Playing with 'Others':
Strategies in Intercultural Performance

*By Declan Patrick**

Playing with 'Others': Strategies in Intercultural Performance explores ways in which There's Danger in the Dance engaged with approaches to exploring difference. There's Danger in the Dance was an intercultural performance project that took place between 2007 and 2012. This piece of writing explores some of the strategies taken in conception, rehearsal and performance of this practice-as-research project. The rehearsal and performance investigated a complex intertwining of three dances from the Philippine folk dance canon, English performers and a range of ideas, including ideas around identity, nostalgia, memory and nationalism.

Introduction

Recently, I went to see a dance performance, presented by a graduate dance company in the Northwest of England. The work was made by a highly regarded local choreographer, and to my surprise, in the middle of the choreography there was a substantial movement sequence that had clearly been highly influenced by, or taken from, New Zealand Maori *Kapa Haka*. *Kapa Haka* is a modern iteration of Maori performing arts, and an integral expression of indigenous identity, hard fought for and won. However, in the English dance work there was no contextualizing of this, just straightforward appropriation of movement in service of the larger art work. As a New Zealander, (although not Maori) I felt quite proprietary, and slightly offended. As an intercultural performance practitioner, I understood exactly why and how the choreographer had taken the dance, and incorporated it into his own work.

In many ways this was just another way of incorporating 'other' forms of performance within a 'Western' performance lineage, and there is a long tradition of reputable 'Western' performance makers finding inspiration from the culture of the West's 'others', from Goethe through Ruth St Denis to Peter Brook.

Cultural appropriation is an idea that sits at the heart of many performance practices and attitudes towards them. The 'romantic' notion of the independent artist, making work that is 'divinely inspired' is the model that has been enshrined in law throughout much of the 'Western' world, through copyright and intellectual property law. This model, whilst providing much needed

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protection for some artists, does not take into account the ways in which making art builds on the accomplishments of the past, nor the collaborative nature of many forms of art. Rustom Bharucha argues that,

> ...ultimately it is this stamp of originality and invention that is upheld in claims around intellectual property rights, at the expense of taking into account collaborative and communitarian modes of production, inherited legacies of oral and folk wisdom.
> (Bharucha, 2000, p.23)

While Bharucha exposes the privileging of originality, he is also revealing the trap many cultures find themselves in; that of group creation and adaptation, and specifically ways in which artists and groups who do not fit the 'romantic' pattern sometimes struggle to be recognised under the law. He opens the way for further questions, such as how to measure originality, or how to assign responsibility for a cultural work constructed and adapted by an entire community through time.

This sense of communal ownership has, however, been vindicated through processes of law in New Zealand, where the intellectual ownership of indigenous cultural artefacts is discussed and action taken, generally under the terms of the founding document of the New Zealand nation, the Treaty of Waitangi. This is shown in the decision to award intellectual property rights for the 'Ka Mate' Maori *Haka* being awarded to a single tribe, the Ngati Toa, who according to news reports, seek to control intellectual property rights in order to protect the dance against profit-seeking corporations, specifically 'Hollywood'.

> The 'Ka Mate' *haka* has long been a symbol of New Zealand identity, and assumed to be within the public domain, but has now returned to private, tribal ownership.
> (Connolly, 2009)

Displaying, or interacting with the 'other', can be seen as an act of translation that works on the premise that the director/choreographer/ performers are taking from one culture, and through a process of shifting context, transporting cultural understanding and insight into a new setting, yet retaining that most elusive of qualities, 'authenticity'. Appropriation comes when that translation is not acknowledged, or respected.

Rather than approaching intercultural performance as a translation, I worked on deconstructing and reconstructing performance through a series of particular research focuses in order to understand how and why it functions. In no sense can my intercultural performance practices be called 'authentic', but then again, that is not something I have ever claimed. For me, the liminal nature of intercultural performance, the confusions created and explored by intercultural performance, and the possibility of multi-layered meaning are where the interest lies.

