

Search:Hamlet

- a dance-theatre event, a free interpretation of Shakespeare's play

By Ong Keng Sen

Of late, I have become used to working on projects which span three to five years in conception and fruition, so Search:Hamlet has been a surprise. My first meeting with HC Gimbel was for three days in June 2001 and it has been an express train to Kronborg August 2002.

June 2001, Singapore

I remember my reticence on doing another Shakespeare as I have never professed a special love for him. And the several times I have seen *Hamlet*, I have never felt specially drawn to him. I was always more drawn to peripheral questions such as the culpability of Gertrude, the redemption of Claudius, "Is Laertes a loser?" Perhaps I have been dissatisfied with the Ghost, perhaps I always compared him to the unfulfilled ghosts of Japanese Noh plays and wished for more longing, more evocation; a more holistic vision of life and death.

So I gave a long list of requests to HC including that I would only consider doing a *Hamlet* project if we could perform a site-specific version at Kronborg, in its different rooms. I wanted to rethink *Hamlet* in a way that would include different peoples, that would open up his conflicts into a universal realm, into the everyday conflicts which could have a resonance for individuals all over the world today. Locating it at Kronborg would raise all sorts of cultural issues such as cultural authenticity and possession. Does Kronborg belong to Denmark or to the world? Who has the right to perform in a country's cultural monuments? Who owns Hamlet? What is Asian, what is European, what is Danish? Is this globalisation? Should globalisation develop specificities to take into account different localities, different contexts, different individual circumstances? For I did not want to create an international work floating in the festival circuit. How do we root it in Denmark, how do we root it in the cultural specificity of the country that we are making it in? Perhaps Kronborg was the answer.

At that time, I was a little concerned about the casting of Hamlet as I did not want it to be a simple substitution of an Asian face for a European face. I also knew that in a cast with artists from all over the world, this question of who plays Hamlet would be loaded.

I knew I was not interested in another version of *Hamlet* which would have the audience debating whether this actor was a powerful Hamlet, how he pronounced the monologue of "to be or not to be"; how he cried over Ophelia's grave. I wanted to return to *Hamlet* as a parable for life, no longer just another hors d'oeuvre to be consumed before dinner with friends (although it is a little

difficult as most conventional productions of *Hamlet* fight to keep the length at four hours!). How do we return to the symbol and metaphor of *Hamlet*, going back to theatre as a search, as an enigma, as a mystery of life, as a place to ask questions rather than to receive trite answers.

September 2001, Copenhagen

I returned to Copenhagen for three packed days to meet Danish artists and to see Kronborg. I had not been back since 1999 when I had performed *Lear* at the KIT festival. Then, Trevor Davies had asked me about directing a Hamlet at the castle with an intercultural Asian cast. I had not answered as I was not convinced that I had a reason to do it.

I remembered this irony as I sat down for my first meeting with Danish artists at Kanonhallen. In two years, my life had changed so much, now I was working on multiple productions in different cities. I had developed a methodology of creating in modules and often I had to juggle time schedules that required me to mind-switch, deal with jet lag and a different hotel every two weeks. The *déjà vu* crystallised with Alette Scavenius who had interviewed me for *Lear* in 1999 in Berlin at a beerhouse. Alette was to be my dramaturg on this Hamlet project. Somehow, we drifted to talking about casting for this role and I voiced my thoughts about the inadequacy of any performer (male or female) representing Hamlet in a project with so many cultures. Could he represent all the individual artists from these various cultures; conceptually how sound would this representation be? That meeting was the birth of the absent Hamlet.

Alette then talked a little about a Danish theatre tradition when there was sometimes a final commemorative performance after the death of a famous performer. The dead performer might be represented by a spotlight that would trace his choreography or blocking. The partners of this dead performer would essentially dance or act with this spotlight like a memory ritual. This gave me an idea that perhaps our absent Hamlet could be represented by light, and that light could be used as a special presence in our performance. I took this into the discussion with Jesper (lighting designer) who was challenged by the prospect. At that visit, I considered many options of rooting the performance into Denmark including looking at Asta Nielsen's portrayal of Hamlet in her silent movie. Asta was a Hamlet of her time, in that she was dissatisfied with the status quo of women and of film. Attempting to image herself as Hamlet was a very brave feat indeed for those early years. This convinced me further that I should leave the Hamlet character as a living space that would suggest rather than confirm a concrete situation.

December 2001, Singapore

The next stage was to bring together the individual artists that I was interested in working with. This was no mean feat as everybody had an impossible schedule. I was interested in a collaborative process with artists rather than casting actors or

dancers in the standard way. I finally chose to work with primary creators, composers or choreographers who made their own solos or group shows.

