*Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 41(3), pp 509–528 2010.*
© The National University of Singapore, 2010 doi:10.1017/S0022463410000287

# Testimony, trauma and performance: Some examples from Southeast Asian theatre

Roxana Waterson

*Is the suffering of others also our own? In thinking that it might in fact be, societies expand the circle of the 'we'. By the same token, social groups can, and often do, refuse to recognise the existence of others' trauma, and because of their failure they cannot achieve a moral stance. … [B]y refusing to participate in what I will describe as the process of trauma creation, social groups restrict solidarity, leaving others to suffer alone.*

Jeffrey Alexander, 'Toward a theory of cultural trauma', in J. Alexander *et al.*, *Cultural trauma and collective identity* (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 2004: 1)

*Memory exists in an ongoing process of performance and response. Traces of the past otherwise slip into the archive, an ever-present but usually ignored repository filled with the random survivals of antecedent social relationships stored in buildings, landscapes, libraries, museums, store windows, the electronic media, as well as in the everyday lives of the countless unknown people whose paths cross ours. One person's memory is another person's archive.*

Richard Cándida Smith, 'Introduction: Performing the archive', in his *Art and the performance of memory: Sounds and gestures of recollection* (London: Routledge, 2002: 3)

*All theatre …is a cultural activity deeply involved with memory and haunted by repetition.*

Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The theatre as memory machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003: 11)

## Reality, film, theatre: Intersecting arenas for the performance of memory

This paper is a reflection on a number of theatre performances held in Singapore, each of which probed problematic or traumatic historical events occurring either in Singapore itself or in other parts of Southeast Asia. These avant-garde performances were inspired by or built around actual testimonies of individuals in ways which, for this author, suggest a striking fluidity in the boundaries between testimony and performance, one that raises difficult questions about performance ethics and the processes by which collective memories are shaped. The plays also made use of visual media: one had been recorded on video while others incorporated photographic and video materials into the actual performance. At the time I witnessed these plays, I had already become interested in the way that, over the course of the twentieth

Roxana Waterson is Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore. Correspondence in connection with this paper should be addressed to: socroxan@nus.edu.sg.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000287 Published online by Cambridge University Press

century, documentary films had come to play an increasingly important role in the recording of testimony concerning traumatic events.[1] Testimony on film, I have argued, functions simultaneously as evidential trace, and as performative event. Films of testimony develop their own trajectories as they enter into the realms of public remembering. They preserve and extend the record of personal experiences, thereby adding them to the pool of collective memory about an event. Theatrical performances, too, develop their own trajectories through repetition, as Marvin Carlson's statement (cited above) suggests. But what exactly might be different when testimony is performed as drama before a live audience? What are the purposes of such performances, and what might be their possible effects upon both participants and audiences? Is the trace left by a live theatre performance inevitably more ephemeral than those captured on film, or might it be in some respects even more powerful? These are some of the questions I raise – without necessarily being able to present definitive answers – in what follows. I conclude by arguing that in the Singapore context, because censorship laws place very specific constraints on the making of documentary films with openly political content, in recent years theatre has been able to offer a slightly greater space than film as a medium for critical reflection. How theatre directors and actors have tried to use this space is a subject correspondingly deserving of our close attention.

It is part of the human condition to be the bearer of memories that are not part of our own first-hand experience, but which are nevertheless crucial to our sense of ourselves, of where we have come from and what we should do next, and of our membership of diverse and overlapping social groups. But to become 'social', memories must be articulated somehow and passed on. Within the social sciences, where the past two decades have seen an explosion of interest in the phenomenon of social memory, a central problem is to explicate better the various processes of transmission by which memories come to be shared.[2] Transmission from one person to others is the point at which neurological models (of encoding, storage and retrieval of memories in the brain) stop, and memory as a social, intersubjective phenomenon begins.[3] Neurological and psychological models of how memory functions for the individual, however, in my view also have important implications for social memory. Gillian Cohen, for instance, notes that memory is *dynamic*, being readily subject to revision, updating and modification, since fixed memory structures are always at risk of obsolescence. Memory is also *integrative*: Cohen states that 'the most important function

1 Roxana Waterson, 'Trajectories of memory: Documentary film and the transmission of testimony', *History and Anthropology*, 18, 1 (2007): 51–73.

2 It would be impossible to list here more than a fraction of this literature, but see for example James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social memory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); *Social memory and history: Anthropological perspectives*, ed. Jacob Climo and Maria Cattell (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002); *Perilous memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)*, ed. Takashi Fujitani, Geoffrey White and Lisa Yoneyama (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Shigehara Tanube and Charles F. Keyes, *Cultural crisis and social memory: Modernity and identity in Thailand and Laos* (Richmond: University of Hawai'i Press; London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002).

3 On individual memory processes, see Gillian Cohen, *Memory in the real world*, 2nd edn (Hove: Psychology Press, 1996); *Episodic memory: New directions in research*, ed. Alan Baddeley, John Aggleton and Martin Conway (Oxford: The Royal Society / Oxford University Press, 2002).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000287 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of memory in the real world is to link past, present and future'.[4] *Prospective* memory is that function that enables us to draw upon past experience in order to plan for the future. This facet of memory has to be constructive, able to conceive of things not present, imagine hypothetical situations, and predict outcomes that have not happened yet.[5] A key question for social memory research is how these integrative and prospective uses of memory actually operate in the politics of memory at wider communal, social and transnational levels.

Maurice Halbwachs' pioneering insights into the 'social frameworks' of memory and its constructed, selective nature have made him the acknowledged founder of social memory studies, but he said little about actual media and processes of transmission.[6] Extensions to Halbwachs' conceptualisations include Jacob Climo's concept of 'vicarious memory', paralleled by Marianne Hirsch's 'postmemory', as ways of talking about the often strongly emotional and embodied quality of the memories passed on by those who are closest and most important to us.[7] It seems to me that underpinning this phenomenon of identification are the qualities of empathy and imagination that are integral to human consciousness.[8] There are many other memories of the past that we may carry without being so personally touched by them as Climo was by the tacit expression of trauma of the adult Holocaust survivors who surrounded him in the New York community in which he grew up. But as the global community continues to shrink, our knowledge of what is happening to others, elsewhere, becomes more and more immediate and will continue to pose moral challenges concerning responsibility and accountability. In the broadest possible sense, our understanding of past events has consequences for how we imagine ourselves as human beings, and in this context it is the most traumatic events that pose the severest threat to our imaginings, and require most urgently that we try to understand better in an effort to prevent repetition. It is clear, for instance, that current developments in international law and the discourse of human rights grow out of the continuing, unfinished effort to grapple with the moral issues raised by the Holocaust and which must arise again – still with shamefully weak and unconcerted results – in the face of new genocides.

Halbwachs especially did not touch upon the roles that might be played by mass media, or visual media, in the transmission of memory. Here it is intriguing to note

4 Ibid., p. 313.

5 The latest studies of the brain using functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging indeed confirm that largely overlapping areas of the brain are activated in imagining the future, as in remembering the past. See Jessica Marshall, 'Future recall', *New Scientist* (24 Mar. 2007): 36–40.

