singing, of course. And the dancers dancing to that throat singing, dancing to the changes in tempo of that throat singing. And the collaborative aspect was where the dancers and the singers all moved around the stage at various times.

NS: Almost blended into one. Sometimes you couldn't tell who was the dancer, who was the performer. I mean, obviously you can because most of the dancers were women, and for the heavy metal choir, only one was a woman, the rest were men have long hair. But even with the long hair flying all about, sometimes it's like "wow, like who is who?".

NS: And I think that was quite cool, because essentially these are two worlds that come together for a performance and I like that in the end it became one unified world almost—

CO: Yes.

NS: And I'm not sure if I imagined it but at some point, I felt that the throat singing actually evolved into... I could actually hear gamelan sounds that were still all coming from humans, essentially... And I heard words even.

CO: I heard words. I'm not sure if I heard the gamelan sounds. And I don't know whether there was any, any soundtrack piped in as well.

NS: I think there was? A little bit?

CO: -accompaniment. There was piped-in accompaniment, so that might not have been from the choir but perhaps—

NS: Who knows? They were coming up with such interesting sounds actually – like animalistic as well. Sometimes it sounded like construction and things like that.

CO: Oh, yeah, absolutely, absolutely. There was a very strong timbre in their throat singing and on that point about the collaborativeness of the performance, right, “who was dancing, who was singing”. I think this was a good example of a true multidisciplinary performance because a lot of the time when you say “multidisciplinary” people think “okay, let's just stick a poet on stage and then have somebody next to him with a guitar and that's multidisciplinary”. It's like... No. Where's the result of that collaboration? So I think this one really blended the two quite well.

NS: I mean, I do still feel that it's a little bit raw around the edges. I feel like it could—

CO: Oh my gosh, how is heavy metal not raw? Everything about it so raw.

NS: Maybe some rawness is to be expected, okay. Basically I'm interested to see like, what happens after this because this is a 60-minute performance. Can they evolve it such that it, I don't know, it builds to a bigger kind of thing than it was. Because this is the world premiere of the piece, so that would be very exciting to see. And I think just having the heavy metal choir in this festival – I thought it was so interesting to have them.

CO: Right.

NS: And I think lot of people were there because of the curiosity as well.

CO: Yes. I mean, because you ask the question, “what the hell is a heavy metal choir?”

NS: Yah, totally. And that's partially answered in the show.

CO: Yes, it is.

NS: Yes. So with that, we've come to the end of this quite long episode. We are actually watching even more shows – there'll be another episode that's coming out in

a few days. And thank you so much for joining us. And thank you for Asia TOPA for having us in Melbourne as well.

CO: Thank you very much.

NS: Thank you. Bye-bye.

CO: Bye.