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Fiona Trigg:

I know there was an acknowledgement to country read out in the foyer, but I would just like to, again, acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we're meeting tonight. The Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, and pay my respects to their elders, and to any indigenous people who are here tonight. I think we're all particularly primed after seeing this work to think slightly differently about questions of history and about the nature of betrayal. And our involvement in the history of the place where we live. So, I thought, it's probably good as we talk about Lai Teck, to just, in the back of our minds, those of us who live here in Melbourne, think about the local scenario as well. I'll just move that. So Tzu Nyen, speaking of Melbourne, you're not a stranger to Melbourne, you have some history with this town yourself, don't you?

Ho Tzu Nyen:

Yeah. I was actually a student at Melbourne Uni and also at VCA.

Fiona Trigg:

Right.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

But this was a long time ago, this was 1999.

Fiona Trigg:

Right.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

So being back in Melbourne brings back a lot of strange sensations. Yeah.

Fiona Trigg:

Right. Thank you for maybe bringing some rain with you, but I gather now you're in Berlin, is that...

Ho Tzu Nyen:

I actually, right now I'm based back in Singapore.

Fiona Trigg:

Oh okay.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

Yeah. So I was living in Berlin for three years as well, between 2015 to 2018.

Fiona Trigg:

Right. Also, a city that has an interesting history of betrayal and espionage.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

Betrayal. Yeah. I think Berlin is the city of spies, of course, during the Cold War.

Fiona Trigg:

Right. Sorry, I'll just get closer to the mic.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

Sure.

Fiona Trigg:

I did notice, as I'm sure we all did, the Lili Marleen song as part of this work, but sang not in German, but in...

Ho Tzu Nyen:

In Japanese.

Fiona Trigg:

In Japanese, that was, yeah. We might just start with that small detail because I know we could talk about really big picture questions or we can talk about details. Maybe if we move from one to the other, it will help us kind of respond. Why did you include that song in the work?

Ho Tzu Nyen:

Yeah. So the song, Lili Marleen, of course, it immediately evokes a certain period.

Fiona Trigg:

Right.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

But the track that I chose was sung in Japanese.

Fiona Trigg:

Right.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

So then it brings, for me, it evokes, again, the time of the Japanese involvement in the Second World War. So I thought the song Lili Marlene was very apt, since it combined both the German and the Japanese into one track. And at that moment, Lai Teck was speaking about his favourite movie.

Fiona Trigg:

Yes.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

And I imagined that his favourite movie was a German film by Fritz Lang called The Testament of Dr. Mabuse. The title of the film was never mentioned, Lai Teck said he forgot the title. But for those of you who might not know the movie, should I explain briefly?

Fiona Trigg:

I think you talk a little about the plot in the work. But, yes, please do, why were you attracted to that idea?

Ho Tzu Nyen:

So, basically, Dr. Mabuse was a evil criminal mastermind who only speaks to people behind a sets of curtains. So, actually, the Greek philosopher, Pythagoras, he was also a religious leader. He also spoke to his disciples from behind curtains. So by removing vision, you have to concentrate on hearing.

Fiona Trigg:

Right.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

So I think these were kind of important ideas, for me, in conceptualising this piece.

Fiona Trigg:

Yes, your whole body becomes an ear.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

Yeah.

Fiona Trigg:

And I think for the audience, the use of the curtains at the beginning half of the work has that effect. In that you're so primed by the theatrical references of curtains, to expect it will open, and all will be revealed, and the story will really start. But the curtains just keep coming and parting and moving and changing colour. And so your attention is really heightened because you're waiting and waiting, waiting. And then you realise, oh, this is the work that I'm watching. So maybe you could talk a little bit about the use of curtains in the work, where did that idea come from?

Ho Tzu Nyen:

Yeah. I guess, when I think about theatre, I think about curtains. I would say, there are two main elements I would think about, one, is human presence, and the other is curtains. And the human presence is always behind the curtains.

Fiona Trigg:

Yes.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

So I thought this was kind of the basic elements one needed to make a theatrical piece, which sort of really explains the configuration of this work.

Fiona Trigg:

Right. Right.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

But, I guess, I am also very drawn to the visual quality of curtains as well, like the folds in the cloth. I guess, it makes me think a lot about baroque sculptures, these folds.

Fiona Trigg:

Right. Right.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

So there's also that kind of attraction. So curtains is a screen. And a screen, if we think about a screen, a screen is just a face on which one projects. But it's also as a face which conceals. So I think in some ways this piece was using the curtains as both.

Fiona Trigg:

Yes. And I also thought about the connotation in kind of spying. The curtains on a window, where you feel safe behind them, but you don't know if someone's peeping through. Yeah.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

Behind. Yes.