6 Maurice Halbwachs, *On collective memory*, ed., trans. and with an introduction by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

7 Jacob Climo, 'Prisoners of silence: A vicarious Holocaust memoir', in *The labyrinth of memory: Ethnographic journeys*, ed. Marea C. Teski and Jacob J. Climo (Westport: Begin and Garvey, 1995), pp.175–84; Marianne Hirsch, *Family frames: Photography, narrative, and postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

8 There is no space to pursue those two concepts here, but see for instance Antonio Damasio, *The feeling of what happens: Body and emotion in the making of consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999); Martin Hoffman, *Empathy and moral development: Implications for caring and justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Randolph Nesse, *Evolution and the capacity for commitment* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2001); and Edward Casey, *Imagining: A phenomenological study* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000287 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the contemporaneity of Halbwachs and Walter Benjamin, both of whose lives were cut short by the same catastrophe, which continues to loom ineluctably as the irresolvable issue, the 'limit case' as Dominick LaCapra has called it, at the heart of memory studies.[9] Benjamin was aware of witnessing a historical transformation in which photography and film were already coming to perform a radically new communicative function in society, and he also commented upon the differences, as he saw it, between the experience of theatre audiences, exposed to the 'aura' of a live performer, and film audiences, who were without realising it identifying with a machine, the camera.[10] His comments on this subject were brief and did not encompass documentary film, a genre in which I have argued that the mediating role of the filmmaker, as independent investigator involved in what is often a very personal and even life-transforming quest, deserves our closer attention.[11] By the same token, in the theatre performances which I describe below, the relationship between actors/participants and audience has been crucially mediated by a director, forming a triangle that likewise begs critical scrutiny. Although Alfred Gell, in his *Art and agency*, deliberately (though only for convenience) avoided a consideration of performance, I find his ideas about agency and intention as embedded in the work of art may be useful here in thinking through the possible effects of testimony as a performance of memory.[12] He maps the shifting possibilities for agency within his schema of the relationships involved in art production, including the involvement of patrons, and the potential agency also of the spectator as the one worked upon, the 'patient' (as he terms it) or recipient of the art object. Tracing the agency of the audience is something that is elusive, yet definitely felt in the moment, when their engagement is crucial to a sense that a performance has been a 'success'; in social terms, it also raises other questions, however, about how much it is reasonable to expect from theatre as a catalyst for change.[13] Where a real life problem is involved, such as accountability for human rights violations, testimony contributes vitally to the longer term 'working through' of memories, but this should not be assumed to imply the possibility of a facile or premature 'closure'.[14]

In this exploration, then, I have found myself criss-crossing the unstable boundaries between film and theatre, theatre and life. The dialectical relationship and continual interchange between the dramas of ordinary life and those of the theatre have

9 Dominick LaCapra, *History and memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 183.

10 Walter Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', in his *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999 [1935]).

11 Waterson, 'Trajectories of memory', p. 69.

12 Alfred Gell, *Art and agency: An anthropological theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

13 Susan Bennett, *Theatre audiences: A theory of production and reception* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 167; *The politics of theatre and drama*, ed. Graham Holderness (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 93. Bennett cites John McGrath (1974: xxvii), who writes: 'The theatre can never *cause* a social change. It can articulate the pressures towards one, help people to celebrate their strengths and maybe build their self-confidence. It can be a public emblem of inner, and outer, events, and occasionally a reminder, an elbow-jogger, a perspective-bringer. Above all, it can be the way people can find their voice, their solidarity and their collective determination.'

14 LaCapra, *History and memory*, p. 185.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000287 Published online by Cambridge University Press

been creatively explored by both anthropologists and theatre practitioners.[15] As Richard Schechner insists on the ability of 'theatrical reality' to work its effects on both performers and spectators, so can reality benefit at times from an injection of theatre.[16] But what are we to think of the reverse movement, by which the historical testimony of individuals may end up in the theatre? The plays I want to consider here touch upon a number of violent events in Southeast Asia's recent history, events whose effects are still working themselves out in the present; they thus provide an opportunity to reflect on the multiplicity of means by which memories may be transmitted, and the implied necessity for the engagement of the audience as witnesses to testimony.

### Testimony as theatre

Whether the person who testifies is telling a story shaped and polished by many repeated tellings, or whether they may be breaking for the first time a silence that might have lasted years or decades, the act of testifying about any traumatic event must carry a cost for the teller. Of necessity it must also include a performative element (as any form of self-presentation arguably must). Far from disqualifying it as evidence, the performative elements themselves may provide valuable additional elements for analysis and understanding. The idea of testifying in the theatre may come as a surprise, seeing that this has traditionally been seen as a space for the free play of the imagination and the enactment of fictions. On the other hand, a dramaturgical element undoubtedly enters into the presentation of testimony in real life settings, too, such as courts of law or the hearings of Truth Commissions. The presence of the audience, and its empathetic attention, is indeed an essential precondition for such proceedings as TRC hearings to have any hope of efficacy, either for the survivors or for the society as a whole.[17] The structure of such events is designed to create a space conducive to testifying – both by survivors and perpetrators – and to

15 See especially Victor Turner, *Dramas, fields, and metaphors: Symbolic action in human society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), *From ritual to theatre* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1983), and *The anthropology of performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987); Abner Cohen, *The politics of elite culture: Explorations in the dramaturgy of power in a modern African society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); Bruce Kapferer, *A celebration of demons* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1981); Richard Schechner, *Between theater and anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985) and *The future of ritual* (London: Routledge, 1993); Eugenio Barba, *The paper canoe: A guide to theatre anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1995).

16 Schechner, *Between theatre and anthropology*, p. 117. An especially vivid example is provided by the career of Vaclav Havel. The Velvet Revolution of 1989 unfolded like a well-planned drama because, as Deputy Foreign Minister Alexandr Vondra later recalled, it had indeed been scripted. Havel, immediately on his release from prison on 10 Nov. 1989, the day after the Berlin Wall fell, had spent 10 hours plotting it in painstaking detail, 'like a screenplay' (*Guardian Weekly*, 6–12 Feb. 2003). Nothing could illustrate more clearly how the element of performance may be deliberately woven into a real life drama, nor for that matter its positive power to help ensure a good outcome. By contrast, in the unpredictable drama played out in Tian An Men square in 1989, the moment for compromise was lost, at least partly because certain student leaders seem to have been unable to resist the temptation of the dramatic gesture that would lead to tragedy.

17 Martha Minow, 'The hope for healing: What can Truth Commissions do?', in *Truth v. justice: The morality of Truth Commissions*, ed. Robert Rotberg and Dennis Thompson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 235–60; Stephanie Marlin-Curiel, 'Truth and consequences: Art in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission', in *Art and the performance of memory: Sounds and gestures of recollection*, ed. Richard Cándida Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 37–62.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000287 Published online by Cambridge University Press

appropriate acknowledgement by an audience. Testimony that might otherwise remain suppressed by a culture of impunity and silence is thus brought into the open and entered into the public record.[18] Martha Minow emphasises the importance of solidarity and 'a moral, sympathetic, and politically attentive stance' on the part of the witness in the testimonial, just as in the therapeutic, relationship.[19] She warns against simplified assumptions about the possibilities for 'healing', whether individual or collective, but judges the process, however incomplete, to be at least worth the effort.

