

## ARTS EQUATOR ASIA TOPA REVIEW

### Transcript – Part 2

#### Transcript

**Nabilah Said (NS):** Hello and welcome to the ArtsEquator theatre podcast. This is the second part of our episode that's on Asia TOPA in Melbourne and I'm here with Carolyn.

**Carolyn Oei (CO):** Hello everyone.

**NS:** So let's get into it. I caught *Are You Ready To Take The Law Into Your Own Hands*—

**CO:** And how was that Nabilah?

**NS:** A bit of a mouthful. So that play is by Sipat Lawin and friends, they're from the Philippines. Essentially, it was about a pop star Gracielle V, apparently the Philippines' because pop star —of course fictional— who has been kidnapped. Only one person sees her being kidnapped, and it's this millennial fan of hers called Selina. And of course, you know, when your biggest idol is kidnapped, you would freak out, right? So she grabs her sister and they go to a police station and tries to report it, except that apparently no crime has been reported. But on the strength of this millennial's passion and conviction that something bad has happened, these three women go and do a vigilante chase through Manila to find the kidnapers. It's played out as a B-grade live action movie-type thing.

**CO:** Starting to sound like it.

**NS:** Along the way they get caught in a really bad traffic jam in a Jeepney, where for some reason, the kidnapers actually find them — and they have to do a dance battle with the kidnapers. Also the kidnapers are actually played by a dance group — they are called the KIKI House of Dévine — they're a drag and dance troupe and they are from Melbourne. So you know, as with a lot of these Asia TOPA shows, they're collaborations between certain countries with Australia or with Melbourne. But the piece actually, even though it sounds really fun and really kind of madcap, the play is also talking about politics, or the politics of the people in the Philippines, affected by certain things that are happening in the administration in the current landscape. And without naming names, without actually telling you 'this is what's happening'. They give you a sense that Filipino people, they are trying their best to live their lives out large, even with the issues and the problems that comes with living in the country in the current moment. So you can tell that there's a lot of things going on.

It's quite interesting because they use a lot of Tagalog without subtitles. The writer and the director of the show actually feature in the show as well. The writer interviews the director, like, "Oh, what was it like to create this show?" And at first, it seems like it's a serious thing. But as the scenes go by, the more and more you watch this "interview", suddenly one person speaks in Tagalog, or certain parts of the thing will be all in Tagalog.

And you're a bit lost, but essentially you know what's happening. They're reasserting Filipino pride, in language and culture. There's also elements of dancing, traditional dancing, there's fan dancing and fingernail dancing (which sounds really cool) but interspersed with voguing, interspersed with Filipino songs, Carly Rae Jepsen song, so there was a lot of things going on. I just loved that it was Filipino culture come alive. Everyone was there to have a good time. So I was really glad for the festival to have given the stage to this Sipat Lawin ensemble, which is essentially a young theatre group from Manila. Everything came together as a very energetic burst of passion for the country, passion for the Philippines, but also an acknowledgment that things need to change. So there was an element of social change and social justice through theatre, which is like really powerful.

**CO:** Speaking of social messages — *Hades Fading*, and just my initial feelings about it is that it seemed to me like a community art event, something that you would see in a warung or in a small village or town, the equivalent of a community centre for example. It had shades of the wayang kulit, which is your shadow puppet theatre. Yeah. Not only from the social message standpoint, but also

from the set design. There were translucent muslin drapes – there were three layers of those – and the musicians were set to the back of the stage. The music was live, which, which added that very natural, authentic feel to the performance.

**NS:** So essentially, the show is set in Hades. As the title suggests, Hades is fading, because of how people have forgotten Hades, people have forgotten these Greek tragedies, and by extension people have forgotten the natural world and our connections to the natural world that we come from. So, in the show, we follow Eurydice who is played by Heliana Sinaga. She is dressed in this beautiful wedding dress that's merging with like newspapers, right? They have newspapers strewn around her dress, so she's like rising from the floor. Hades is described as a library of sorts, and she wakes up and she doesn't know where she is. Because she wants to find out where she's from, she starts to open up a book, and she's like – so apparently she comes from this place, but she reads another book and the book says she comes from another place. And so there's all these information, almost like information overload, and she's like, I don't know where I come from. But there are cheeky reference. So instead of opening up a book, she would be typing on a laptop. So there were incursions of modern technology that came into the natural world that we were physically presented with that were quite cheeky.