The issue of cultural appropriation is one I address in a practice-as-research (PaR) project I made in 2009, which then toured within England until 2012. This PaR performance project was intercultural in nature, and within its construction I investigated and used various strategies with which to explore the selected dances, trying to find a balance between respect for all concerned, rigorous investigation and a spirit of playfulness. In it, I investigated ways to remove material from the trap of imitation, while finding a connection between the materials and performers.

The project was a performance, called *There's Danger in the Dance*. The performance was a 75 minute exploration of what happens when Filipino folk dance was explored by Northern English performers, directed by a New Zealander. This article concerns the strategies I undertook in exploring three Filipino folk dances in this English setting.

PaR, as one might assume from the name, works on the idea that the practice contains within it the research. The research is not the paper written after, but rather the interaction between the live, evolving event, and critical reflection.

> Because art is inherently reflective and reflexive, practice-as-research activity may be identical with art activity in key and necessary aspects.
> (Nelson, 2006, p.112)

The 'key and necessary aspects' of both art activity and research, concern the ways in which the processes flow. This writing traces the directions in which the art processes of this project reflected, informed and engaged with the more 'traditional' research processes. In this I provide a platform for understanding how the ideas I work with have moved from writing to practice, and, at times, back again, in such iterations as this document.

The performance aspect of this project was planned from September 2007, rehearsed from April 2009 until its performance in September 2009, a process that lasted two years. It was first performed as part of a PaR doctoral thesis, and, after graduation, toured UK universities, as a research event, and also in public venues, until 2012, making the life of the project around 5 years.

The rehearsal process was informed by my academic research, which included reading, especially ideas concerning the performance of culture, memory and nostalgia, authority and authenticity. I also videoed interviews with leading dance workers in the Philippines, as well as attending *Sayaw* 2008. *Sayaw* is a yearly festival conducted at the Cultural Centre of the Philippines that acts as a platform for folk dance companies. The rehearsal process was also informed by my experiences with the folk-ballet performance company Filipinescas/Benildanze, as artistic director from 2005-7, and the performances I attended in the Philippines during that time. The rehearsal process became an integral part of my research, as through it, I extended the ideas previously explored in writing to include the body. I also experimented

with the relationships between the spoken word and the physical exploration of themes and ideas.

My own background is important in this. Moving on from the idea of the researcher being imbued with the 'Eye of God', I had and continue to have an agenda in making, and discussing intercultural performance, and my agenda has influenced the direction of my own academic investigations. John Martin, in his 2004 manual *The Intercultural Performance Handbook* says that, 'Interculturalism is an area of interaction where new forms are created' (p. 2), and this act of hybridized creation was one of the desired outcomes of the project.

Methodology

This study began with specific research questions, which examined what some Filipinos desire from their dances, and what functions, sometimes contradictory, the dances actually perform. I identified and examined several different narratives that operate through the dances, and in turn are constructed and maintained by the dances. Through my practice I extended these questions, and added an emphasis on what functions the dances could perform, specifically the contesting of their own narratives. I asked what the relationships between the dances and the performers might be when the dances were performed by foreigners. By taking the dances out of the Philippines, I effectively decontextualized them, making the relationships between the material and the performers more complex, rather than a straightforward expression of nationalism or remembered, reconstructed nostalgia. I asked how the dances might function in an environment where they were subjected to a process where authenticity was recognised as a negotiated concept and the 'feeling' and 'essence' of the dances, so important when the dances are performed in the Philippines,   were interpreted through my academic, practical research.

The methods I used to do this were taken from several disciplines. I used techniques from contemporary dance and contemporary performance practice, such as structured, task-based improvisation and group discussion, to generate information in rehearsal. This was part of the research process. From this, I observed and analysed the information generated. I selected material that was relevant to the concerns I was investigating, edited it and refined it. At the same time, I edited the footage of the interviews I had conducted in the Philippines, choosing material that was relevant to both the material generated in rehearsal and my areas of interest. When I had sufficient refined material, I ordered it to reflect the processes of my thinking, to the point where the interviews and other video footage had a relationship with the live, performed material. There was further rehearsal to fix and clean the material. The work was then performed, as both a research outcome, and as an ongoing research process.

