

And What of the Weft?

Considerations around Interweaving Cultures, questioning the Contemporary and the Critical, and discussing Cultural Policies in the Postcolony

By Anuscha Lall

My first day at the Dance Congress, Duesseldorf, and I recognise the beginnings of that familiar stirring within. A mild sense of displacement. Uncomfortable but not unusual for a body that has been transported over 6,200 kilometres in eight hours, all the way from India. But as my body adjusts to the new smells, hues and clock, I know I will have to confront a sensation more menacing, longer lasting. It is the unwholesome awareness of feeling strangely at home in a foreign land whilst yearning for the familiar. Of knowing, too intimately, its mind but not comprehending the language with which it speaks it. Of realising with a rude shock the hoax of representing "my culture" to a culture that feels more mine to me than my own, and representing it. It is as if my bones have been put out of joint. And over the next few days this clamour in my head will drown out everything else.

My first session was on 'Interweaving Dance Cultures – Limits of Interweaving?' moderated by Gabriele Brandstetter. The panel was composed of U.K. based playwright Kaite O'Reilly, German anthropologist Klaus-Peter Köpping, the dance and theatre scholars André Lepecki, Susan Manning and Philipp Zarrilli from U.S.A, Avanthi Meduri and Navtej Johar from India, and Nanako Nakajima from Japan amongst others. Held in the aftermath of the conversation between the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, Faustin Linyekula with moderator Claire Rousier that same morning, this informal "teatime" discussion soon converged around piece 'La Création du monde 1923 – 2012' by Congolese choreographer Faustin Linyekula with which the Congress had opened the previous evening. In his piece, he embeds a reconstruction of Jean Börlin's formerly so-called "ballet nègre" from 1923, which Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer had reconstructed.

It was a mystery. Was this reconstruction, as someone in the audience suggested, an all too ill-conceived, naive replay of the 1923 original? Why this reconstruction now? What a pity that he had chosen to use superficial African elements like masks and costumes, but a white cast! Where was the "African" in the movement vocabulary? What was he trying to achieve? Why, the group seemed to ask, at this particular historical moment, in front of a European audience, had he neglected to reclaim his "real" identity, assert his black "African" roots?

And then, gradually, we turned from the artwork to what I now see was the real work at the Tanzkongress. It could be, someone mused, that Faustin was being subversive, even beyond our own imaginations, deploying the strategy of reconstruction to reflect on the deep paradoxes of "interculturalism" and "postcoloniality"? Maybe he is asking us if we have really shifted our position, our perspectives, as "colonisers"? Does he, in fact, intend to force us to contend, as black masks reveal white faces, with our ambivalence and shame with racism? Does he, brilliantly, throw back at us our own colonial gaze which, though rusty and confused with time, lies alarmingly intact? Is he, in fact, suggesting that as we sit amicably imagining a reality cleansed of colonialism, that in actuality, we, both you and I, may be more trapped than ever in a pervasive and sinister continuation of the myth of the "other"?

The term "intercultural" carries suggestions of dialogues between cultures that are distinct, whole and intact. We talk simplistically of "African" as if it were a singular idea, a unified narrative. But, as one of the panel members emphatically pointed out, it is

impossible to imagine “other” cultures, past and present, without acknowledging that all locations are contaminated with multiple influences. And this gets infinitely more complicated with cultures that have experienced centuries of colonisation. Long past the event, there lingers a “double consciousness”, “a peculiar sensation ... of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” Coined by W. E. B. Du Bois, this double consciousness painfully intrudes on one’s sense of being, rendering it ruptured, incomplete and irreconcilable. “One ever feels his two-ness, ... two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” I was taken back to something that Faustin Linyekula had said in the discussion with Jean-Luc Nancy that morning, “I am here between my ruins. How can I move on?”

As someone who grew up in urban India in the 1980s and 90s, I, like millions of others, know this sense of loss and rupture, this painful referencing of the other to know one’s self. And I wonder how we can start talking about exchange, translation and transfer with cultures that recognises themselves through another? In what sense do you refer to the “other” when members of this other culture, particularly those invited to this Congress, identify with you more than with this “other”. And how can we even begin a dialogue that is truly equitable in a world where the Democratic Republic of Congo knows more about Belgium than Belgium knows about the Democratic Republic of Congo? Is it possible, I ask myself, to weave fabric with only warp, no weft?

It was, therefore, with a sense of unease that I entered our own session, ‘The Contemporary and the Critical’, led by Gabriele Wittmann, Asoka de Zoysa, Esther Sutter and myself, in which we were exploring what these labels meant with respect to dance creation and journalism in Europe, India and Sri Lanka. The questions we posed were chosen to bring out the complexities we’d encountered in our discussions on notions of contemporaneity and criticality, particularly for a book on contemporary dance in India, and the cultural gaps and losses in translation we’d confronted on the way.