**CO:** Right. Even with a set design, you have something that looks like a very traditional wayang kulit sort of setup, but the projections, and the lighting and even the sounds that are created, both by the musicians as well as by the sound designer, are just such a blend of traditional and contemporary.

**NS:** So one of the elements that is quite interesting in this piece was actually the use of humour and when they would use humour. Because as you said, their message is a social message of you know, the world kind of dying. Climate change is very, very serious, but they would always have cheeky touches that will make you... even if you don't laugh, you smile. There was one part where there was a chorus of voices making sounds – so the word that really was quite distinct was “buku buku buku”, of course in a melody kind of way.

**CO:** And “buku” means “book”. But the way they said it and the repetitiveness of it made it also sound like a bird chirping “buku buku buku”....

**NS:** And besides “buku” there was like “CD” and “flashdisk” and a lot of other words as well. Sometimes when you hear a word like “flashdisk”, it sounds absurd in a choir of natural sounds. But I feel where the humour was very, very obvious, was with the character of Orpheus, right, who is Eurydice's lover, where he actually breaks the fourth wall and comes into the audience. Orpheus is traditionally known as a character that plays... I think he plays an instrument. So he loves music. And in this iteration of the story, he wants to build a recording–

**CO:** A recording studio, so he comes out from behind the muslin drapes and he interacts with the audience. And so this is where the audience is not quite sure how to deal with it, because we're watching something behind all these drapes, and then suddenly, boom, we're confronted with him straight-on.

**NS:** Yeah. And he's a showman.

**CO:** Yes.

**NS:** He wants you to laugh at his little antics, his physical flourishes. There were those bizarre kind of elements that made you laugh. And there are people in the audience who were laughing their heads off–

**CO:** Throughout the entire performance.

**NS:** Which was kind of disturbing for me, sometimes.

**CO:** Yes.

**NS:** Because I don't think it was always meant to be that funny?

**CO:** No. I think the chuckling might have been a coping mechanism of dealing with some discomfort. Discomfort whether in understanding or not recognising what's going on, not being familiar with a certain cultural practice or culture even. And because it was Bahasa Indonesia interspersed with English – and yes, that was sufficient translation – but still, there might have been moments where members of the audience would have missed the translations, or moments of non-understanding or even maybe misunderstanding. And that could create feelings of discomfort.

**NS:** Yeah, I think so. The writer and the theatre maker is Sandra Fiona Long – so this is a collaboration once again of Indonesian and Australian artists. We did want to mention a shout-out to the tempe...

**CO:** Yes, because this was the world premiere and it was the opening show. There were nibbles and we got the chance also to interact and have a chat with the team that put this together. And, yes, shout-out to the tempe because we were kind of missing Asian food, and to accompany the tempe was some seriously wicked sambal.

**NS:** It really lends to the whole experience because, you know to have tempe and spring roll, I felt like the thought there, it extended the whole experience for us. So that's why the tempe was worth talking about.

Moving on to another Southeast Asian work that I caught – it is called *À Ố Làng Phố*. It's from Vietnam. It's essentially a Vietnamese bamboo circus and the director of it was from Cirque du Soleil actually. So you can imagine some of the technical feats that would come out from it, or the worldbuilding that would come from having been in Cirque du Soleil. But this was a world building that was a Vietnamese world, a very specific real person from Vietnam, from the villages, perspective. So it's a bamboo circus, which means that all the props that they used, whether big or small, were either made of bamboo or made of rattan. So we had huge domes made of weaved rattan or bamboo and there were also hoops, bamboo poles, and some of them were huge. So for example, if you imagine like a giant bamboo pole, they were essentially juggling them with each other across the large stage. And these were predominantly very muscular, 20-year-old boys who were just very, very acrobatic.