A performance, unlike an article, or other published research outcomes, is ephemeral. As such, every time the work is performed, there is an opportunity to extend the research through the context of the performance, the interpretation of the performers and the relationship between the performers, the performance score and the audience. This means each time the performance is performed it will be different, allowing the research to evolve. It also means that a performance effaces itself as it progresses: although fragments, such as video footage, may remain, the lived moment of shared meaning-making between the performers, the audience and the director, does not.

The Dances

The performance was structured around the exploration, and deconstruction, of three dances from the Philippine folk canon; the Cariñosa, the Tinikling and the Binasuan.

I selected these dances for their representational value. While it can be said that Filipino folk dance is cross-cultural in its approach to itself, grouping dances according to distinct geographical regions, religions and time periods, there have been several dances that have represented the Philippines as a whole. One of these, the Cariñosa, is a dance that has, itself, been through a process of translation. As part of the Maria Clara suite of dances, the dances of the lowland, Christian, urbanised Filipino of the 19th century, the Cariñosa is a dance born out of Empire, with clear Spanish references. It is a courting dance that originated in Europe, was imported to Asia, and was 'Filipinised' to reflect the cultural mores of that particular time and place.

The Tinikling, on the other hand, is a dance that uses clashing bamboo poles, which dancers jump in and out of. In this sense it forms part of a lineage of dances across Asia that incorporate this stylistic feature. The dance comes from the Rural Suite, a collection of Filipino dances that originated in the food-producing countryside.

I looked at how each of these dances, to a degree, represent the struggle of ideologies in the public sphere: the Cariñosa as a stately, but flirtatious, dignified, heavily coded mating ritual looking backward to a time of colonial rule, while the Tinikling can be interpreted as an attempt to integrate an 'Asian' identity. The movement in Tinikling is faster, less dignified, than in Cariñosa, with a strong suggestion of physical danger, posing as 'fun', as dancers jump in and out of clashing bamboo poles.

The third dance, Binasuan, is a skill dance, where, according to the great pioneer of Philippine folk dance, Francesca Reyes Aquino, it is 'usually danced only by one girl, but sometimes two or three or more girls may dance it in group formation' (Aquino, 1960, p.1). However, in practice, it is also danced by men, who have slightly different, more spectacular, steps as demonstrated by the performance company Sining Bulakenyo, (n.d.). The performers balance glasses that are one third full on their heads and hands, while dancing. This dance was included for several reasons: the act of balancing a glass of water on

the head is a skill, but one that trains the body to move in a very particular manner. It embodies ideas about how the body works and is managed. There is an emphasis on a fluid verticality, which can change into a horizontal without losing its shape. This connects to an idea Philippine folk dance academic Sally Ann Ness discusses, where the concept of surface is important in Philippine dance: specifically the idea of the body draping on surfaces. It also connects with the idea that water and containment are paramount in the dance, revealing relationships between daily life and the surrounding ocean (Ness, 1992, Ch. 2). In Binasuan, the dancer adapts to different movement axis, while balancing the containment of water.

This contrasts and relates Binasuan with the other two dances. The constraint of the glass, and the physical shape necessary to hold the glass in place echoes the physical dignity and the verticality of the Cariñosa, yet the nature of the dance – the 'trick' of balancing glasses on the body – echoes the more exuberant Tinikling and its 'trick' of jumping in and out of the clashing bamboo. Binasuan can also be seen to work as a metaphor for culture, and the balancing act between the twin forces that, according to Bayart (2005), act on culture; innovation and tradition, the second hiding the first. It is also a spectacle that elicits several responses from an audience; tension, expectation and a kind of relief.