Fiona Trigg:

And talking of peeping through, I'm really conscious that there's a third person on this stage. I'm feeling this incredible presence of this figure behind us who has also been drawing in our attention throughout the performance. So I'm just really curious to think about the Genesis of this work. I know that you have made previous works referencing the history of Lai Teck. And, actually, I did come last night to see the performance, and afterwards I overheard one person who'd been in the audience saying to someone else, but was he actually a real person. Not knowing the history of Singapore, as many of us are not so familiar with it. So I'm just wondering if you could tell us a little bit about how you came to be interested in this figure? And decide to create a series of works about him?

Ho Tzu Nyen:

Sure. I mean, communism is illegal in Singapore, as in many places in Southeast Asia. So I have always been interested in history. So I think it must have been 10 or 15 years ago when I came across the figure of Lai Teck. And I was already attracted to him. I think not only in the sense of bringing about a kind of other, alternative history, because a lot of these histories of communism has been quite suppressed, I would say, in Singapore. But my interest in him, and in the history of communism, is not merely one of revealing another history because, to me, this history is important and interesting as it is. It is also highly problematic. And, for me, Lai Teck kind of encapsulates this. So yeah. So that's kind of, I guess, the roots of my interest.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

And why problematic? I think it's because, I mean, this kind of came out in the scripts earlier, which is that all of these histories about spies, informers, double agents, they're usually written by other informers or the handlers of the spies. So there's a kind of a process of storytelling involved. So these reports, they were written by someone and for someone. So it makes the entire narrative kind of very, very unstable. And this instability is what draws me to it. So the previous work that I made in 2015, a

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video called The Nameless, which was about Lai Teck, which you had mentioned earlier. And for that film, I recycled images of Hong Kong films starring the same actor over 20 years. But I re-edited it into a film about Lai Teck.

Fiona Trigg:

Right. Right.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

So, for me, using other films to tell this story is already creating a kind of a shell. The figure that appears with the same actor...

Fiona Trigg:

Yes.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

... He's almost like a hollow shell in which we can project this narratives.

Fiona Trigg:

Yes. Yeah.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

So I think between that, and this eventual outcome, it's not that far apart.

Fiona Trigg:

Right. Right. I'm wondering if anyone in the audience has a question. I don't believe we have roving mics, but if you're keen to ask, please just put up your hand and maybe I'll repeat the question.

Speaker 3:

How well-remembered is Lai Teck in Southeast Asia?

Fiona Trigg:

Question is, just so everyone can hear, how well-remembered is Lai Teck in Southeast Asia?

Ho Tzu Nyen:

Actually, he's not well remembered at all. So Lai Teck's successor in the Malayan Communist Party is a man called Chin Peng. So Chin Peng was the next leader of the Communist Party. And he was much better known because he was the one who led the Communist Party during what we call, The Emergency, which is the armed revolt. And he was the one that eventually led the Communist Party northwards into the forest between Malaysia and Thailand. And they just surrendered, I think, like 10, 15 years ago. So when people think about communism in Malaya, they think about Chin Peng, but not Lai Teck. But actually Chin Peng was handpicked by Lai Teck, so there's a very close connection. But he's not well-known at all. And whatever is known about him, if you look at all the academic research done, they all consist of very contradictory accounts. Yeah. So yeah. Which is another reason why I was really drawn to this figure.

Fiona Trigg:

Ah, yes.

Speaker 4:

I just wanted to ask whether you've performed this in Malaysia and whether you see if there's been a problem with that? Or if you see a different sensibility between Malaysia and Singapore in relation to Lai Teck And the communist movement?

Ho Tzu Nyen:

Yeah. So I, yes, of course.

Fiona Trigg:

Sorry, I just repeat the question, was asking if this work has been performed in Malaysia? And if there has been a different response there from audiences to performances in other places?

Ho Tzu Nyen:

Yeah. So I've never actually presented this in Malaysia, but I have done so in Singapore. But I've, of course, met with Malaysian audiences. So in Malaysia as well, I mean, Lai Teck is not well known. So all of the focus on that period of history goes into the later parts, which is after the war and during The Emergency. At least the Malaysian audience that I spoke with, they were also quite intrigued to find out about this figure.

Fiona Trigg:

I'll just get to you in one second, sir. But, just, I wanted to comment when you were talking about the character being unstable. And it's like an unstable, it's almost a portrait, but it's not quite a portrait in the traditional sense. I love how the form of the work really reinforces that idea. And the way that you have written the script, which is so beautiful just to listen, has so many amazing kind of lines in it. But that's pieced together from a wide range of sources in it. I mean, there are quotes, and there are recollections, and there are things you've imagined such as the movie. But we don't really know that when we're watching. Whether he wrote a diary entry some time, that we've seen, about going to the cinema. Or the story, in particular, about running into his old colleague from the school. And then meeting him secretly and hugging him and saying he was a true communist. How did you go about deciding what to include in the voice, which you've all put in the first person?