What testimony, film and theatre all have in common, then, is this need for an audience; they are all intrinsically dialogical.[20] Jacques Derrida, writing about testimony, focused on the idea of written autobiographical testimony as text, the product of an isolated individual author, even though addressed to an imagined readership.[21] But in legal settings, one must bear testimony *to* someone, and Andrea Frisch therefore draws our attention to the idea of the addressee. Implicitly, some work is required of the audience in order to arrive at a satisfactory outcome from such performances; they have their part to play in being actively, not merely passively, receptive to what is being communicated. A dialogic understanding of the production of meaning likewise undergirds the work of several contemporary theatre practitioners. Theatre director Eugenio Barba, for instance, insists that meaning itself is the result of a relationship: 'The very fact that the performer-spectator relationship exists implies that meanings will be produced. The point is whether or not one wishes to programme *which specific meanings* must germinate in the spectator's mind.'[22] He sees the job of the performers in conveying a story as 'creating the conditions within which [the spectator] can *ask her/himself* about its meaning'.[23] And Richard Cándida Smith writes: 'The gesture itself lies beyond words, but without its presence, words stand devoid of context … Meaning arises from conditions external to though surrounding the statement. Only if a proposition generates a response that is capable of generating further responses, has one created a meaningful situation … An "I" speaks to a "you" about an "it" in order to get a reaction of one kind or another.'[24] With this idea of

18 While some earlier Truth Commissions, like the Chilean, were not held in public for fear of retaliatory action from the military, the proceedings of the South African TRC were broadcast live on TV and were watched by audiences of millions daily. The ambitiousness of this process, and the difficulties of achieving its sometimes conflicting goals, have been thoughtfully commented on by a number of writers. See for example, *Truth v. justice*; Fiona Ross, 'Speech and silence: Women's testimony in the first five weeks of public hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission', ed. Rotberg and D. Thompson, in *Remaking a world: Violence, social suffering, and recovery*, ed. Veena Das (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 250–80.

19 Minow, 'The hope for healing', p. 245.

20 Andrea Frisch, *The invention of the eyewitness: Witnessing and testimony in early nodern France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, Dept of Romance Languages, 2004); Shoshona Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

21 Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and testimony* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

22 Barba, *The paper canoe*, p. 105.

23 Ibid., p. 95.

24 Richard Cándida Smith, 'Introduction: Performing the archive', in *Art and the performance of memory: Sounds and gestures of recollection*, ed. Richard Cándida Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000287 Published online by Cambridge University Press

an active dialogue and its possible social consequences in mind, then, let me now turn to the plays themselves.

The plays represent a range, within which testimony has been incorporated in very different ways. My first example is *The Spirits Play*, by an extraordinary and much missed figure in Singapore theatre, Kuo Pao Kun, who died of cancer in 2002 at the age of 63. This play is informed by research into real life happenings and accounts, which have been distilled and abstracted into the characters and their monologues in a rather indirect way. The play, which probes the wartime experiences of ordinary Japanese people, was originally inspired by a visit to the (easily overlooked) Japanese cemetery in Singapore.[25] The playwright then developed it while in a retreat in the remote village of Nino in Nagano, Japan.[26] The characters in the play are a set of allegorical figures: the General, the Mother, the Man, the Girl and the Poet, all of whom are ghosts speaking from the realm of the dead, as they ponder their fates. The play's anti-war theme has been deliberately universalised, and the location remains ambiguous. We learn that they all died during the final defence of an unnamed island that had been conquered and occupied by Japan (Okinawa most obviously comes to mind, but any Singaporean would be bound to find resonances with Singapore's own experience of Occupation). As they struggle to remember what happened to them, it becomes clear that it was the General who was responsible for their deaths and had prevented any surrender; yet they themselves had all gone along with his militaristic propaganda. The tacit questions raised about Japan's wartime aggression in Southeast Asia are obvious enough. The play was first produced in Mandarin in Singapore by the Theatre Practice in June 1998, and again in Singapore and Hong Kong in November of that year. In August 2000 it was produced in English in Singapore by Ong Keng Sen, in a collaborative performance with Japanese performance artists, at the Battle Box in Fort Canning Park (a historically significant location, being the bunker from which British Army commanders directed their defence against the Japanese invasion of Singapore in 1942). When the play was performed in Singapore, the very idea of showing things from a Japanese perspective was enough to raise criticisms from those who felt, even 50 years after the event, that this was to grant the aggressors a sympathy they could hardly deserve. When plans were made for its production in Japan, however, as part of an Asian theatre festival that

25 The Japanese Cemetery Park was founded in 1891 by Tagajiro Futaki, a plantation owner, philanthropist, and by some accounts, also himself a brothel owner, who donated 7 acres of land from his rubber plantation to be used for the burial of young Japanese women who died in destitution. These women came to Singapore in large numbers in the late 19th century to work as prostitutes (Karayuki-San). See James Warren, *Ah-Ku and Karayuki-San: Prostitution in Singapore 1970–1940* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993). Roughly half of the 910 graves in the cemetery are of Karayuki-San, many of them anonymous. The poet Futaba Teishimei, best remembered for his translations into Japanese of the works of Dostoyevsky, died in Singapore and was buried here in 1909 after falling ill on board a ship on which he was returning from Europe to Japan. Also buried here are the Supreme Commander of the Japanese Forces in Southeast Asia during World War II, Field Marshal Count Hisachi Terauchi (who died of a stroke in 1946), two other officers wanted for war crimes, who shot themselves to avoid surrender, and a number of Japanese soldiers, airmen or prisoners of war.

26 C.J. W.-L. Wee and Lee Chee Keng, 'Breaking through walls and visioning beyond: Kuo Pao Kun beyond the margins', in Kuo Pao Kun, *Two plays by Kuo Pao Kun: Descendants of the 4 eunuch admiral and The Spirits Play*, ed. C.J. W.-L. Wee and Lee Chee Keng (Singapore: SNP Editions, 2003), pp. 13–34.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000287 Published online by Cambridge University Press

same year, the funding agency refused support, finding the play to be too critical of Japan. To date, it has still not been performed there, a reflection of official Japan's continuing difficulties in working through its wartime history.