**CO:** You would have to be.

**NS:** You need to have all those muscles to do all the feats of strength that they were doing – things like trapeze acts, aerial displays, but all with bamboo elements, so that was cool. I feel like people have to go and Google it to really see what I'm talking about. But what was more interesting was actually how they depicted Vietnamese life on stage. So for example, it would start with fisherman fishing, and that's how they would use bamboo poles, for example. They'd be fishing and then at one point, they all become frogs, you know, ribbit-ing around with a dome on their backs. But then it quickly becomes like a construction scene, where they use the bamboo poles to create scaffolding. And later on they depict people in Vietnamese villages living in close quarters to each other. So there's one quite funny sequence where these two lovers are like basically trying to have some quality time together, but they have neighbours very close above them who are pounding on some spices and making a huge noise, so obviously it spoils to the mood, right? And the girlfriend goes and picks up bamboo pole and pokes the ceiling. And so there's a little squabbling that goes on and it's always very funny and very cheeky.

And also, if you think about it, they're not actors, right? So it's more like physical gags that are taking place. Credit to them, all these acrobats, they nail the comedic timing or the physical movements that they were doing and the audience was laughing and cheering the characters as they were going on about their regular lives.

And *À Ố Làng Phố* means "from village to city". So that's why this idea of urbanisation and how it affects real Vietnamese people. And it was also accompanied by very traditional Vietnamese music, using instruments like the two-chord fiddle and plucked lute, but there was also beatboxing, hip hop dancing and b-boying. So there was the sense of contemporary and traditional that I didn't expect. And I think with *À Ố Làng Phố*, it's a bit hard to really tell someone about it. It's one of those things where like, "just watch it, it was amazing".

**CO:** Which is probably how I feel about *Dragon Ladies Don't Weep* by Margaret Leng Tan. Wow, where do I begin? Because any superlative that I use is just going to shortchange Margaret Leng Tan for her artistry, for her grace, her style, her physicality. It was, for want of a better word, a brilliant performance. She is a Singapore-born avant garde musician who is known globally as the queen of the toy piano. She basically brought the toy piano to life and essentially said "yes, this is a very real instrument". This was a one-night-only world premiere here in Melbourne as part of Asia TOPA. And it's where she comes clean about her OCD, her Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, which manifests itself in counting. And with counting, you can see that – and she says this line in the performance – music is where counting belongs. And so the performance essentially is a chronicle of the people, situations and influences that shaped her life and her music. It's autobiographical in nature, which is why she can talk about her OCD and you can see that music is where she was meant to be. And I think the world can be very grateful that she recognised that and has thrown herself into it.

**NS:** So rather than her usual kind of concerts, this one is a bit more.... would you say theatrical?

**CO:** Yes, certainly theatrical. And there's a good mix of her playing on the piano, as well as the toy piano, and also the toys, the physical toys that she plays with and she's also known for that. As in like, she can take a can of coffee, for example, and turn it into an instrument. So in this particular performance, there is her also actually addressing the audience and there's projections at the back as well. Mainly lines and geometrical shapes, which lend weight to the whole OCD thing about counting. And the counting bit also shows itself up in a particular scene where she is recounting a story of how she tenaciously pursued professionally, the late John Cage. And we all know, John Cage was one of the US' major contemporary composers, and he was also the lifelong partner and collaborator of Merce Cunningham.

**NS:** There's a sense of like the importance of this woman and this talent. At her age as well.

**CO:** Yeah, it's amazing. She sits and stands, she even lies down on the floor at one point. And at the age of 74, to be able to get up again, yes, it is difficult. But she does it so flawlessly and so elegantly, that it's really #LifeGoals. When I grow up–

**NS:** I wanna be Margaret Leng Tan.

**CO:** Yes, absolutely. But what I also appreciated about her performance is that she peppers it with her thought process. Or at least she gives us a glimpse into her thought process, which I interpret as being extremely critical, or crucial, to her grounding as a person. She came across also is very human, and not somebody who's totally lost in her artistic bubble to the point of narcissism. So for example, she has this thing called the DRC, the Daily Reality Check. And how she shared this with the audience was that she would have a tenet, if you will, that was flashed on the projection behind, so the first one that came up was "Every day 100 elephants are poached (or slaughtered) for the ivory". And immediately there's a sense of dread and gloom in the pit of everybody's stomach. And then she turns to the audience says, "toy pianos do not kill any elephants". And I think that is a brilliant thought process because it indicates or at least it hints to us that she is aware of what's going on in the world. She takes in what's going on in the world. And she establishes her position in that world.