Each dance had a specific treatment, trajectory and a different rehearsal strategy from the others. This treatment and rehearsal strategy was based on my specific interests, and acted as the research focus for the dance. Once the focus was established, it was used to deconstruct the dance, construct a frame for the dance, and to develop alternative narratives for the dances. I used the idea of memory as a focus for Binasuan, I used written inscription as a focus for Cariñosa and I used the idea of cultural adaptation for Tinikling.

The exploratory phase of the process generated variations on the dances; repetition and duplication of material, but with differences. Some of these variations were quite far removed from the dances as danced in the Philippines; others showed small, incremental change. At times, I thought the dance needed an introduction or postscript, or indeed comment, and provided either a short segment of an interview or another dance or scene to frame the dance.

> A text's meaning is understood as its temporary rearrangement of elements with socially pre-existent meanings. Meaning, we might say, is always at one and the same time 'inside' and 'outside' the text.
> (Allen, 2000, p.37)

Allen's explanation of meaning is a useful way of understanding the way I used the Filipino dances, taking elements and re-arranging them, and using a complex structure of meaning that referred both to the internal structure of the dances and to the various contexts in which they have been and are being danced. Meaning can be accessed both through watching the performance, and writing such as this. Meaning can also be accessed through the physical

performance of the dances, and through the rehearsal process. The context in which the dances were performed, in English universities and theatre spaces, where the dances were developed in order to create and disseminate new knowledge, also contributes to how the dances are perceived; as an investigation into Philippine folk dance that utilises the dances but is not a performance of the dances.

The Strategies

Unifying Strategies

In rehearsal, thinking about the elements that unite the three dances investigated, I realised that one common denominator was their rhythm. All three dances are in ¾ time, and this became my starting point for the live performance. The repeated ¾ rhythm became a linking device through the whole performance. I also, through the work, challenged the dominance of the rhythm. I achieved this by asking dancers to move through the set music, or on some occasions to work against the music rather than on it, to give a sense of disjunction. Some sections were performed without music at all, or to music that was used in rehearsal, and taken out for performance, so the dancers could dance to the memory of the music. However, we always came back to the ¾ time to keep continuity and a sense of flow through the whole work. The time signature started as a convenient device to link the disparate sections of the performance; however, as the rehearsals continued, it became more than this. The time signature felt rigid, even though there were variations in tempo. Because the ¾ time repeated constantly, some of the movement, especially in the Cariñosa and Tinikling, became mechanistic and repetitive, and the rhythm became a constraint, something to work against and through, rather than with. It came to stand for the mechanistic inflexibility of the inscribed dances, constantly pulling the performance into prescribed patterns.

Exploratory and Performance Strategies

Parody and pastiche were two of the tools I utilised frequently in *There's Danger in the Dance*. As such, it is useful to have working definitions of these terms, and to see how they work through the dances. Parody can be defined as '…imitation and mimicry of other styles' (Goulding, 2000, p.838). Goulding goes on to say that parody uses the unique style of the original to mock it. In the performance, the liberating principles of mimicry and mockery were very important, as they became a strategy whereby I could engage with a postcolonial discourse while at the same time criticising a type of authority within dance.

> The **menace** of mimicry is its **double** vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority.
> (Bhabha, 2007, p.126)

Bhabha's view of mimicry shows how it can be used to examine discourse in such a way as to become aware of different ways of understanding the same actions. By exposing actions to this 'double vision' it is possible to challenge a single interpretation of events, opening up possibilities for development and understanding, and, of course, challenging authority. Bhabha's double vision can also be seen to correspond to the doubleness of the performer, who is at once present and absent in the performance.

Pastiche has been described as 'a kind of imitation that you are meant to know is an imitation' (Dyer, 2007, p.1). This is in itself a kind of doubleness; the knowing imitation that doesn't try to be the 'real thing'. Dyer continues to explain that pastiche has several formal procedures: likeness, deformation and discrepancy (Dyer, 2007, Ch. 2). This means that pastiche contains some form of comment on the 'original'. It is not an exact copy, and the differences between the original and the pastiche can be rich areas of investigation.