*Occupation* by Huzir Sulaiman is much more obviously bound to the life of an actual individual. Its author founded the Straits Theatre Company in 1996; this play was commissioned by the Singapore Arts Festival in 2002. It is based on the wartime recollections of the playwright's grandmother, Mrs Mohamed Siraj, who contributed her memories, documents and personal effects to the project. Huzir calls it 'a work that harnesses fact to fiction', in that much selection, alteration and discarding of material of necessity took place during the process of its development. As he says in the programme notes, the play grew from his desire to address 'both my family's experiences during the war, and the wider concerns of the historical representations of the period', by sharing stories that he had heard since childhood. Claire Wong, Huzir's co-director/producer, who played the role of Mrs Siraj (the sole character in the play) adds that these are:

> stories set in a period where countless tales already abound, where almost everyone has her own memories and family tales passed on from 'that time, Japanese time'. A moment in history we have collectively agreed to recall at the mention of certain buzzwords: Tapioca, water torture, tapioca, banana money, tapioca.[27]
>
> But are there not tales to tell without the buzzwords, tales that skirt those singular images that may have come to crowd out the variety and jumble of experience?
>
> And in telling those tales, we cannot help but consider these questions: why does one story become history and not another? Should history make us feel bad or good, repentant or forgiving, bored or interested? How do we remember? What else is there to remember? Should we forget?

The play makes imaginative use of visuals, sound effects and music. It succeeds in raising some awkward questions, such as the apparently forgotten presence of thousands of Indian soldiers, as well as other non-Europeans, who were interned in the Changi prison camp along with British and Australian troops. Where are their memories? Why are their stories apparently excluded from the displays in the new Changi Museum, which focus heavily upon the British experience? 'Shouldn't we remember them?' asks Mrs Siraj pointedly. 'Or do only white people count? … and Chinese?' She complains how history is always incomplete, especially in those narratives contrived for the purposes of nation-building — 'But truth is still allowed, in judicious amounts, if truth will do the nation proud.' Recalling the Japanese who ran 10-cents shops in Middle Road before the war, she comments unexpectedly, 'Such lovely chaps they were, before the war — they were always bowing.' While Huzir's grandfather and other young Indians held meetings in Racecourse Road to talk about Independence, as a young girl, Mrs Siraj's own wartime experience was hardly 'typical', since she spent it shut up in the house. Her mother kept her in for her own protection, for another universal memory of Occupation in Singapore is of the

27 Perhaps the most commonly recounted memory of Singaporeans who lived through the Japanese Occupation is of having to eat tapioca (cassava) because of rice shortages. Tapioca has become emblematic of wartime hardships, almost to the exclusion of more varied memories.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000287 Published online by Cambridge University Press

dangers posed to young women by Japanese troops. Some girls disguised themselves as boys at that time, or made themselves look filthy in order to avoid attracting attention. Her own family was wealthy and respectable (having been in the shipping business, before the war), and their preferred option was to keep her indoors. She was not even allowed to stand at the window; yet she secretly waved to a young man lodging in the house next door, who tutored the house owner's children in exchange for board and lodging. They succeeded in passing notes to each other, and later married.

In other ways too, Mrs Siraj's experiences were distinctly atypical. At the start of the war, the family had been able to fill a room with food items from two ships, which they shared with neighbours during the first year until the supplies ran out. Mrs Siraj recalls that they 'had to cut down' for her wartime wedding – entertaining only 500 guests instead of the 1,000 or more who would have been invited in normal times – a memory quite at odds with most people's experiences of wartime hunger. Although the particularities of one individual's life might sometimes appear to be of no special consequence, and in this instance might even strike us as relatively trivial, they clearly are not to the playwright. Most stories passed on by grandparents remain within the family, though it is never guaranteed that there will be somebody in the younger generations who is interested to listen to them. Huzir's decision to share his family stories with a public audience potentially lengthens their life span by feeding them into the collective 'memory bank'. In becoming the subject matter of a play, Mrs Siraj's recollections have been interwoven with Huzir's own questioning about memory, so that their voices are mingled. This performance of memory strives to take us beyond the iconic mention of 'tapioca', which as a condensed, symbolic image has become almost a hindrance to an understanding of a fuller range of wartime experiences in Singapore.

Theatre Works is a company that has made a specialisation of what its director, Ong Keng Sen, likes to call 'docu-performance'. An intriguing example was an avant-garde opera called *Broken Birds: An Epic Longing* (1995), which was staged outdoors on Fort Canning Hill in the centre of old Singapore ('Singapore's oldest cemetery'). The play was sold out every night. That year was the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, and was marked by the international resurgence of the issue of 'Comfort Women', who had been forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese Army. The willingness of surviving Comfort Women from several countries to break a 50-year silence and testify about their experiences was met with repeated refusals from the Japanese government to offer apologies or compensation. *Broken Birds* raised certain parallels with that issue, from a more distant time in Singapore's history. Its substance was provided by adapting as drama a work of history, James Warren's *Ah-Ku and Karayuki-San: Prostitution in Singapore, 1870–1940* (1993), which tells the story of Chinese and Japanese prostitutes who were trafficked to Singapore, especially during the late nineteenth century, to service an immigrant community at that time overwhelmingly made up of men. Warren himself was closely consulted in the process of adaptation, as Ong Keng Sen was in close correspondence with him over a period of months during which the cast studied and 'workshopped' his book. Warren has commented critically upon the passage involved from the original documents he studied, to the composition of his book as a work of social history,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000287 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to its transmutation as a theatre performance, and finally to an amateur video film that was made of the production.[28] That passage began in 1978, when he paid a visit to a Court building in Singapore, and a security guard found a key and let him into the basement. It was full of coroners' records dating from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth. The first item he picked up was a suicide note from a prostitute in a brothel in Malabar Street. He was struck by how the accumulated legal records had preserved the authentic speech, if not of victims themselves, then often of those who testified about them in court. Warren has dedicated his efforts as a historian to rescuing the stories of those who get written out of official histories, which has been as much the case for these women as for the rickshaw coolies who became the subjects of another of his studies, constructed from the same records.[29] He blames conventional historians for acting as magicians, 'making women disappear before your very eyes', and creating a 'culture of silence' about the less savoury aspects of their own past. He wants to show that 'enormous consequences are embodied in individuals', even those subordinated by their class and gender positions, whose lives formed part of a bigger story of migrant labour. Karayuki-San were encouraged (or tricked) into coming to Singapore in large numbers, especially in the 1870s. It was a time of dire and widespread famines, particularly in Kyushu and in some prefectures of northern Japan, from whence most of them came. At that time there were few exports from Japan except for coal, silk and women; the latter came to Singapore from coal ports like Kobe in the holds of coal ships, and the fates of all these commodities, human or otherwise, were connected. Singapore itself was connected to Kyushu then, Warren proposes, in much the same way that it is now connected to Bangladesh and the Philippines and other areas from which migrant workers come in large numbers. The lives of the Karayuki-San were a strange mixture of trauma and patriotism, since they were making substantial contributions both to their families and to the Japanese economy. They were encouraged to see themselves as a sort of army contributing to the national economy with their remittances, and they typically kept a picture of the Emperor over their beds. In today's international economy, migrations may flow the other way, from Southeast Asia to Japan, as women from countries like Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines are the ones

28 Warren presented this film at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 22 Oct. 2002, with a talk on the theme of 'Singapore's avant-garde theatre: New ways of viewing the history of Japanese women in Southeast Asia'. His comments cited here are from that occasion.