We met for an intense period of improvisation and familiarisation with each other's expressions. During this time, we constantly asked the question "Who is Hamlet in our cultures, our communities today? Are we Hamlet?" I found out more about each individual artist beyond her art form, spending time one-to-one. I discovered their parallels with Hamlet – the conflicts which they lived with in their everyday life - the conflicts in love; the conflicts between artistic expression and religion, between the chosen country where they live today and the country they were born in, between traditional and contemporary art, between national duty and personal interest. During this time, I discussed the project much with documentary film director Wenguang whom I had worked closely before in other projects. I asked him who he thought was Hamlet in Beijing today. He was intrigued. He felt that it was important that his Hamlet was not just an intellectual or someone of high birth. He affirmed my constant probing of the artist as Hamlet rather than a simple immersion into the character scripted by Shakespeare. I encouraged Charlotte and Ann to write monologues/viewpoints that we would review together; this was a practice that continued all through our rehearsal period. Discussions were held with Sadra and Dicte about composition styles, whether music should move the dancers or whether dancers should move the music, possible obstacles ahead to fruitful collaboration within the music. Much of my time was also spent on negotiating differences in aesthetics and working styles. I enjoyed doing this out of curiosity and an interest in human nature, seeing the difference to be individualistic rather than cultural.

January 2002, Copenhagen

HC, Tay Tong, manager of Theatreworks, and I gathered the three designers together in Kronborg to discuss how to design the show specifically for the castle. I was interested in using varying sites in the castle including the casemates, the rooms and the courtyard. Another compounding challenge was the move from Kronborg into Copenhagen, how do we redesign the show and fit it into Edison Theatre? The only way was through building blocks or fragments or elements that could be reconstituted in different shapes in different spaces.

Justin (set designer), Koji (costume designer) and I had worked together in *Lear* and had also met in Singapore in December. Often I work like a film director with designers, collaborating on the storyboard from scene to scene. Justin, Jesper and I had to discuss closely how to suggest Hamlet's presence poetically through light. With Koji, I was interested in the appearance of the artists in the rooms and in the courtyard. In an unusual turn, the audience would have an opportunity to interact with the characters intimately and also in an epic fashion, almost like going both inside and outside of a character. We discussed the texture of the costume; *washi* (Japanese paper) was appealing as I felt that it could convey the fragility of personal memory, memory of the characters and our physical excavation of the different spaces.

April 2002, Kronborg

This was the most fascinating portion of our workshop process. For an entire week, all the artists explored intimately the architecture of Kronborg. For hours on end, we would improvise and create in extreme conditions such as freezing zero degrees in the casemates. My strategy was to find out how individual artists responded to each room, how the characters they were playing came to life in different rooms, how much the music of the performance should be inspired by these atmospheres. I can say that it was from these excruciating spaces and workshops that the artists scrapped different emotions from the walls, the floors, the perspectives, the shadows, the stillness, the air, the echoes, the ghosts of Kronborg. Taking these traces, these shavings, we finally displaced what we had found in different rooms into the courtyard.

Comment: Jeg ved ikke om der menes 'scrapped' her eller 'scraped'. 'Scrapped' har ingen betydning hvis man tager næste sætning i betragtning.

Looking at the moments in the courtyard performance, I can still identify the rooms where the performers found these movements, these emotions, sometimes even entire scenes. From the traces in the rooms, I extracted meaning and character relationships, finally constructing solos, duets and ensemble scenes for the courtyard. In particular, the lower casemates were haunting; we tore our trial paper costumes and brought these rags into the finery of the ballroom. From this simple exercise, we realized the frailty of human nature and our attempts at concealing these vulnerabilities in the public self. Carlotta voiced one of the strongest remarks about this time: "How do we give the audience the feeling of the search that we went through in Kronborg in April?" One of my greatest regrets was that we were finally unable to bring audiences into the telegraph tower, a site in the sky where our souls took flight.

23 July 2002 – First Performance 16 August 2002, Kronborg

I took the bold step of structuring the entire performance according to five books or chapters. These five books were based on my interpretation of the structure of a day at the Japanese Noh Theatre. An avid Noh audience member would sit through five plays a day with varying central characters, a god play, a warrior play, a woman play, a madness play and a demon play.

Since working on *Lear* from 1996, I had developed an affinity for Noh Theatre. In 1999, when I lived in Tokyo, I shared a residence with a Noh musician/shite (lead performer) who talked Noh with me every day. His library was a treasure trove of Noh theory, plays and videos. Every morning I would awake to him teaching students the musical chanting *Lear*. I attended Noh recitals regularly including obscure experiments with brain activity and Noh, where a Noh performer was hooked up to machines to measure his brain activity during sections of meditative performance!

Each of the unfulfilled central spirits in our five books exhibit shades, degrees of Hamlet behavior: the lost child in the ghost (Ghost); the intimate companion in

the warrior (Laertes); the rebel in the young girl (Ophelia); the self-absorption/obsession in the mad woman (Gertrude); the struggle between temptation, guilt and action in the demon (Claudius). The action is pierced by interventions of a strange lady who is both inside and outside the story of Hamlet; a storyteller who presents stories like colours, sensations floating through our experience; and a gentleman caller who never stops for long. Reminiscent of Shakespeare's Hamlet and yet alien, weaving in and out of parallel truths, lies, inventions, repetitions, sliding times, they impinge on our senses; jolting us into a no-man's land of sense and non-sense.