

Searching for Hamlet

An interview with the director

By Alette Scavenius

Search: Hamlet concludes Ong Keng Sen's intercultural Shakespeare-trilogy preceded by Lear (1997) and Desdemona (2000). In this interview the director reveals his thoughts about Shakespeare, cultural differences, site-specific performances and the search for a Hamlet.

When you planned your trilogy of large-scale intercultural performances, was it your intention that all three should be based on Shakespeare's texts?

- No. I planned that the last part of the trilogy would not be a Shakespeare play but a piece about Siddharta or Buddha and the dilemma of global souls. That is still happening, I will enter into the first workshop in December this year in the royal capital of Laos, Luang Prabang.
 - The two first parts of the trilogy were different exercises in collaborating with Shakespeare's text. First came *Lear*, re-imagined in the sense that Goneril, or Elder Daughter in our production, became the central role, a daughter killing her father in Asia. In the second production, *Desdemona*, we went behind the mask to look at the actors as opposed to the characters. The third was to leave behind Shakespeare and go into something which will be perceived to be from Asia, just like Shakespeare is perceived to be from the West, although we all know that it becomes less and less of an issue who possesses these cultural goods in an increasingly hybridised world. I do not believe in authenticity in that I think it is an illusion often used to exclude rather than include. I think that today, Shakespeare and Buddha belongs to the world rather than the original source country.
- When HC Gimbel approached me to do *Hamlet* – and he was the one to suggest *Hamlet* – I was quite reluctant in a way, because I felt that I wanted a more specific reason for making that piece. I think it is very dangerous to explore Shakespeare if you don't have a specific purpose – it can just end up like one-thousand-and-one ways to do a different Shakespeare and I'm very sceptical of that. So I felt that this time it should not be simply an aesthetic exercise. Then I thought - what if we made it in the Kronborg castle?! This would be an interesting exercise of re-imagining and scrambling culture, cultural authenticity, and cultural possession. And once the castle was confirmed it became an interesting journey, and especially if the castle could be used in a site specific way and we could go into the bowels of the castle and almost excavate what is the site. It is a very difficult thing to make a site-specific work in a different culture, meaning that I'm a non-European director, directing *Hamlet* with Asian performers in the site which originally inspired Shakespeare to write – and there is no Hamlet, no European Hamlet, no Danish Hamlet, no Asian Hamlet. So this process of the complexity of cultural categories is what I'm interested in and I could see continuity from the very beginning with *Lear*, a challenge, a reason for taking on this project.

Who is Hamlet?

- So when I started the process it was a bit like this: how do we make a Hamlet that would have meaning – and this is very important with all the work that I do. What is then the central issue for our *Hamlet* – perhaps the central issue is really about who is Hamlet in our times, in our cultures, in our communities?
- When you bring a cast originating from many cultures together, obviously everybody has a different image of Hamlet, and a different perception of what is Hamlet's role – who is Hamlet in their countries? Is it the young man or young woman who is fighting for animal's rights or a resistance fighter in Timor – he could be a Hamlet. At the same time I was really sparked by the first conversation we had together where we talked about what happens if someone is absent. I was very resistant to casting Hamlet, because I thought if we put an Asian performer as Hamlet, it is a simple substitution in a way, and if we had a European Hamlet, there would be all the questions on why it is a European Hamlet if it's a mixed cast. I wanted to almost suck his presence out, and in this vacuum, you begin to see all the different characters in a new way, and possibly realize the other dimensions of the piece that Shakespeare wrote.

The search

Having decided that there should be no Hamlet on stage, you have named the performance Search:Hamlet, what kind of a search are we talking about?

- The search is a search on many different levels, one is a personal search in asking ourselves certain questions about our culture and the countries that we live in, and the search is also on a level to understand the social significance of Hamlet – this is coming from my Asian background - that this performance, this *Ramayana* (*traditional Hindu epic, ed.*) or this character serves a social significance – the story of Sita and Ravana (*from Ramayana, ed.*) is not just a story of a girl and a ogre or a family and an antagonist, but there are messages for society today and in that way, there is also a message in *Hamlet*.
- This is how theatre was in Elizabethan times; when you tell the story of Macbeth or the story of Lear, you tell the story of human folly or human foolishness – they were lessons for the audience on how to live. *Search:Hamlet* is searching ourselves, both for the social significance of the piece, for our process as an intercultural company but also searching for the constant dialogue between different peoples in Europe and Asia. I don't want to generalize about these two continents, but it is very different how the Danish audience will react to *Hamlet* as from a Singaporean audience and this kind of specificity is important.