29 James Warren, *Rickshaw coolie: A people's history of Singapore 1880–1940* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986). Women in general, and prostitutes in particular, are under-represented in both Japanese and Singaporean histories. In Singapore's recently opened Chinatown Heritage Centre, the curators have presented a peculiarly sexist account of male Chinese migrants and their encounters with the Ah Ku. In a part of the display depicting a room in a brothel, the accompanying text reads:

> "*Arms of the Ah Ku*": 'Traditionally, the sinkehs [migrants] came without their wives. Hopelessly outnumbering the women, the man craved affection and human touch. For these men, the arms of the prostitute or Ah Ku were a consolation. However, the comfort from them [unfortunate choice of language!] also came with diseases of epidemic proportions, and men languished and died, in pain and sometimes in madness. In addition, the Ah Ku also introduced men to other vices that would eventually shatter the dreams of many sinkehs' [a reference to opium, use of which can hardly be blamed solely on the Ah Ku, given that half of Singapore government revenues were derived from opium profits during the 19th century, and in the period 1923–42 it was even sold in government-run opium shops].

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000287 Published online by Cambridge University Press

who now find themselves in similar circumstances to the Karayuki-San of the nineteenth century. And the hotel in which Warren stayed in Chinatown while working on these documents was by the late 1970s occupied by JAL stewardesses, a newer and more fortunate category of women workers abroad, no doubt unaware that they were treading the same streets where members of their grandparents' generation had worked at a different occupation.

Warren, if I interpret him correctly, had somewhat mixed feelings about the outcome of this unusual collaboration. On the one hand, the dramatisation enabled the voices of the forgotten individuals in the coroners' records, first rescued by his history text, to reach out across time to a new and wider audience. Yet, in his book, they had been presented as named individuals; in the theatre production, they were abstracted to become emblematic voices. Rather than building detailed characters, the dramatisation focuses on a set of circumstances and events that become critical moments in a life, forcing a person to choose. It invites us to consider questions about the complexity of those choices, and of the nature of good and evil. He had strong opinions about the risks of introducing an unwarranted affectation and sentiment into the production, yet there was also the possibility that the operatic format, most stylised of all forms of theatre, might create too much distance between the subject matter and the audience, in spite of the fact that for a Singaporean audience, the issues come directly out of their own past. But eventually, it seemed that the music had somehow become the bridge between the past and the present, helping to present individual voices without subordinating them. Most of all, whereas Warren's book traced the fates of both Chinese and Japanese prostitutes (and established that it was the Chinese Ah Ku who in general were treated far worse than the Japanese Karayuki-San), Ong chose in his adaptation to focus only upon the Karayuki-San. Was this a cop-out? Would it have been too close to home for the Singaporean performers to have acted out the exploitation of the Ah Ku instead?

A more recent play conceived and directed by Ong Keng Sen was still more remarkable in involving direct testimony from the living. This was *The Continuum: Beyond the Killing Fields*, first put on by TheatreWorks Singapore in October 2001. It was performed in the derelict Bank of China warehouse in Mohamed Sultan Road, which had by then been scheduled for demolition. The play deals with the Khmer Rouge years in Cambodia (1975–79),[30] and its principal participants are four Cambodian survivors: Em Theay (then 69 years old), Kim Bun Thom and Thong Kim Ann (Preab), who had all been dancers at the Royal Court, and Mann Kosal, a shadow puppeteer. The core of the play is their own testimony about what happened to them. Thus they are all performers in the double sense, of being trained artists and of presenting their testimony. A mediating role was played by an English-speaking Malay Singaporean cast member, Norlina Mohamad, who had

30 For an anthropological study of the Cambodian genocide, see Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why did they kill? Cambodia in the shadow of genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). A thought-provoking parallel in film is Jocelyn Glatzer's *The flute player* (Over the Moon Productions: Distributed by NAATA Distribution, 2003; 53 minutes). It concerns a musician, Arn Chorn-Pond, who as a young boy was recruited into the Khmer Rouge. He survived the genocide, much traumatised by his experiences as an enforced perpetrator, and now dedicates himself to reviving Cambodia's musical heritage.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000287 Published online by Cambridge University Press

spent time in Cambodia during the development of the project, getting to know the Cambodian performers, being taught by them how to dance, and shooting video. She sometimes offered ironic commentary on her own halting progress in getting to know Cambodian life and arts.

The performance, lit by large candles, shifted around the floor area inside the deserted building, as the audience was invited to follow the sequences of the action, grouping and re-grouping themselves around the four performers as they took turns alternately to demonstrate their arts, to continue their 'training' of Norlina, and to testify about their experiences under the Khmer Rouge. They spoke in Khmer, while the audience could follow what was said with the aid of a script provided in English. Occasionally, they also involved members of the audience in dancing with them. While their accounts and performances summoned the past, video projected on to the walls served to show the return to normality, and their resumed practice of their professions, in Cambodia's present. We see footage of everyday life in Cambodia, and a new generation of young dancers in training with Em Theay. In one sequence, the video shows a cow's head and hide, looking gross and bloody, being cured to make new puppets, while Mann Kosal himself, in front of a screen, wields the ethereal shadows from his own puppet collection. On the video, the men take a break from cleaning the hide to play *pétanque* in the yard. Mann tells of how, as a boy of 10, he found himself in a work group which had been detailed to finish the building of a dam. But they were getting too weak and sick to finish it in the time demanded by their Khmer Rouge officers, so in fear of his life he fled into the forest. With both hands he raises a huge shadow puppet scene, depicting the small boy running through the killing fields with skulls underfoot, the sky full of leering demon faces that pursue him. The shadows flicker on the wall as he flees. The next puppet, a very beautiful one, shows a scene of the boy alone, sitting by a river in the forest.

Preab recalls how her mother, Em Theay, resisted the temptation to obey the instruction for court dancers to go and register themselves. Her favourite music student and dance partner, 'who was her soul', Sin Si Sa Mut, went to register himself, and died in Tuol Sleng. Em Theay went to look for traces of him years ago, and saw his photograph there, for the Khmer Rouge torturers obsessively catalogued their victims. Recently, she went to find the picture again, but ironically it had vanished, and a search of the archives failed to locate it. On the video we see examples of the haunting photographs from Tuol Sleng, now preserved as a genocide museum, with visitors looking round. Em Theay tells how she lost three sisters, all court dancers, four of her eight children, a granddaughter and son-in-law. The intention of the Khmer Rouge was to eliminate all those with skills, especially skills such as hers associated with élite court arts, and only a tiny proportion of them escaped death. Although 300 of her friends perished, she survived because the chief of her labour camp enjoyed watching her dance. Almost inconceivably, she had succeeded in keeping with her, all those years, a cloth bag containing her dance books, although it would have meant immediate death to have been caught with them.

