

The Theatre of Essence in the Making: The Secret Art of EX-Theatre Asia's Actor Training Approach

Tsu-Chung Su
Department of English
National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan

Abstract

Chongtham Jayanta Meetei is a native Manipuri of India and currently the Artistic Director of EX-Theatre Asia based in Miaoli City, Taiwan. When he first came to Taiwan in 2005, he experienced culture shock, language barriers, and all kinds of miscommunication. As an immigrant artist in Taiwan, he felt alienated and frustrated in the beginning. In order to assimilate himself into local customs and cultures and to re-establish himself as a theatre artist in Taiwan's theatre circle, he began to grope for an actor training method and a theatre vision which could be rooted in Taiwan, yet have Asian and even global resonance. This search quickly became an existential quest for his roots in the rich cultural storehouse of Manipur and India. In addition to his Manipuri and Indian theatre roots, Jayanta also strived to integrate classical Asian theatre, Taiwan traditional theatre, Western realistic theatre, postmodern physical theatre, and other theatre forms into his brand of theatre aesthetics. He ended up naming his enterprise the "theatre of essence." As time went by, the idea of the theatre of essence has become the cornerstone fundamental to Jayanta's artistic endeavors and visions. In this paper, I first examine the question of "essence" in Jayanta's career as a theatre artist and explore the definition of the theatre of essence as proposed by him. Next, I look into the use of the *rasa* theory and other related theories of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* in the theory and practice of Jayanta's theatre of essence. I proceed to analyze Jayanta's dramaturgy, theatricality, and actor training method. Then, I discuss his theatre vision and critically appraise his theatre of essence in the making. Lastly, I draw a conclusion about Jayanta's initiative of the theatre of essence.

Keywords

the theatre of essence, EX-Theatre Asia, Chongtham Jayanta Meetei, *rasa*, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*

The capitalized prefix “EX” in the theatre company’s title, EX-Theatre Asia, co-founded by Pei-Ann Lin and Chongtham Jayanta Meetei (Jayanta hereafter) in Miaoli City, Taiwan, in 2006, was intended to indicate a dedication to the art of experiment, exchange, exploration, existence, and extension.¹ Along with experimenting with the performing styles and aesthetics of Asian theatres, the company has offered a variety of productions, conferences, forums, workshops, and actor training sessions to a wide gamut of participants, including researchers, scholars, students, theatre artists young and old, and the general public from far and wide. The purpose of these activities is to survey the future of theatre arts in Taiwan as well as to explore the potential of the “theatre of essence” initiated by Jayanta.

When Jayanta, a native Manipuri of India, first came to Taiwan in 2005, he experienced culture shock, language barriers, and all kinds of miscommunication. As an immigrant artist in Taiwan, he felt alienated and frustrated in the beginning. In order to assimilate himself into local customs and culture, and to establish himself as a theatre artist in Taiwan’s theatre circle, he began to grope for an actor training method and a theatre vision which could be rooted in Taiwan, yet have Asian and even global resonance. This search quickly became an existential quest for his roots in the rich cultural storehouse of Manipur and India. In addition to his Manipuri and Indian theatre roots, Jayanta also strived to integrate varied theatre aesthetics derived from Chinese and Taiwan traditional theatre, Western realistic theatre, physical theatre, and other theatre forms of Asia and beyond, into his brand of theatre aesthetics. He ended up naming his enterprise the “theatre of essence” (Meetei 2016b: 366). As time went by, the idea of the theatre of essence has become the cornerstone fundamental to Jayanta’s artistic endeavors and vision.

Jayanta’s actor training method and his theory of the “theatre of essence” are deeply indebted to the *rasa* theory in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the Manipuri traditional arts. By adapting traditions, theories, and plays of India and Manipur, and relocating them to the context of Taiwan’s socio-political and cultural milieu, Jayanta’s theatre of essence absorbs and integrates the rich and varied cultural heritages of Manipur, India, China, Hakka, Taiwan, and elsewhere, constructing and inventing a new theatre idiom along the way. The native Manipuri traditional arts he uses are mainly the Thang Ta martial arts while he also adopts the classical Chinese singing form, Nanguan. Apart from the aforementioned traditions, Jayanta had exposure to great

¹ While Pei-Ann Lin, a graduate of Theatre Training & Research Programme in Singapore (2001-2003) (renamed Intercultural Theatre Institute in 2011), is the Executive Director of the EX-Theatre Asia, Chongtham Jayanta Meetei, a MA graduate of National School of Drama in India (1997-2000), is the Artistic Director of the EX-Theatre Asia.

