

Expanding Conversations: Social Innovation, Arts and Anti Racism May 2012
By Yumi Umiumare

Thanks for inviting me this forum and I feel privileged to be a part of this program, amongst these intelligent people. I also acknowledge traditional owners of this land we are here today.

Introduction

First of all, I will quickly introduce myself.

I came to Australia from Japan in 1991 with a Butoh dance company performing in Melbourne International Festival, and start living as I called 'mental refugee' in Melbourne from 1993. Butoh originally started during the social turmoil of late 50's. (Butoh-literally means Dance and Stomp, Bu is dance, Toh is stomping.) It was originally called Ankoku Butoh- meaning Dance of Darkness. The quote said "*Rather than aspiring to an aesthetic ideal, the dance attempts to expose joy and sorrows of life through the Butoh Spirit, exploring the fundamental elements of physical and psychological existence.*" I was very curious when I started Butoh, because Butoh dancers were doing almost exactly the opposite things to what a classical ballet teacher would instruct.

In my work, my main themes for creating art are through ;

- Provocation
- Transformation
- Embracing the unknown.

Butoh has been great tool for me to explore my art and living as a migrant, in order to embrace the unknown and dark side of our human emotion and psyche.

Now, I want to show you a short excerpt of my performance video.
This work is one of my DasSHOKU Butoh Cabaret repertoires.

Dashoku suru' is a Japanese term meaning to bleach, to strip off the surface colour. The works have been exploring the notion of bleaching; bleaching away commonly held views of cultural stereo types and cliché. The works provoke both personal and cultural identity and also raises questions about the meaning of 'cross' culture, as one could be interpreted as 'killing' (crossing off) each other!

Coming from Japan, which is quite a mono cultural country, I've learned a lot about Australian cross-cultural or multicultural way of living. I think this is indirectly related to today's theme of anti racism. It is easier to get rid of unfamiliar elements or 'others' rather than to confront one's own self.

In this work *DasSHOKU Hora! I've* , I've portrayed 'transmutation' of a person's characters, which may be trapped in their own disguise. In this work, I've confronted myself and my own diverse identities.

So let's have a quick look.

DasSHOKU Video(2min)

Why Arts? And our role as artist

I totally believe that art-making and viewing/participating in the arts can be a great medium to understand against discrimination and racism. In my professional territory, I believe dance and physical theatre have great potential to communicate to audience at a deeply emotional level. Great work is able to “de-centre” the audience and take them away from their habitual perspective.

I try to incorporate particular elements in my work in order to share these magical moments with audience, such as:

Accessibility, Inspiration, Light& Celebration, Cleansing and 'the Sacred'.

Art can be accessible entertainment while educating about culture and race.

Art can inspire people to create or imagine something totally new.

Through art and humor, we can share laughter in a fun and light but respectful ways even though the subject might be quite heavy and traumatic.

Art gives us opportunity for celebrating our differences and embracing our diversity, and also possibly, to cleanse away our automatic way of thinking or stereotyped views about race and culture.

Art can be spiritual experience itself without itself being religious or judging other religious belief and practice.

Now, I would like to introduce three art projects that I'm involved in. Asylum seekers project, and a couple of projects I worked in English as second language (Migrant community) and Aboriginal communities. These are great examples of achieving cross-cultural understanding through arts projects.

Asylum seekers project

I was involved to be in the theatre project directed by Catherine Simmonds in collaboration with Asylum seekers resource centre. I was working as a choreographer working with over 30 asylum seekers and refugee people. The work was shown at Human Rights Arts and Film festival in 2010.

As the title “Not Just My Story” suggests, the director has tried to include everybody’s personal stories. It was huge process for all of us to transform their traumatic, difficult, and quite subjective yet occasionally comical stories into objective narratives, incorporating abstract dance and music. We tried to be careful not to tell the audience a bunch of tragedies, but to tell of hope and truth, even through some of their stories are heart wrenching full on stories .

A Somali woman walked 8hours from Melbourne airport without knowing anybody in this country, without speaking any English.

Turkish man had sleepless night in prison after receiving on-going tortures.