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Cultural differences

- What I think is very nice about the Hamlet project, is that it is specific to Denmark. Audiences in Tokyo, Berlin, New York, Singapore and Denmark are not the same, so you can't produce one work and tour it to five cities and it remains the same. So the fact that we are site specific in Kronborg forces us to tailor it to Denmark, which I think is very important in this floating space of international performance. Kronborg is an important root to make us specific.

- You have chosen Kronborg with its very stunning background as the setting for a company including Asian artists who are unaccustomed to work in a setting at all – how do you relate to that?
- I think that very often in my pieces there is a huge challenge or huge tension. In *Lear*, for instance, the tension was between the traditional performers and the contemporary performers, and very often it was a struggle between how to balance, but that tension actually made the piece – in the same way, *Desdemona* was a tension between audience expectations of the piece after the beautiful exotic *Lear* and our denial of this expectation. In *Hamlet* there is a different tension: it is a tension of these extremely individualistic artists, the freedom to imagine the site, the text and ourselves each in our different ways.
- Like Ann (*Crosset, plays the role of Gilda Rosie Krantz III, ed.*), for example, she's an American who has lived in Denmark for many years, is this castle alien to her? More and more we are beginning to realize that this *Hamlet* is not about cultural categories – it is so easy to say that differences are due to cultural issues. Like the music; Dicte composes music first from notation and plays it from a very precise score, and Sadra (*I Wayan Sadra*) completely improvises, composing music by the ear. Is this a cultural difference? Actually, when we look at it, it's a *personal* difference of how they make music. There are European musicians who completely improvise, and there are Asian musicians who completely notate their work.
- So the realization with *Hamlet* is that it is really about personal idiosyncrasies, personal eccentricities - also in relation with this particular site which is so imposing. *Search: Hamlet* is ultimately about liberation, the freedom from cultural categories, which continue to be the weapons of societies and nations.

The play-within-the-play

- One individual story in the performance is Wu Wenguang's documentary about a gay man in China. How does that relate to Hamlet's story?
- Wenguang's movie is one of the elements of the play-within-the-play (*In the original script Hamlet organizes a touring company of actors to dramatize Claudius' murder of Hamlet's father in front of the whole court in order to make the king reveal himself, ed.*), and hopefully it reveals certain things to the audience about themselves. Maybe how open they are. Just like Hamlet held a mirror up to Claudius, Wenguang is holding the mirror up to us, the audience. The audience may be completely confounded as to why he's chosen to interview this gay man who has been caught for toilet sex! Wenguang and I discussed the proposal in last December at a workshop for all collaborators. He responded to that with this film – and my response to him was to keep it. The film brings into fore the whole question of to be or not to be a gay man in a culture where it is illegal to be gay. And you also begin to realize that perhaps one part of Hamlet's tension was that he could never be right. He was fated and he was caught in this; he had no choice but to continue that journey.
- In a way I think it starts to break the mythology about Hamlet: he's not really an important prince but just a gay man caught for toilet sex and that makes us rethink what is mythology, how do we find our new mythology today from our everyday lives? Any person could be Hamlet or Macbeth. So we're holding the mirror up to our middle class theatre complacency and in that I include myself, because I'm

middle class, I'm a theatre person and I'm quite complacent about certain aspects of the theatre which I embrace.

The Cast

- *Your cast is a very diverse group of performers with totally different cultural and artistic backgrounds, what were your considerations in casting the performance? Was it the individual performer or was it the representative of an art form, you chose?*
- In *Lear* it was definitely the art form we went for, like a Noh actor and a Beijing opera actor, and they had to reinvent their specific forms for *Lear*, but in *Hamlet* the artistic forms are less important. That means I didn't choose a *topeng* actor for his *topeng* (*Balinese masked dance form, ed.*) but because I wanted to work with this individual (*I Wayang Dibia, plays the role of Claudius, ed.*). So this time there is a less overt display of form and cultures. I have chosen to work with them because I am inspired by these particular artists.
- I feel that there is an acknowledgement that people choose to be what they are – just because you are from Malaysia, you don't have to be a dancer who dances in a Malaysian style. For example, I don't think Aida (*Redza, plays the role of Laertes, ed.*) dances as a Malaysian dancer; she really has a specific individual style. And I think our Hamlet moves into that realm of the individual – the individual who has some relationship with his or her cultural context or has rejected his or her own culture to embrace another affinity – there are no "easy" categories. Like for instance Pichet (*Klunchun, plays the role of Gertrude, ed.*), who is trained as a Thai classical dancer in the ogre role, but what he is doing on stage is very different from this traditional training.
- This brings up issues like what is traditional and what is contemporary. And the more I work with artists with traditional training; I see that they think of themselves as contemporary artists because they are still reinventing their forms every day. But we from the outside, we see them as traditional even though there is a constant redefinition. In *Lear* we worked with art forms which came from the bastions of classical traditions and cultures, but now we can arrive at *Hamlet* without saying Aida = Malaysia, Dibia = Bali and Pichet =Thailand. I would like that we describe what they do artistically, but not mark them as being from this or that country or culture or art form, so in a sense it becomes a company like Pina Bausch or William Forsythe or Rosas, where all the dancers come from many different cultures, but you would never first describe them as: "oh they are Arabic dancers from Brussels, Lisbon or classical ballet dancers from Copenhagen".
- And Charlotte (*Engelkes, plays the role of the Storyteller, ed.*) has been another kettle of fish completely! What is traditional in Europe today? I saw her in a crazy piece by Heiner Goebbels and I said to myself, perhaps we speak the same language despite being from Singapore and Sweden. She draws very much from her personal experience, which is very eclectic indeed. Her instrument has been text, she has written many responses to Shakespeare's text. We worked together intensely on this material resulting in a juxtaposition of personal, fictional and imagined contexts.
- This journey for me has been very important, moving from *Lear* to *Search:Hamlet*. Coming from contemporary theatre in Asia, I have had to mark myself first culturally and now individually in a theatre space governed essentially by artists from art centres of Europe and the US. The European journey could be said to be a journey