What kind of a performance is this, which is both art and testimony? What are its implications, whether for the players or the audience? The linguist Alton Becker has pointed out that in all forms of utterance, we cannot avoid simultaneously both

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000287 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'speaking the past' and 'speaking the present'.[31] In the present, even apparently fresh utterances are always constrained by linguistic conventions and thus carry a trace of the past; repeating, on the other hand, is speaking the past, but always in a present context, which allows some freedom to express the 'now' in the speaker's own meta-communicative contributions of attitude, gesture and voice quality. Thus 'one can never wholly speak the past'.[32] These ideas resonate with those in the epigraphs with which I started this paper, yet we must note that a testimonial narrative is assumed to bear witness to the past in a peculiarly direct way, while at the same time itself being potentially shaped and polished by repetitions. When testimonial narratives become part of a theatrical performance, which itself implies rehearsal and repetition, the interplay between speaking the past and speaking the present becomes even more complex. In this instance, we see that the past is also embodied in the actors themselves as a result of their prolonged courtly training in the skills of dance, song and puppetry. We may ponder the irony of Em Theay literally being saved by those skills which should have been her death warrant, and we might even wonder whether that training may in any way have helped the performers, mentally, to withstand the murderous disciplines of forced labour, beatings and starvation devised by the Khmer Rouge. In the performance, we see these same courtly traditions marvellously reanimated in the present, no longer as a distraction for bored royalty, but rather as a sublimated yet urgent expression of the performers' own survival. Strikingly in the case of Mann Kosal, the ancient medium of the shadow play has provided him with a space to tell his story by generating innovative puppet images of his own, thereby weaving Cambodia's own recent history back into the shadow play tradition.

The setting abolishes barriers between audience and performers and replaces the stage with a single site of action in which mixed media create the spectacle and the audience moves to follow it. This gives rise to a peculiar sense of intimacy in which the players' revelations about themselves have all the more impact for the listeners. But if bringing traumatic testimony into the theatre might offer the possibility of mastering, to some degree, the excesses of real events, does this deployment of witnessing not risk subjecting the performers themselves to repeated secondary violence, as they are obliged to retell their stories night after night?

Theatre in many places has evolved from a ritual context, and Schechner has pointed out that both may involve substitutions.[33] In sacrificial rituals, the victim is offered as a substitute for the sacrificer; when tragedy is enacted in the theatre, the actor substitutes for a character who substitutes for a real person. But in this case, the tragedy has already happened, and those who evoke it are themselves the survivors who have suffered. They are not 'characters' in somebody else's drama. The 'play', which would normally imply the creative exercise of imagination and invention on the part of the playwright or performers, in this instance rather makes a demand on the audience, that *they* should make the effort of imagination required to enter

31 Alton Becker, 'Text building, epistemology, and aesthetics in Javanese shadow theater', in Alton Becker, *Beyond translation: Essays toward a modern philology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), pp. 26–7.

32 Ibid., p. 26.

33 Schechner, *The future of ritual*, p. 234.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000287 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in to the events recounted. While this may be true of any performance, it rarely involves the audience in such a sense of moral obligation. To perform is to *act*, in this case not in the sense of inventing, but of claiming back the autonomy that is stripped from the individual person in régimes of terror. But it is not so simple. In telling their stories, the actors must perforce relive their past helplessness, plagued as they were with the impossible 'choiceless choices' inflicted on them by their persecutors, whose unpredictability made it impossible to foretell whether one might endanger one's loved ones more by acting or not acting. Their tales are in this sense strongly reminiscent of those recounted by Holocaust survivors, which threaten to leave them so haunted by their losses that they are left with an intractable problem of how to 'survive survival'.[34] At the most practical level, the continuing economic difficulties of making a living in what is still one of the poorest countries in the world must undoubtedly have a bearing on the performers' willingness to continue participating in the project. That in turn places a special onus on the director to ensure that he does not simply trap them into a repetition of their stories that might become an 'acting-out', causing them to feel stuck in the past, rather than a 'working-through' which might offer some therapeutic benefit or at least the possibility of finding a reinvestment of hope in the future.[35]

And yet, the curious combination of mixed media, ethnographic documentary video footage, testimony, dance and prayer contained within the performance in themselves serve to testify to the fact that not everything was destroyed by the Khmer Rouge. The performance might be seen as an act of reconstruction, and perhaps of transformation. Em Theay is now retraining a new generation of dancers; Norlina Mohamed learns from her experiences in Cambodia and is transformed bodily by the dance training (we see them bending her into shape). Ong Keng Sen has been criticised for saying that it is good for Singaporeans to confront such painful events, since Singapore itself has no such experience of genocide. In making this remark he apparently was forgetting the notorious Sook Ching massacres of Chinese civilians by Japanese soldiers in the years of Occupation during World War II.[36] But that only raises other questions about how under-commemorated such events have been in Singapore until very recently. It was only a few years ago that plaques were put up at some sites associated with the Sook Ching as official public reminders of what happened there. Why should it have taken so long?

In explaining his motivation for developing the performance, Ong notes that those who directed the genocide in Cambodia have yet to be brought to account, and comments: 'Artists are always too slow to capture that slice of life [i.e., the personal experience of historical events]. We are already 20 years late in telling Em

34 Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust testimonies: The ruins of memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 205.

35 On the application of Freud's concepts of 'acting out' and 'working through' to the analysis of social trauma, see LaCapra, *History and memory*, p. 185.

36 On the Sook Ching massacres, see *Sook Ching*, ed. Daniel Chew and Irene Lim (Singapore: Oral History Department, 1992); Kevin Blackburn, 'The collective memory of the Sook Ching massacre and the creation of the civilian war memorial of Singapore', *Journal of the Malaysian branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 73, 2 (2000): 71–90; Ralph Modder, *The Singapore Chinese massacre: 18 February to 4 March 1942* (Singapore: Horizon Books, 2004); and Geoffrey Gunn, 'Remembering the Southeast Asian Chinese massacres of 1941–45', *Journal of contemporary Asia*, 37 (2007): 273–91.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000287 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Theay's story and *Continuum* presents us with a very rare occasion where there is a war survivor who can talk about what actually happened.' On the style of the performance, he comments: 'We are stripping the presentation down to bare facts and those naked moments actually make gripping drama. There is absolutely no need to embellish or theatricalise.' But what is to stop this from putting the audience in the position merely of voyeurs, thrilling momentarily to the tales of others' misery before returning safely home? This presentation of testimony as theatre bears comparison with the evolving genre of 'verbatim theatre', in which real testimonies are re-presented in dramatised form by actors, thereby mediating the raw horror of what is testified about traumatic events.[37] In thus re-creating testimony at one remove, verbatim theatre arguably alleviates the possible ethical dilemmas involved in the cross-over from testimony to theatre, while at the same time contributing to a collective process of 'working through' appalling events that might be still too 'incomprehensible' to absorb all at once.[38] But in *The Continuum* there is no such cushioning distance between the audience and the one who testifies. Ong has been at pains to address these concerns: 'When you dance, you express yourself, you have chosen to be here and to master your life … We will continue to perform the play for as long as it is necessary for us to perform … The day the performers decide the healing is no longer necessary is the day it stops.' The players themselves speak of the difficulty they have in talking about their experiences in Cambodia itself, where everyone is carrying terrible memories, and where those who survived feel a tremendous urgency about getting on with life. There are feelings of resentment, too, that leading ex-Khmer Rouge leaders still remain unpunished, or were even asked to join the new government. They explain that their schools and institutions pay them a small stipend for their work in rebuilding the court traditions that were almost lost, 'but it's nothing and the Government subsidies are really low, which makes further development of our projects almost impossible'. Yet Em Theay recalls, 'but Angkor without dance, without art, without life, it has no meaning'.[39]