Margaret Rose discusses how pastiche is associated with post-modernism, while parody has been associated with the idea of the modern. She makes the point that both pastiche and parody are devices that can be put to use in a post-modern fashion, or in a modern fashion (Rose, 1991). The way in which the devices are used in this performance, however, has more common with the post-modern than the modern.

The procedures found in pastiche Dyer describes can be clearly seen in the first sequence in which I use Binasuan, where there is a strong similarity to the 'original' dance, but it is deformed in that the tempo is much slower than the 'original' and the movement slower and more graceful. The discrepancy comes when a performer spills her water, creating a deliberate mistake, a moment of shock for the audience.

Parody and pastiche can be seen in further sequences in which I use Binasuan. Framed within the structure of the dance, one performer performed a pastiche version, while the two other dancers, performed a parody. This opens interpretation on several levels. The dance is not a parody in itself, but has carefully controlled elements of parody. The use of the parody of the dance suggests an attitude of the performers and director towards Filipino dance, exoticising, or trivialising it. It is also important to see the flow of movement, from three dancers performing pastiche, to two dancers performing parody, and one performing pastiche. The sequence of movement suggests a changing and developing attitude towards the source material.

The dance that used parody the most was Tinikling. This was one of the most difficult dances to prepare, as one of the major features I wanted to parody was the spectacular, virtuosic fashion in which this dance is performed by folk dance companies. To do this we first had to learn to dance Tinikling, and in rehearsal we achieved competence in the basic steps. In the final stages of rehearsal we deliberately worked against the specially commissioned music, dropping counts and the bamboo, and working on technically difficult variations on the basic steps. I deconstructed the dance, physically separating the dancers from the bamboo, challenging the narrative of spectacle. I used this as a strategy because this type of performance would never happen in a

Filipino company. Even in rehearsal the strategy jolted my own perceptions of the dance, causing me to understand how virtuosic dancing could take the place of a deep connection to the dance.

J. Sionil José discusses how the Philippines has a 'folk' culture, and defines it thus because he thinks it is so simple, and easy to learn, although he does make an exception for Tinikling (José, 2005, pp.170-171). By parodying this dance, we were manipulating ideas of 'folk' and 'high' culture. John Storey argues convincingly that many 'popular' arts were appropriated, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, by the middle classes in the West, and that they were taken out of the 'popular' domain by putting them into contexts where access to them became problematic for most people (Storey, 2003). By performing a folk dance such as Tinikling in concert and research settings, I followed this pattern. It was an appropriation, but a self-reflexive appropriation. This is also the pattern the dance companies in the Philippines tend to follow. However, the process I put the dance through was different to the process of 'authenticating' that the dance companies use. Instead I tried to reveal, through the use of grotesque smiles, 'missed' counting, separating the 'clappers' from the dancers, and my own participation, the constructed nature of the dance. My own role, not as a dancer, but as a 'clapper' allowed my inclusion, as a tourist/foreigner. The position I took was subordinate, physically lower than the dancers, supporting them. This reversal of status was deliberate, done to further distance my version of Tinikling from a company version. By following a strategy of deliberate mistakes, I allowed the audience and the performers to view the dance in a way that challenged the narrative of spectacle; a reading that breaks out of the meta-narrative of foreigners being impressed and Filipinos being proud of the dances.

In rehearsal, I worked with Cariñosa, exploring the idea of mimicry, in a very particular way. The research focus for Cariñosa was exploring and extending the notion of inscription, in a formal and informal way. This involved using written instructions as a complete score for the dance. I constructed the dance by reading the Cariñosa entry in *Dances of the Philippine Islands Volume V* (Guillem, 2003, pp.18-26). While I read aloud, the three performers, with no previous knowledge of Philippine folk dance, interpreted the words. The performers were then shown the photograph alongside the text, and heard an interpretation of the written music that accompanied the written description of the dance.