Ho Tzu Nyen:

Yeah. Actually, for example, the bit about the movie, so it was true that Lai Teck was a cinephile.

Fiona Trigg:

Right.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

And he was true in the sense that it was written in certain academic papers.

Fiona Trigg:

Right.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

And it was also true that, in that same account they mentioned, that he went to the movies like, he saw his favourite movies at least 10 times.

Fiona Trigg:

Right.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

But I took some liberties with what the actual movie was. But I find that when I'm reading through a lot of these, supposedly academic accounts, I sometimes find them full off projections as well. So, for example, the book, *The Mysterious Lai Teck*, which is real. The author was describing Lai Teck in a very factual way until the middle of the book, he suddenly described Lai Teck's marriage to his third wife. And he was describing, suddenly, the night of the marriage, when Lai Teck was opening the buttons to the blouse of his wife. And I'm like, this was like a really strange eruption of this fantasies almost. I mean, this is a very extreme case that I'm describing. But, for me, these types of fantasies and projections, I would say, I could almost find them in every single piece of writing. No matter how academic, serious, it appears to be. So yeah. So, I think, naturally, as I was writing this script, that also kind of happened.

Fiona Trigg:

Yeah. I'm sorry, sir, your question?

Speaker 5:

What's the genesis behind the larger than life figure [inaudible 00:15:25].

Fiona Trigg:

He's just asking what prompted the choice to use a figure? An automaton? And not a live actor in the...

Ho Tzu Nyen:

Yeah. Sure. So I think he was also asking about the scale of the figure.

Fiona Trigg:

Right. Yeah.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

But, first, the choice of this animatronic model. So I think the voice, and the sound, sound and image, for me, is something sort of divorced, like split. I mean, if we think about cinema, we think about synchronisation, but, for me, the voice and the body is something separate. So this goes together with what I mentioned earlier about this speaking behind curtains, when you're cut off from the visuals, right? So it's almost two separate kind of tracks that occasionally comes together. So I think the figure is a shell in which things pass through. So I think about a spy in that way. A spy is a container or a medium, if we like, containing secrets. You could smuggle secrets inside. But we could also think of the spy as someone who smuggles war or chaos into civil society.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

So that kind of, for me, explains this usage of the shell. But I think of him also actually as a screen, which partly accounts for why he's black and white. I mean, he's kind of like there's no colour in him, so that he's white like a screen, which facilitates projections, of course. So behind the curtains you expect a source, but the source is actually just another screen, so he's another curtain. So as for the scale, I think, because when we are looking at him in a theatre, and there's no other reference points for size, we can't really tell how big or small he is. And that's also why we leave the curtains open for so long at the end, right? So this perception or inability to perceive scale, this misperception, I think also kind of resonates, I guess, with my treatment of the piece as a whole.

Fiona Trigg:

Yeah. Yeah. I also really loved the text. How you talk about him seeing himself as a being who was like water in water and tears in the rain. I'm not quite sure the origin of those phrases. [Inaudible 00:18:28] very beautiful way to think about a life. A mysterious life that we all have. But I love how you made that evident in the use of light in the project. I mean, it's so fluid and changes without you realising. It's like the character says, you can wake up on the wrong side of history or the wrong side of a border without even hardly knowing it in the 20th century. Just as the light kept changing. And you'd be really focusing, and think you were really paying attention. And then suddenly it would be red. And you think, oh, I didn't see it turn red. So I just wondered, on a technical level, did you write a script for the light? Or how did you go about deciding how to manipulate it?

Ho Tzu Nyen:

Yeah. I think my scripts often contain some kind of directions about every element.

Fiona Trigg:

Right.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

But then I work with a group of close collaborators.

Fiona Trigg:

Right.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

And they have some liberty to interpret the instructions.

Fiona Trigg:

Right.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

The curtains were also, I did the editing of the curtains together with an editor.

Fiona Trigg:

Right.



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Ho Tzu Nyen:

But I spent a lot of time, actually, maybe too much time, tweaking the colours and the changes between the colours. I mean, I was quite lost in the process...

Fiona Trigg:

Right.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

... Of just seeing this ultra saturated colours kind of shifting from one hue into another.

Fiona Trigg:

Right.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

But sometimes when we are projecting the curtains, we also have lights from behind, which kind of does like a wash. So sometimes what you are seeing is actual lights from the back. And sometimes what we are seeing is projections from the front. So, actually, almost at every moment, there are these types of illusions going on. I am not actually sure how perceptible they are at a conscious level...

Fiona Trigg:

Right.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

... But I think kind of unconsciously, they must produce some kind of effect. I don't know if you guys, anyone, is familiar with the paintings of David Reed, it's a American painter.

Fiona Trigg:

[inaudible 00:00:20:50].