Victor Turner emphasises the *processual* and *reflexive* dimensions of human performance, whether in social dramas or in the theatre. Meaning is derived reflexively out of the chaos of lived events by telling a story about them, transforming them into a coherent narrative. As he puts it, 'Meaning is apprehended by *looking back* over a temporal process', a process which in his analysis of social dramas can be studied in terms of four phases: breach, crisis, redress and finally, reintegration or else a recognition of permanent schism between two agonistic parties.[40] From the perspective of memory studies, however, we can say that in the case of severely traumatic events, redress can be a very long time coming, and reintegration a correspondingly slow and uncertain part of the process. In Turner's terms, the repetitive performance of

37 Examples include Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles* (1992) a solo performance based on transcripts from the Rodney King trial and verdict; *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, by Jane Taylor with William Kentridge and the Handspring Puppet Company (1997), (text reproduced in Helen Gilbert, *Post-colonial plays: An anthology* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 25–47); and *The colour of justice* by Nicholas Kent (1999), based on transcripts of the trial of the accused racist murderers of a black British teenager, Stephen Lawrence, in London in 1993.

38 Gilbert, *Post-colonial plays*, p. 25.

39 Programme notes, *The Continuum*.

40 Turner, *From ritual to theatre*, pp. 68–81.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000287 Published online by Cambridge University Press

*The Continuum* (as the play's name suggests) might itself be seen as a long-drawn-out 'redressive action' after a social crisis. The consequences of this process are still unfolding. At the time of that first performance, Theatreworks was using the first two nights of performance as fund-raising events to raise cash for a performance to be held in Tuol Sleng itself. That performance must certainly have been eerie. It played again in Berlin in August of that year, and has had several more performances internationally since, including in Vienna in 2003, and at the ICA in London in 2005. In 2006, it played in Oslo and Stockholm. Perhaps in each of these different settings the effects achieved by the performance may have differed, but the memories of the performers continue to send out wider and wider ripples into the pool of collective memory. Although the audience in each case may be relatively small compared to the numbers who might see a film, the immediacy of face-to-face contact with those who testify has the potential to leave a more profound impression on the listeners. In the case of music, for instance, though recordings can be made to sound more perfect than a live performance, they will never become a substitute for it. And although we cannot pinpoint exactly what happens in the expressive communication between performers and audience, since it goes beyond language, we will certainly sense the engagement in the moment that it happens, and take our own memories away with us. *The Continuum* is an encounter that spectators are unlikely to forget. We cannot know what are the long term effects of the process for the performers, but one can only hope that the dialogic encounter is serving some purpose for them, if only as an act of defiance against those who wished to destroy them. A different form of drama is now being enacted as Cambodia's long-delayed Khmer Rouge Tribunal, the Extraordinary Chambers of the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), has finally commenced proceedings to try five surviving leaders of the Khmer Rouge on charges of Crimes against Humanity.[41]

One final example touches upon a repressed aspect of Singapore's own recent history. In the Singapore context, it represents perhaps the most surprising move yet to bring testimony into the theatre. On 26 February 2006, theatre group The Necessary Stage organised a three-hour forum entitled *Detention-Writing-Healing*, held at the Esplanade Recital Studio as part of the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival. The speakers were a group of former political detainees, who had been trade unionists, journalists, or members of the then quite legitimate socialist party, the Barisan Sosialis, who were rounded up and imprisoned as part of the PAP's 'Operation Cold Store' shortly before the 1963 General Election. They were accused of pro-communist activities and held without trial for varying lengths of time, some for many years. For the first time, a largely young audience heard these individuals speak publicly about the sufferings they had endured in detention, in a regime which one of them, Michael Fernandez, maintained had aimed to 'break us physically and mentally'. He called for a general amnesty for all ex-detainees and for them to be recognised as loyal citizens who had worked to contribute to Singapore's progress. Playwright Robert Yeo, who has written a collection of plays, *The Singapore Trilogy*, loosely based on Mr Fernandez's life, was a participant in the discussion, which was chaired by social

41 For more about the ECCC, see the website of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (http://www.dccam.org, last accessed on 13 May 2010).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000287 Published online by Cambridge University Press

activist Tan Chong Kee.[42] 'The healing process is not just about the detainees', insists the latter, but is something that affects the entire nation, because it is these detentions more than anything else that 'have made Singaporeans afraid to talk about politics'.[43] That this event was permitted to be held, and was reported in the newspaper, gives grounds for some optimism that, sooner or later, the work of memory will be more thoroughly extended to silenced areas of Singapore's own recent past. What I should like to draw attention to here is that theatre practitioners are the ones who have been brave enough to take the lead in encouraging their fellow citizens to ask questions about the past.[44]

The Singapore government's attitude to such productions, it must be said, reflects their assessment of the relative power of different media. Other former detainees, now growing old, have recently published their memoirs as books, and have been permitted to do so; Michael Fernandez is permitted to accept some public speaking engagements and has addressed NUS students in a Sociology course on Human Rights in the first Semester of 2006/07. But under Section 33 of the Films Act, the making of films defined as 'party political films' is prohibited in Singapore, while Section 35 (1) enables the Minister for Information, Communication, and the Arts to ban any film which he deems to be 'contrary to public interest'. In April 2007, Martyn See's documentary film *Zahari's 17 Years*, which concerns another former detainee, Said Zahari, was banned when it was submitted for classification to the Board of Film Censors, becoming the first film to be banned under this provision. Zahari, now 79 years old, was one of those rounded up in Operation Cold Store in 1963 and he was held under the Internal Security Act until 1979. See was ordered to surrender all copies of his film to the Board of Film Censors. He had previously been in trouble for making a film on present-day dissident Chee Soon Juan, *Singapore Rebel*. This was banned under Section 33, but can be viewed on YouTube. Keeping opposition figures (whether credible or otherwise) off the air is thus becoming harder than it used to be. But the issue with *Zahari's 17 Years* also concerns the government's tight control of public memory and their investment in the way that the official narrative of the Singapore story has been shaped by the defeat of communism as a defining trope. Fernandez, Zahari and other labour activists were under constant pressure to renounce communism but they never admitted to being communists; according to the Ministry, the film, largely consisting of an interview with Zahari, was 'an attempt to exculpate himself from his past involvement in communist united front activities against the interests of Singapore'.[45] So, to date, we can

42 Robert Yeo, *The Singapore trilogy: Are you there, Singapore?; One year back home; Changi* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 2001).

43 'Relax rules on traditional media for open political debate', *Straits Times*, 28 Feb. 2006.