Asian theatre traditions during his stay at the Intercultural Theatre Institute (ITI) in Singapore as a student and was influenced by what he studied there. In a word, his actor training system incorporates training methods from both the East and the West and attempts to use “dance-like physical language” and “music-like oral expressions” as two core values of performance in order to try out new and creative theatre practices.

As of today, Jayanta has devoted some fifteen years trying his best to realize his vision of the theatre of essence which is an intercultural project with the view to updating the practice of eastern traditional theatre and developing modern theatrical aesthetics. His efforts to incorporate contemporary actor training methods, diversify theatrical languages, and invent a creative actor training system are a means to revitalize the art of performance nowadays. Even though we can garner some basic attributes and goals of the theatre of essence, we still don’t have a clear idea or picture of this very theatre Jayanta has had in mind for so many years. Why did he want to name his visionary theatre the “theatre of essence”? What does the keyword “essence” mean or signify? What is the “essence” of this “theatre of essence”? How does one enact or perform the “essence”?

In this paper, I will first examine the question of “essence” in Jayanta’s career as a theatre artist and explore the definition of the theatre of essence as proposed by him. Next, I will look into the use of the *rasa* theory and other related theories of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* in the theory and practice of Jayanta’s theatre of essence. I will proceed to analyze Jayanta’s dramaturgy, theatricality, and actor training method. Then, I will discuss his theatre vision and critically appraise his theatre of essence in the making. Lastly, I will draw a conclusion about Jayanta’s initiative of the theatre of essence.

Jayanta’s theatre of essence has been taking place and taken its place within a broad spectrum of life forces and art forms. It focuses on how cultures and cultural forms interact and negotiate their differences through performative exchange as it raises issues about the nature of essence and the concept of the Absolute, and offers the idealistic vision of self-realization, self-knowledge, enlightenment, liberation, and *moksha*. Given the fact that Jayanta’s presence on the contemporary performance scene is mainly due to exploration of identity formation, emerging interculturalism, and intercultural theatre since the second half of the 20th century, in this paper, the notion of interculturalism and the agency of intercultural theatre, thus, will serve at once as the framework and the methodology to engage cultures, theatres, and traditions such as Indian philosophy and theatre poetics, Manipuri theatre and martial arts, Chinese, Taiwanese, and Hakka culture and theatre

traditions, and other Asian theatre art traditions. Also, the notions of interculturalism² and intercultural theatre³ are deemed as “contested” and “politicized” sites of negotiation, always involving issues of dynamic exchanges, appropriations, hybridity, and syncreticism in the field of theatre and performance studies.

The Theatre of Essence in Question

For many, Jayanta’s “theatre of essence” is like a mystery which needs to be solved, especially as we want to inquire further into his theatre vision and real creative intent. In this paper, I will start my investigation by probing into the historical context of his enterprise, the theories drawn, and the sources of his influence.

First of all, I find that Jayanta’s theatre vision and practices bear a strong resemblance to the commitment and contribution of his forerunners, gurus, and fellow-countrymen in Imphal of Manipur, India. Two names are particularly worthy of note. One is Ratan Thiyam (1948-) and the other is Sanakhya Ebotombi Haorokcham (1946-2016). Both were major exponents of the “theatre of roots” movement in Manipur and in India itself during the 1960s and 70s after India’s Independence from the British Empire on 15 August 1947. They turned to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* tradition and various regional dance, theatre, and ritual performance traditions of India for their artistic pursuits. As Aparna Bhargava Dharwadkar points out, “practitioners of the new drama [that is, dramatists after Independence] have forged a reactive cultural identity for themselves by disclaiming colonial practices and by seeking to reclaim classical and other pre-colonial Indian traditions of

² In his *Theatre and Interculturalism*, Ric Knowles views interculturalism as a “contested” term and a “politicized” process, inevitably operating within the frameworks constructed by globalization. It points to all kinds of cultural borrowing that result in hybrid and syncretic work on world stages (3). For Knowles, the intercultural focuses on “the contested, unsettling, and often unequal spaces between cultures, spaces, that can function in performance as sites of negotiation” (4).

³ In his *Intercultural Performance Reader* (1996), Patrice Pavis defines intercultural theatre as a theatre that “creates hybrid forms drawing upon a more or less conscious and voluntary mixing of performance traditions traceable to distinct cultural areas. The hybridization is very often such that the original forms can no longer be distinguished” (8). In his more recent article “Intercultural Theatre Today” (2010), Pavis thinks that intercultural theatre is a contested and politicized site attempting to “broaden the national and political perspective by approaching ‘foreign’ culture” (6) and it “cannot avoid the question of its socio-economic basis and the political and economic analysis of the transformations created by globalization” (6).

performance as the only viable media of effective decolonization” (2). Ratan Thiyam was the founder of The Chorus Repertory Theater in 1976 in Imphal, Manipur. He reclaimed classical, pre-colonial, and regional traditions of performance and many of his works have set the benchmark for theatre performance in Manipur and in India. As for Sanakhya Ebotombi Haorokcham, he was the renowned director of many avant-garde and experimental theatre projects in Imphal where he trained a legion of theatre artists in Imphal as well as from other parts of India.