Ho Tzu Nyen:

Yeah. So he does this very beautiful kind of folds, sort of abstract folds, with kind of very saturated colours. So that was also another big inspiration for me.

Fiona Trigg:

Oh yes, we have another question.

Speaker 6:

[inaudible 00:21:07].

Ho Tzu Nyen:

Sure.

Fiona Trigg:

It's just a question about the sequence when he's repeating that, one wants to be two, two wants to be three.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

Sure. So, I think, in the first 10 or 15 minutes, there was a part when Lai Teck was describing his childhood. And he was describing how he overheard. So he was living next to a scholar who was teaching classes. And the scholar would be reciting sort of classical, I mean, it's in Vietnamese, so classical Vietnamese culture is very closely tied with classical Chinese culture, in the sense of the Confucius teachings. So sometimes the teacher would be reciting something from Confucius or from Lao Tzu, the Taoist philosopher. So one of the lines was, one wants to be two, and two wants to be three. So actually that kind of comes from Taoism. So the Tao or the path, is the Nameless, which can be divided into two. And from, two, you kind of divide into, three, right? But the origin is something which is formless...

Fiona Trigg:

Right.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

... But it kind of works through these divisions.

Fiona Trigg:

Right.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

So at the end, yeah. So there was another fragment of the classics that he also overheard, which was when the teacher was talking about this particular hexagram from the, Yi Jing or the Book of Changes, which is the 49th. So, essentially, the last sequence is this things coming together. But I just also wanted at the end of the work, to have this like nothingness, sort of nothing happening. Except us, kind of with this empty kind of counting, and we are just face-to-face with the figure under these lights. So I wanted that duration.

Fiona Trigg:

Right. Yeah.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

Yeah. And, of course, I think, one doesn't quite know how to read it, one doesn't quite know how to behave. Like what do we do with ourselves in this counting. And that ambiguity, that discomfort, was sort of what actually really interested me. Yeah.

Fiona Trigg:

Yes. I think we're almost out of time.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

Maybe...

Fiona Trigg:

Oh, but we have one further question, yes.

Speaker 7:

The shift to the first person in the presentation. I'm interested in your thoughts about the difference between a scholarly sort of interpretation of Lai Teck and what you can bring to in a theatre? Whether you've made any discoveries as to who [inaudible 00:24:23]? What theatre can actually inform us about that? And that personal biographical narrative, which is obviously not been presented before in the scholarly narrative?

Fiona Trigg:

Oh, the question is about the difference between the historical factual record of Lai Teck and what we can present in a theatrical forum? In an artwork, really? Yeah.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

So, sort of academic writings about Lai Teck, they tend to be from this very small specialised field of people interested in this espionage and counter-espionage, which is a very, very small field. So I've drawn a lot on the works of these scholars. But these types of writings tend to be of a very specific sort. So they hardly, for example, go into the psychology of Lai Teck, right? And in many of these writings, they try not to judge the character. So, I would say, that with *The Mysterious Lai Teck*, what I tried to do, in some sense, is to transform all of this information into some kind of sensations. And this sensations, for me, has a lot to do with these uncertainties and ambiguities and ambivalence. Also in relation to the character of Lai Teck. So it's also inevitable that in working on this piece, I would be thinking about how one judges such a character?

Ho Tzu Nyen:

And it's sometimes easy to judge traitors. Everybody hates traitors, right? If you betray the states, you can be put to death. It seems to be a very harsh line between black and white. But as I was digging deeper into Lai Teck, I started thinking about what it must have been like for him to grow up in Vietnam in the early 20th century. So, again, this was kind of in the script. But this sudden encounter and experience with this multitudes of different discourses. From Catholicism to Marxism to Darwinism, together with Confucianism and Buddhism and Taoism, which was already in Vietnam. So I try to think of this multiplicity in relation to his later career as this triple agent, right? So I try to think about treachery and traitors, not in a moral sense of being able to judge them easily, but to think about treachery, historically, which is to say that, treachery is a condition that is produced by history. If you were living through certain periods and certain places. So that's kind of my own take on Lai Teck.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

And if I were to push that thought a little bit further, I would say, that Lai Teck, for me, embodies Southeast Asia. He was Vietnamese, he went to Malaysia and Singapore. So there's this geographical kind of like crossing. And all his masters were the colonial forces that tried to occupy Southeast Asia, the French, the British, the Japanese. So in his biography, for me, it's encapsulated all of Southeast Asian history within a particular moment in time. And how do we judge this? So that's sort of one of my starting questions, I would say, for the work.

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Fiona Trigg:

Thank you. That's a beautifully eloquent way on which to end this conversation. I think we've run out of time. So please join me in thanking, Ho Tzu Nyen, for this incredible work.

Ho Tzu Nyen:

Thank you.

Fiona Trigg:

Thank you. Thank you. (silence)