which starts with the individual and explores what is the meaning of culture and the intercultural. My personal journey starts from the opposite end: let's look at our cultural roots and then from there we look into who is this individual and this individual may actually have chosen to become divorced from his culture.

The young generation

- I'm very interested in what the young generation artist is doing today in South East Asia – Pichet and Aida represent that and they come from either traditional classical training, which is very culturally consolidated like Pichet's *khon (classical Thai court dance, ed.)*, or they come from an understanding of the value of being rooted, like Aida understands that she has gone from American training back to Malay dance and martial arts. So I'm interested in this generation of young artists who are culturally rooted, but are creating a very specific language of their own. The territory of the European or American art scene has been that conceptual art belongs to them, whereas the Asian artist seems to be ethnic, multi-culti and then suddenly you begin to realize oh, there are these classifications! But it is not so; the young South East Asian artists are going on in such a different environment from their parents' generation.
- I'm also interested in mixing the cast with someone deeply classical like Dibia - he's a different generation, but at the same time it is important to him that he keeps redefining his art and for me it's a big lesson in the life of an artist, that he never stops, that he keeps changing, evolving, growing. In the same way, I see this in Carlotta (*Ikeda, plays the role of Ghost, ed.*) who has chosen to live in France to continue her search. Why did she choose to leave Japan? Was it difficult for a Japanese woman to live in the way she wanted to live - and why did she gravitate towards *butoh* then? Today she's reinventing the *butoh* language, but is it still *butoh*? What is *butoh*?
- This is very different from *Lear* where my first image of Lear was a Noh actor, not a specific actor, but a Noh actor. In *Hamlet* Claudius did not inspire me to choose a masked form but I knew that I wanted Dibia rather than the form. This production is a move away very simple lines that was drawn in *Lear*. Now I am elaborating deeply and modifying some of those earlier thoughts. Here the interest in the particular artist raises complications and contradictions like with Kota (*Yamazaki, plays the role of Young Man, ed.*). Kota made his career in what is categorised as international contemporary dance but he has been immersing himself in *butoh* lately. Some could say that this is the journey of an artist from Europe. He doesn't fit any category.
- *Where do the European actors fit into this picture?*
- With Ann it was her constant anxiety neurotic tic, maybe it's not her, but it is the way she presents herself, and I find it interesting to work with – it wasn't like I started out thinking ok, I want to have an 'outsider' in Denmark, who's lived there for many years (is she Danish then?) to play this role. We started off with her playing Polonius and then I became very involved with her interventions during improvisations. I had also asked her to interrupt other characters' scenes with her neurotic tics based on the role of the clown in traditional Asian theatre who sometimes say the most profound things. Now her interventions have become her only character. We call her Gilda Rosie Krantz III inspired by the roles of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. And with Dicte, (*plays the role of Ophelia, ed.*) -

when I talked to her, I found her very serious in the way she talked and this made me feel that I wanted her in the project – I was attracted to her seriousness in the pop world - obviously she has chosen to play a very specific type of pop or pop with a certain branding. With Charlotte I was very struck by the way she carried herself – she has such a formidable presence, and that’s what I think the storyteller is. So the creation of *Search:Hamlet* has been from a very individualistic stance, where these people are inspiring me, rather than the cultures that they come from.