**NS:** So those were all the shows that we've caught in this one week of being in Asia TOPA. And I'm also conscious of the fact that Asia TOPA runs till March, so there are a lot of other shows that we wish we could catch, but obviously we only have a limited time here. What were some of the highlights for you?

**CO:** I think you will agree with me that we were just very taken by the curation and the programming of Asia TOPA. I think they've done a really good job of ensuring that, as you said Nabilah, this Asian world or the Southeast Asian world is really a part, it should be a part of our consciousness and should be a part of our awareness. It's not something exotic that you go to a special place to see, and then marvel at it and maybe poke at the artists and ask "are they real?", or something, you know.

**NS:** Yeah. And part of the contemporary performing arts landscape as well. like, we are not, you know, museum kind of pieces. And it doesn't always have to be reverential or traditional, or you know, staid or static. It's very dynamic. It's very alive. It's very current. You know, things like climate change and all, it's all in our collective consciousness. I really got that sense of a shared world from watching

all the shows in Asia TOPA.

**CO:** Yeah and you say the word “staid” and certainly the shows that we watched were not at all staid. We both liked *Metal*, for instance. That was the collaboration between Lucy Guerin and Ensemble Tikoro, so it’s Australian contemporary dance mixed with heavy metal–

**NS:** From Bandung.

**CO:** Yeah, but heavy metal as we don’t know it because it was just a whole bunch of throat singing basically. And Asia TOPA prides itself in presenting new worlds. So this to me was certainly new work, because it’s not something that you would even imagine or even think possible.

**NS:** I look forward to the next edition of Asia TOPA because this is only the second time they’ve done it. It feels like it’s an established festival. And that’s going to be in 2023, so that’s exciting. Another thing that I think we both resonated with is how everyone would always pay tribute, pay respect to the land, pay respect to the people who own the land on which we stand. So there was always a verbal respect that was given. And I resonated with this one line where they always say – or they say a version of – “I pay respect to elders past, present and emerging.”. And I like that, because it’s a bit like what we’ve said, not everything is about the past. It’s also about the present, and the future–

**CO:** What’s to come.

**NS:** And what’s to come is a shared future, you know, but we all have to be in it together. We all have to respect each other’s cultures. And I really like that sense of that, which we got a lot of from just one week of us being here.

**CO:** And I hope that it’s a practice that we could bring back with us.

**NS:** In some way, right? So far, it’s the chilli and onion that we bury in the ground, to ward of rain but that can connection to the land, I think we can do more of in Singapore, for sure.

**CO:** I agree.

**NS:** And I think we also got to connect with a lot of our Southeast Asian colleagues and compatriots in the art scene and had loved kind of invigorating conversations about the region and, trying to negotiate how we feel about being in Australia, seeing Southeast Asian works outside of Southeast Asia – what that means. Because it’s not clear-cut, you know, it’s not always beautiful and perfect. What does it mean to be a Southeast Asian in Australia, and having those conversations with our colleagues, I think was quite enriching.

**CO:** Yeah.

**NS:** I think with that we’ve come to quite a long episode. It’s been a week here in Melbourne as part of Asia TOPA and Asia TOPA is actually Asia-Pacific Triennial of Performing Arts, in case anyone was wondering, and we look forward to future iterations. And thank you so much Asia TOPA for having ArtsEquator, me and Carolyn, here. It was a privilege and an honour to watch all these shows. And Melbourne has been also lovely to us.

**CO:** Yes, thank you very much Asia TOPA and thank you, Melbourne.

**NS:** Yeah. Thank you. Goodbye!

**CO:** Bye!