

Critical Thinking and Multicultural Arts Practice

Escalating Intercultural Forces



This article wishes to identify a maturing ‘intercultural’ dialogue being expressed in recent contemporary Australian music, theatre and dance; and that such work challenges existing notions of ‘multiculturalism’ in Australian performance.

The argument is that this is prescient of an inevitable broader cultural shift that will challenge the underlying conceptions and assumptions that permeate institutions, policies and public debates concerned with questions of culture and identity.

What are the implications in the seeming rise and rise of contemporary performance making that come from intercultural activity? How well is current public debate acknowledging this activity? In the face of work that has increasingly complex cultural encodings, created by artists with increasingly layered identities, what positions, attitudes and models of thinking are being expressed in response? How well are we articulating, and perhaps more importantly, *anticipating* the flow of cultural dynamics in the age of information? Who is best placed to sponsor such critical thinking? And what of the continued validity of the term ‘multicultural arts practice’ in the context of this contemporary work?

This invokes a huge debate — clearly beyond the scope of this article to attempt to detail. Perhaps it is best to offer some provocations and invite responses.

We are in an age where ‘cultural information’ is no longer tethered to geography and ethnicity. Affinity and attraction leads people from all manner of origin and circumstance to associate themselves with all manner of artistic practices on offer via the ‘cultural diasporas’ in urban Australia, via international study, and via the agency of the internet. One is able to curate specific artistic experiences and achieve a degree of accomplishment in multiple cultural forms to a degree never previously imaginable.

Yet marketing strategies still persist in what I call the 'close encounters of the third kind' category. Contemporary intercultural performances are still advertised as an encounter between performers of isolated traditions 'reaching out across cultural boundaries in an exchange' — often further encoded in dubious sentiments of 'East meets West' or similar. At worst the performance is exoticized to seduce a mainstream audience to take a walk on the wild side. Further to this a kind of reverse colonialism still pervades much of the dialogue surrounding non euro-centric performance in Australia; delegitimizing performers who are seen as not being of the ethnic origin of the traditions they are embodying. Yet no such attitude appears to haunt the phenomena of virtuoso performers in the western symphonic tradition now emerging from Asia.

From Multiculturalism to Cultural Integration

Reflect this issue of ethnic origin upon the next generation. What meaning does the current term CaLD (Cultural and Linguistic Difference) continue to hold for a hypothetical second generation Australian born film maker in South West Sydney who has a first generation Australian born Vietnamese mother and a Chilean father — and whose work is perhaps currently inspired by contemporary manga style from Japan?

We need to understand how we have moved from 'either/or' identities into 'and/and' identities.^[4] Contemporary intercultural work is an expression not just of collaborations between practitioners of singular traditions, but more an expression of the multiplicity of traditions embodied by a single artist. In this world global performance languages and technology are blending in exciting ways that challenge mainstream conceptions of cultural production.

At this level of activity the notion of multiculturalism in arts practice is fast becoming a redundant term, simply unfit to describe the emerging mature integration of multiple performing languages on display. It may simply become a given that a contemporary Australian theatre work might invoke in equal measures performance languages drawn from middle eastern dance, SE Asian puppetry, and electronic sound art combined with a text driven theatrical narrative... and not through an ad hoc clumping together (although this has surely happened) but simply as an expression of the artists' own various deep engagements, training and personal heritages.

Everywhere we find musicians at the highest level of professional activity whose training and current contemporary practice embodies multiple traditions — venerated composers conversant at an advanced level in the performance languages of jazz, Balkan melodic and rhythmic forms and Southern Indian Carnatic music — 5th generation Anglo Australians who hold venerated positions in 400 year old lineages of Turkish classical music who also compose contemporary music born of fusing that sensibility with a jazz harmonic language etc.

And/and identities..... This respectful alchemy of performance languages is *simply an expression of who we are — and of who we are becoming.*

The Tipping Point

View this through Attali's sense of the prescience of musical culture — expressing in anticipation the dynamics that eventually permeate and manifest more fully in the wider culture^[2] I believe Attali's timeframe has contracted. The exponential curve of intercultural information exchange tilts to the vertical. We are at a tipping point, particularly when viewed from the need to acquaint ourselves more fully with the cultural sensibilities needed to negotiate and reinvent our position in the region in this 'Asian Century'.

Consider intercultural contemporary performance activity as the R and D of cultural discourse. This activity demands a critical assessment that is equally as well diversified. This will ultimately demand nothing less than a repositioning of institutional power structures.

'Exnomination' is a term John Fiske^[3] used to describe the ability of a Eurocentric attitude to place itself at 'the centre' — to become invisible to itself — constituting itself as the universal set of norms to which all other activity is 'other' — 'peripheral'. There is no doubting that many of our arts institutions, along with the funding priorities that favour the well established, indeed have demonstrated great skill in the art of exnomination — trading concepts of legitimacy, authenticity and cultural worth to preserve their positions.

If our institutions fail to anticipate and articulate the dynamics of how cultural information is being exchanged, adopted and adapted, we will find ourselves with a serious disjunct between institutions, policy and a world that will belong to those experienced in nuanced and informed intercultural exchange.

Industrial Discourse vs Cultural Discourse

I acknowledge that many artists, administrators and academics are acutely aware of all of this. My concern is with the perception of such work by the mainstream. And what of the implications of this activity for the development of a national cultural policy — if we in fact ever get to have such!

Critical examination of contemporary intercultural performance requires methodologies that engage deeply with multiple perspectives, and are conversant in a diversity of intellectual, artistic and spiritual traditions. A big ask no doubt — but really the minimum requirement to be able to begin to engage with the complexities of cultural exchange and cultural 'production' the likes of which we have only just begun to experience. This dialogue is seen best happening first in tertiary institutions.

Unfortunately many of our tertiary institutions are enmeshed in the struggle between the industrial discourse and the cultural discourse. Many contemporary music courses appear to provide nothing more than vocational skills training, replicating the dynamics of the commercial (and highly Euro-American centric) pop industry. The dynamics of exnomination remain as potent as ever.

Academic music courses that seek to deeply engage with the emerging intercultural reality are thin on the ground in Australia. Most recently the Masters of Contemporary Improvisation course at Macquarie that excelled in this arena (*the author declares self interest as a recent graduate*) has been discontinued by the administration despite being ahead on all economic and quantifiable indicators in its five year business plan.

Beyond the subtle echoes of colonialism embedded in the term 'multicultural', beyond the dynamics of the industrial discourse, the platitudes of marketing, and tabloid hype that profits from feeding misconception, there lies a field of enquiry that dazzles with its promise of an attitude that has at its core a fascination with creating the 'new' with a deep regard for the integrity and history of source traditions. This attitude makes itself available to embrace the available diversity of cultural information as something we can all 'own' — aspects of the human experience that can speak to any one of us and resonate within us at a formative level beyond geography and ethnicity.

Summing Up



Instead of circling each other for a brief moment of earnest intention and then drifting away again to the comfort of our own specificities on encountering differences, we must learn to journey together, spiralling around one another, defining and redefining value systems until we finally arrive at the centre together.

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References

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