The dancers' interpretation of the written words was the first stage in a process. During the performance, I contrasted the interpretation of the dance with a segment of an 'original version' performed by Sining Bulakenyo from a VCD intended '[f]or Students and CULTURAL DANCERS for Abroad' (Sining Bulakenyo, n.d., Liner notes). This video segment was intended as an example of a further video inscription, which was contrasted with the dance being performed live in front of it. This was followed by video footage of the written score from *Dances of the Philippine Islands Volume V*, as well as video footage of the dancers' own notes; their personal score of the dance. All these segments of video were intended as contrasting examples of inscription, and as

an illustration of the inscriptive changes that can take place within a dance, as well as suggesting the dances were a kind of palimpsest. This became a way of tracking the progress of the dance, and exposing the processes of the dance. It was placed near the beginning of the whole work, to set up multiple concepts of inscription; inscription on the page, on the body and on film, and how they differed while referring to the 'same' dance. The work was also being recorded on video, inscribing, and changing it again.

Conclusions

The performance, *There's Danger in the Dance*, engaged with intercultural strategies through exploring Filipino folk dance in an English academic setting. Using a variety of tools, such as deconstruction of the dances, parody and pastiche, and framing devices, I explored some of the cultural ideas that the dances help to construct and maintain. This exploration has come in the form of a challenge; to reveal how the dances function, and to find strategies of representation that can alter the narratives, allowing the agendas of the interested parties, including my own, to become more transparent, and to signal directions in which the dances might develop further in the future. The performance was a structure through which I, as a director, academic and *flâneur*, could locate myself and my interests in the dances. By taking the dances out of context, and by focusing my attention on them, the narratives had already changed. Adding English performers meant the idea of the dances became 'exotic'.

I required the performers to take risks in exposing their own identities in dancing the 'other', and also in interpreting Filipino dances under my direction. The performance showed the dancers as individuals, rather than as 'English' or 'Filipino', working against stereotypes, and interacting in a complex manner with the idea of identity.

Working with the folk dances in such a direct way, I discovered how embedded the notion of 'respect' was in me. I realised that it stopped me from exploring some directions that could have been interesting, but it also kept me focused on the performance of the material. This could be seen in my treatment of Cariñosa as I rigidly stayed with the written description of the dance, and the performers' interpretation of this description through all the versions of the dance we generated. This caused a type of ossification of the description, which fed into the Filipino concern with duplication and repetition, but served also to comment on this concern. Rather than changing the interpretation of the description of the dance, I layered further material as framing devices. This helped me to understand how ossification of the dances could happen, and, on reflection, how dangerous, and necessary, 'respect' can be. I realised too that I had a genuine affection for the dances and wanted others to enjoy them.

Ideas of repetition and duplication, which are so important in Filipino dance, were explored through performing sequential versions of the same dances, and through using pastiche and parody. Although the dances were

repeated, they were also changed, responding to the research focus used, which demonstrated a repeatable progression of ideas.

There are many ways of working within intercultural performance, and this project produced a research performance that moved away from the usual strategies of imitation and appropriation to a more complex, but sustaining and ethical strategy of self-reflexive, polyvocal engagement with materials from several cultures. This project has also provided a way forward, within the field, for working with intercultural materials.

There is a vast difference between appropriating materials wholesale to support an unrelated performance, and working with iterations of a dance in order to understand it more comprehensively. Exploring, in an academic setting, where users (and owners) of the dances have an input into the research, and the outcomes are constantly being reflected upon and updated, means the use of parody and pastiche are there for a greater reason than their simple definitions might, at first, suggest. That greater reason is the uncovering of new knowledge and ways of experiencing and interpreting the dances and the relationships between cultures; an outcome that serves both the academy, and the cultures involved.

Any performance requires a certain amount of trust; trust that your technicians know what they are doing, trust that the performers will have enough of a commitment to the project, and trust that as a director and writer you have sufficiently engaged with your material in a way that is ethically sound.

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