

## *The Unbearable Dreams 8: Somewhere* by Asia Meets Asia:

### Or “Asia” as “Object”

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What happens when Asia meets Asia? *Asia Meets Asia* (AMA) is a nonprofit organization that seeks to answer this question through theatrical performances. Since 1997 AMA has organized a yearly theater festival, inviting participants from all over Asia to its own theater called Proto-Theater, focusing on independent, politically engaged theater companies outside the mainstream. The organization also gathers performers from different countries to work on collaborative projects to create original pieces with which to tour various regions of Asia.

However, in recent years, AMA had to cut back the scale of its activities, and from the perspective of the general theatrical scene in Japan, it only occupies a minor position. Yet, without a doubt, AMA's endeavor remains essential for the Japanese theater because of its regional engagements in Asia, commitment to creating original works, and fundamental philosophy.

Once it was a common practice in Japanese theater for a dramatist or a theatrical group to create a work, and to tour with it. This practice was also supported by the belief that the itinerancy itself constituted the activist “movement.” *Asia Meets Asia* does not go abroad just for the sake of experience, nor does it invite foreign companies just because the budget allows it. Their activities have gone beyond the “theater festivals” that merely gather foreign companies, and evolved into the creation of original collaborative works that can return back to Asia and tour.

After watching a performance by *Asia Meets Asia*, one cannot but ask the question, “What is Asia?” “Asia” as a concept is a construct of Western Orientalism. As such, “Asia” is both present and absent. Ethnically, geographically, and conceptually, as soon as we try to grasp its essence, “Asia” becomes something ambiguous and indefinable. But at the same time, we cannot simply deny its existence. The “Orientalist” gaze from the West has also brought into being its own complement in the form of “Occidentalism,” the gaze from Asia to the West. Asia has internalized the Western gaze, and in turn began casting its longing eyes to the West as modernity itself.

Once thus established, this gaze created the multiple, and often fragmentary, consciousness of the self and the other within Asia. Historically, the concept of “Asia” was used as an effective tool to criticize and mark the “West” as the other. However, within the region, the concept had dual functions. In Japanese modernity, while the rhetoric of Asian unity and the liberation from the Western colonialism was proclaimed towards the outside world, internally its manifestation was in the form of discriminations and violence.

Despite temporary regional reshufflings based on economy, the dualistic relationship between “Asia” and

the “West” hasn’t changed even after the diffusion of various critical theories on orientalism and post-colonialism in the 80s and the 90s. The localism as the byproduct of globalization has been absorbed into nationalism that is casting an ominous shadow in the region.

*The Unbearable Dreams 8: Somewhere* that AMA performed this time reflects concept such as Asia’s inner duality and its currently progressing situations, but it also makes the audience aware of their own desire to project such meanings onto the performance.

The staging of the work avoids one dimensionality of a single perspective. The performers are gathered from Pusan, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Bangalore in India, Baguio in the Philippines, and from those residing in Japan. While all the performers are involved in the staging as collaborators, Hiroshi Ohashi, the organizer of the theatrical company, DA-M and the representative of AMA, plays the central role as the director.

In describing a performance including so many people from so many different places in Asia, one can easily fall into the trope of “Asian diversity and richness,” but the actual stage betrays such facile characterization. Instead, the performance shows both the similarities and the differences within the idea of “Asia.” If you watch this performance looking for “Asia,” one would find such an easy framework dissolving quickly. One cannot distinguish the nationalities of the performers just from appearance. Maybe some people may be able to tell the differences from the color of the skin, physical build, atmosphere and the mannerism and such, but what those differences show is ambiguous. Perhaps, it is only because we ourselves project the mirage called “Asia” that we think we see those differences. The differences in the movements of the performers, who also are dancers, cannot be reduced to the differences in the national origins, but rather, due more to the physical abilities of the individuals.

What actually takes place on the stage is an aggregation of simple movements without a storyline. The performance is built around the reactions of the performers to the numerous stones placed on the stage. The work portrays the performers’ connections to the stones and with each other. Since it also includes impromptu elements, the details change with every performance.

Within the featureless space of the Proto-Theater, the stage is empty exposed concrete surface lit mainly by florescent light. The performers pick up the numerous stones placed there, move them, and put them down. They repeat various movements like offering a stone, picking it up, raising it up, moving it, rolling it, playing with it, throwing it, jumping up with it, etc. Or they may pull on a stone, or try to show its material nature, or the burden picking up a stone places on their bodies. Numerous performers continue to repeat these simple movements and gestures.

Because it is a multilingual performance, words are spoken in various languages when names are called or conversations take place, but they are all very simple. In the multilingualism of the performance, the

materiality of words as code is foregrounded more than their meanings. Words become something inorganic like the stones on the stage. In the same way, actions are reduced to movements without meanings, as words sometimes become noise.

Of course, various scenes are constructed to leave an impression that could function as a metaphor to be interpreted freely by the audience. There is a scene in which the performers gather together as a group, and move together like a floating school of fish. Those in the front moves back and change places with those in the back before you realize the change, and the movement of the group fold back on itself. This may certainly suggest Asia's collectivity. The scene in which a performer spits on a stone, also may suggest the violence within Asia. There are many scenes like those that present various images of Asia.

Compared to another version of *Unbearable Dream* I saw in 2005, which was strongly improvisational almost like a workshop piece, the current version is far more carefully constructed and finished work. But the importance of this work is in creating multitude of images, and simultaneously destroying them. One-dimensional images of Asia that audience members may have are continuously presented, but the work rejects the formation of unified conclusion out of them.

That is like Asia itself, being both present and absent at the same time. We can say that Asia is something that is desired as an "object," but could never be obtained. Series of images can certainly evoke This object by its excessiveness, but at the same time those images themselves must be examined critically. Why does the audience think about the violence inside "Asia" when they look at a performer spitting at a stone or cursing in languages they can't understand? The connotation of the word, "Asia," makes one imagine more things than necessary, but in the actual performance of *Unbearable Dream*, there are only simple movements. Thus, the performance functions as a double-edged criticism.

By actually using the bodies of performers assembled from various regions as "objects," the performance tells us that "Asia" exists, simultaneously as it is absent, that it is an "object." Of course, this perspective is critical of the current situation in which "Asia" is excessively seen through nationalism.

The project of "Asia Meets Asia" itself is changing during its history of over ten years. Going beyond the era of discovering Asia or teaching about it, the project now presents Asia as an "object" that criticizes the excess of images. This performance recovers the word, "Asia" that has been used too freely, and casts critical eyes towards the current situation.