A lady from Papua New Guinea was sold as bride to get money, land and pigs for her family. There are so many dramatic/traumatic moments in their stories and as a creative team, it was our task to find how we could extract those raw elements and put them on stage without being just hysterical, sentimental or tacky. Arts and Theatre became great medium for re-capturing and distilling their moments of truth. To the participants, it was indescribably confronting but I believe, also a very healing process.

I've leaned enormously from them witnessing their courage and openness towards life.

Some episode.

When I started working with the Papuan woman, she couldn't stand still when she delivered her text. Of course, she was trying her best, but without any acting training and very limited rehearsal periods, how could she really re-capture her sad story of being sold for her family's survival? It was my challenge and struggle as a choreographer to make her presence to be authentic. In the end, all I did was pointing the area near the bio box for her to fix her focus, while she delivered her text. Then asked her to imagine the village from her home town as being there; her house, her relatives, and friends walking on the street... each time when she saw the bio-box. Since then, her presence transformed vividly and the scene was one of the most moving in the play.

Another episode.

Congo man who used to be a pastor. One day he made a beautiful speech to the group during our actual dinner break. On that day, he has cooked us meal before our rehearsal and apparently it was actually his birthday. So we celebrated and danced. He was crying and said that it was first time that he has showed his dance to anybody other than his own family who were missing somewhere in his home land.

As we know, the 'real moments' are far more theatrical than actual theatre and it is constant challenge for the artists to create such truthful moments in theatre. As an artist, we tend to obsess and get lost in our own practice and craft itself, and in that sense, artist could believe themselves as "superior" through their freedom and artistic expression using just technical skills. Working with these people who mostly had never been on the stage in their life, this project was an eye-opener as an artist, to bring me back to the pure strength of human expression and assured me in the power of making art and theatre.

By the way the Congo man's beautiful text became the end of the play, and again it was one of those truthful and integrated theatrical moments in the play. All cast members also captured the precious and truthful moment in the play.

Human as a first language project

Last year, I also worked with another group of people who are coming from different cultural backgrounds. They were from Turkey, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Australia. The age groups were between mid 20 to 75 years old, all women and half of them had never performed in their life. It was produced by Brunswick Women's Theatre and the director was same as ASRC, Catherine Simmonds. Including myself, English was our second language, and the working title of the show was called 'Human as a first language'.

The project was focusing on language and communication, and I had a chance of exploring different body gestures and simple movement. It was another fulfilling process of learning and understanding diverse culture through art making and sharing.

Most of them had never had a chance to create real friendships with people from other cultures. Even though sometimes there was tension and misunderstanding between the

performers, it was another great example that art became the medium of understanding of other cultures. I also had a chance to make great Turkish aunties who fed us with yummy food many times!

The process of art making is never easy, and it requires lots of mental and practical support with funding and resources. But as an artist we have to keep provoking our confrontation, difficulties in order to open up our limit and comfort zones, and have to dance with our own darkness just as Butoh dance does.

We do have to confront ourselves and sometimes confront others to embrace our unknown dark monster in order to make positive change.

We all need to learn to accept and respect our differences, and again, the art can contribute great level of experiences and discovery.

I don't think I have much time left, but I would like to introduce about aboriginal theatre projects I have been involved. Since 2006, I've had an opportunity to work in aboriginal theatre project in Broome Alice and currently in Roebourne in WA, with company called Big hART. Big hART is a Arts company which has produced, created and toured many productions such as *Ngapartji Ngapartji*, *Namajura*. They use theatre, art, video, music, etc to combat this issue of narrative invisibility - through applied theatre.

I want to quote a couple of quotes from this company, which I have great inspiration from.

"It is much harder to hurt someone, if you know their story."

"..narrative can be a great protector for many people in society, and this is a critical issue in the times we live in. Story can provide protection for the vulnerable, the invisible and those affected by the most critical issues of our time. "

Lastly

Ainu, Japan's indigenous people have a word, 'Yaikoshiramusuie', which means thinking, but equates to shaking one's heart. I would like to continue thinking about these issues of race and culture through shaking my heart.