One of the questions we asked was: How do we define being “critical” in each of these cultures? And is criticality a necessary ingredient for work in order to be considered a “contemporary” artist where terms such as “classical” and “contemporary” stand for distinct historical, political and aesthetic experiences, different from in Europe? The sudden rise of Bharatanatyam as a “classical” dance form, from one of the most creative and radical moments in dance history, is a case in point. Its transformation in the 1930s, from Sadir, a regional temple dance in South India, into Bharatanatyam, a pan-Indian form with a nationalistic agenda, is now a known fact. And yet, what does it mean when its myth continues to be perpetuated, through a conspiracy between the state and the custodians of the classical, as a continuous tradition with ancient origins? What does this erasure of history do to our sense of criticality as new generations of dancers emerge? And how do we, soaked in a mythic imagination kept intact, be it artificially, articulate and write about the ways in which we seek to engage with our contemporary reality?

From the point of view of the journalist we wondered whether Western viewpoints of daring to openly share criticism pertain also to cultures in India and Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, in particular, where the recent war has led to an autocratic dictatorship, civil liberties are in danger and the role of the critic is as much to protect the lives of artists as to be openly critical.

In the second half of the session, we posed some of these questions to the audience: as a dance journalist, what were your experiences and challenges in writing or teaching writing in other countries? How did you deal with them? Do you want to contribute to our book? What kind of book about Contemporary Indian Dance would you like to read in Germany? Contrary to “Contemporary dance” in the West, contemporary dance in India does not reject traditional forms, but builds on them. How does knowing that change our perception of it? The last of these yielded, interestingly, hidden assumptions behind the term “contemporary” in different cultures. For some, “contemporary” signified “an open field”, one without culturally specified rules, for another it was “the dance that isn’t – it is not this, and also not that”. In Germany’s funding system, it is much more tightly compartmentalised, reserved as it is for the ultra new, the radical. How, we have to ask, does this affect the development of the contemporary in Indian dance? Given that innovative work is funded largely by European

cultural organisations like the Goethe Institutes, and its markets lie primarily in the West, can it be free to define its own trajectory? Or will predetermined European notions of “newness” eliminate the multiplicity of directions that it can take? Or, on the other hand, and this I realised was the source of my unease, will Europe altogether disregard our postcolonial reality with its double consciousness and insist, instead, on proof of our exoticism, our “otherness”?

How deep the problems and paradoxes of European funding run became all too clear at the workshop on ‘Cultural Policies in the Post – Colony’. Moderated by Sabine Sörgel, the panel included Panaibra Gabriel Canda (MZ), Koffi Koko (F, BJ), Faustin Linyekula (CGO, F), Stefan Schwarz (D) Marc André Schmachtel (D), Stefanie Thiersch (D) and Laurent van Kotte (F). The reason the organisers had chosen to restrict themselves to the African continent became evident soon enough. German organisations – next to the French - have a history of funding the development of contemporary work in African countries. Tanzhaus NRW is one such. Speaking of the long history of cross-cultural work between Germany and African countries, its director outlines the nature of long-term projects, such as Dance Dialogues Africa, that support artists in a sustained way. Cultural organisations such as the Goethe Institute and French Cultural Institute also work with local partners to promote regional initiatives.

And yet, what are the implications of this well-meaning support for the arts in Africa, not to mention Asia and South America? For local artists in these countries, harassed by ignorant, corrupt and unresponsive cultural bureaucrats in their countries, European funding and festival circuits are literally the only sources of funding for their artistic work. But does this influence how one works, what one creates, and for whom? Does one really have artistic agency as one walks the tight rope of being “African” enough to be distinguished from the other work presented in Europe, and yet “contemporary” enough to still be palatable? Juggling between the government, realities of the state, and the demands of the funders, a choreographer asks herself, “Do I sell myself? Am I a prostitute?”

And what does this European policy of cultural development in African countries imply? It is true that the plethora of European sponsorships, residencies, festivals and collaborations support the “education” and “development” of artists in these regions. But do they also not promote, quietly, their own aesthetics, notions of self, value judgments, visions of modernity and society? And does this not, most tragically, perpetuate the double consciousness we spoke of earlier?

How then do we speak about cross-cultural translation? Whose culture exactly are you hoping to encounter? As an exasperated Faustin Linyekula exclaims: “Congo is *not* a post colony! And it has no cultural policy! It’s a *colony*, where legitimacy still comes from outside”.

And the clamour in my head begins to subside.