44 On general developments in Singapore theatre since the 1980s, see *Nine lives: 10 years of Singapore theatre, 1987–1997: Essays commissioned by the Necessary Stage*, ed. Sanjay Krishnan (Singapore: The Necessary Stage, 1997); *Kuo Pao Kun: And love the wind and rain*, ed. Kwok Kian Woon and Teo Han Wue (Singapore: Cruxible, 2002); and Jacqueline Lo, *Staging nation: English language theatre in Malaysia and Singapore* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004). For an exploration of repressed themes in Singapore's recent history, see *Paths not taken: Political pluralism in post-war Singapore*, ed. Michael Barr and Carl Trocki (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008).

45 'Film about ex-political detainee is banned', *Straits Times*, 11 April 2007.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000287 Published online by Cambridge University Press

say that print media and theatre appear to have provided slightly more space for the exploration of contentious themes in Singapore than film, which is viewed as dangerous either because of its ability to reach wider audiences, or because of its potential affective power.[46]

## Conclusion: Expanding the circle of the 'we'

The plays I have considered here are all in some sense part of collective memory work, though they draw upon individual testimonies in such different ways. All of them encourage the critical engagement of the spectator, who is invited to reflect on traumatic historical events which are still to varying degrees unfinished business in Southeast Asia. While allegorical in some instances, such as *The Spirits Play*, or heavily stylised, as in *Broken Birds*, in others like *The Continuum* we are confronted absolutely directly by the testimony of the performers themselves about their terrifying real life experiences. The stage then becomes the arena for the transmission of memories that even in their own country, cannot necessarily find a ready audience.

The engagement between actors and audience that occurs in the theatre thus offers the possibility of a continued 'working through' of memory as testimonies are reiterated in new forms. The examples presented here thus bear comparison with instances of 'verbatim theatre', even though none of them fall exactly into that genre. William Kentridge, one of the authors of the play *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, referred to above, has commented that the South African TRC proceedings themselves were 'exemplary civic theatre, a public hearing of private griefs which are absorbed into the body politic as part of a deeper understanding of how the society arrived at its present position',[47] but the Commission itself could only mark the beginning of that process; literature, poetry and theatre continue to offer themselves as resources for continuing the movement into the new South Africa.[48] In the Cambodian case, the civic drama of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal is only now beginning, 30 years after the event, and it remains to be seen how much room will be found for individuals to testify as private parties in those proceedings. In those 30 years, a generation has grown up that is ignorant of what happened during the Khmer

46 As for traditional print media, a space is opening up between mainstream media and blogging, giving rise to a debate in Parliament in November 2006 in which some MPs called for greater relaxation of the rules for control of the former, in the interests of closing the gap ('Relax rules on traditional media for open political debate', *Straits Times*, 10 Nov. 2006). Recognising that technological changes (notably YouTube) have already rendered the current film laws unenforceable, the government in January 2009 also accepted a majority of the recommendations of an advisory council appointed to study the impact of new media. This includes an easing of the ban on 'party political' films that are deemed to be 'objective', subject to approval by a panel of 'prominent non-partisan citizens'. Amendments to the Films Act, heralded as a 'mindset change' by the *Straits Times*, will allow for 'factual documentaries of events held in accordance with the law'; but the government still refused to decriminalise the making of 'party political' films in general, or to commit itself to providing any reasons for the banning of films under Section 35 ('Ban on party political films to be eased', *Straits Times*, 10 Jan. 2009).

47 Cited in Gilbert, *Post-colonial plays*, p. 25.

48 See Njabulo Ndebele, *South African literature and culture: Rediscovery of the ordinary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994); Antjie Krog, *Country of my skull: Guilt, sorrow and the limits of forgiveness in the new South Africa* (Johannesburg: Random House, 1998); *It all begins: Poems from post-liberation South Africa*, ed. Robert Berold (Scottsville: Gecko Poetry, 1999).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000287 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Rouge years, and even finds difficulty in believing it. Outreach programmes have the difficult task of helping to re-involve a Cambodian audience (in a context where former victims and lesser-ranking perpetrators are not uncommonly living side by side in the same communities, without having spoken to each other for decades), so that the legal drama of the ECCC proceedings can 'work' effectively to give Cambodians some feeling that justice has been achieved, and perhaps open up the possibility of reconciliation. In the meantime, a play like *The Continuum* has served to inscribe a handful of remarkable testimonies in the public domain, ensuring them a trajectory in collective memory.[49]

To return to Gell's analysis of the way that the art object, as *index* in his scheme, works its fascination upon the viewer, we can say that in this case the index is not an object (the work of art) but the performance itself, which is therefore less detachable from the performers as agents. Even though ephemerality is in the nature of the performance, what is shown is also a part of the performers themselves, both in the sense that they embody a tradition – the skills of song, dance or puppeteering having been built in to them by the muscular training they once received and continue to practise – and because the fact that they survived a genocide *in spite of* possessing these skills, which should have doomed them, is a part of their autobiography. Ephemeral as the performance may be, that autobiography cannot be laid aside at the end of the evening as a tragic role in fiction can be. In such a case, I have tried to suggest, the audience find themselves called upon to be witnesses rather than mere spectators. As such, the plays, in the immediacy of their performance and the responses they may evoke, work against that sliding of memory into the archive that Richard Cándida Smith talks of in my opening epigraph. How we can respond adequately, and what can serve to prevent such a performance from sinking into voyeurism, are questions that require careful answer. Much must depend on the sensitivity of a director to his collaborators in the performance, since the audience is more or less in the position of having to trust that the relationship is being maintained in an ethical and not exploitative manner.

Richard Butsch has proposed that 'discourses on audiences can be understood as judgements of fitness for citizenship', but here the demand on the audience is precisely to transcend the boundaries of the nation-state, and concern ourselves with issues that touch upon our understandings of our own humanity.[50] No matter how much mass media may come to dominate our lives, to be part of a theatre audience will always remain a far more intimate, and to that degree potentially more powerful, sort of encounter. In the case of *The Continuum*, what Charles Leary has referred to as 'the residue of live performance' leaves enduring traces in the memory, and thus, as

49 Interestingly, another somewhat similar theatre production based upon personal testimonies, *Breaking the silence* (produced by Phnom Penh group Amrita Performance Arts), has toured rural areas of Cambodia in February 2009 as a contribution to outreach in the run-up to the ECCC trials. The stories in this play deal with troubled relationships between survivors – both perpetrators and victims – and are combined with song, poetry and dance (Taing Sarada, 'Play aims for Khmer Rouge reconciliation', bulletin of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, 24 Feb. 2009 (http://www.dccam.org, last accessed on 13 May 2010).

50 Richard Butsch, *The citizen audience: Crowds, publics and individuals* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000287 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the performance has travelled the world, must undoubtedly have made some significant contribution to keeping the Cambodian genocide in international awareness.[51] In this sense it becomes part of the social recognition of trauma, which Jeffrey Alexander has argued so forcefully must be a collective process, one that through evocation and empathy 'expands the circle of the we' and keeps memory alive in performance, as it testifies also to the undefeated spirit of the survivors.

51 Charles Leary, 'Performing the documentary, or making it to the other bank', *Senses of cinema*, http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/27/performing_documentary.html (2003) (last accessed 13 May 2009).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000287 Published online by Cambridge University Press