In his groundbreaking essay in 1989 “‘Theatre of Roots’: Encounter with Tradition,” Suresh Awasthi asserts,

I am taking the risk of giving a label—“theatre of roots”—to the unconventional theatre which has been evolving for some two decades in India as a result of modern theatre’s encounter with tradition. Theatre of roots has finally made its presence felt. It has compelling power, it thrills audiences, and it is receiving institutional recognition. It is deeply rooted in regional theatrical culture, but cuts across linguistic barriers, and has an all-India character in design. Never before during the past century and more has theatre been practiced in such diversified form, and at the same time with such unity in essential theatrical values. (48)

Awasthi makes it clear that modern Indian theatre was a product of colonial culture and felt “an intense need to search for roots to counteract its violent dislocation from tradition” (48). He then identifies three pioneering directors of “theatre of roots”—B.V. Karanth, K.N. Panikkar, and Ratan Thiyam—and praises their “meaningful encounters with tradition” for they have reversed the colonial course of contemporary theatre not only by putting it back on the track of the great *Nāṭyaśāstra* tradition but also by radicalizing it in the context of conventional realistic theatre (48).

On the other hand, by working closely with his guru, the famed director Sri Sanakhya Ebotombi, and from viewing the work of Heisnam Kan-hailal (1941-2016), Lokendra Arambam (1939-) and Ratan Thiyam (1948-), to mention only a few, Jayanta has witnessed and been nourished by the flowering of Manipuri experimental theatre in the 1980s and 90s. Jayanta considers his guru, Sri Sanakhya Ebotombi, a very important figure in his apprenticeship years before he went to study at the National School of Drama (NSD), New Delhi, in 1997. In addition, he

was also the beacon of Jayanta's life and career guiding him all the way until his death in 2016. According to Jayanta, his guru is the one who brought forth the term the "theatre of essence" a long time ago, which was then a murky notion that needed to be refined and clarified. At a 2017 Conference in Taipei, Jayanta put forward a somewhat full-fledged definition of the term:

The "Theatre of Essence" aims to present the nature of the Absolute through sensuous grab and aesthetical relation distinct from the daily life pattern, a work which gives rise to or leads to the experience of the Absolute.⁴

In an interview on 11 September 2019, Jayanta attempted a definition of the word "essence":

Essence is used in a broader sense. It could have different applications and meanings according to the context as shown in the example of "*rasa*." But my practical thinking is that essence refers to the unique quality of each existing physical object around us. This uniqueness cannot be experienced by merely knowing the object's physical appearance. It requires an effort or a process to realize, reveal, or experience the actual quality of a given object. (Jayanta)

For me, Jayanta's emphasis on "effort" and "process" is not unlike Grotowski's highlighted points. For those who are familiar with Grotowski, his notion of the "body of essence" is one of the key terms which can unlock the meaning of "essence" and unveil the secret art of a *Performer*. In his seminal article "*Performer*," Grotowski writes: "Essence: etymologically, it's a question of being, of *be-ing*. Essence interests me because nothing in it is sociological. It is what you did not receive from others, what did not come from outside, what is not learned" (Grotowski, "*Performer*" 377). He then makes a distinction between the "*body-and-essence*" and the "*body of essence*" (Grotowski, "*Performer*" 377). Grotowski argues that with evolution, personal transmutation, and proper process it is possible for one to pass from one state to the other, namely from the state of the

⁴ The 2017 Conference theme is "From Stage to Page: The International Conference of Performers' Voices after Practice" (「從舞台到論述：表演者實踐後的聲音跨界學術研討會」). It was held on 2 December 2017 at Taipei National University of the Arts (國立臺北藝術大學). The paper Jayanta presented was entitled "Towards the Theatre of Essence" (「邁向本質劇場」).

“*body-and-essence*” to the state of the “*body of essence*.”

The key question is: What is your process? Are you faithful to it or do you fight against your process? . . . The process is linked to essence and virtually leads to the *body of essence*. When the warrior is in the short period of osmosis *body-and-essence*, he should catch his process. Adjusted to process, the body becomes non-resistant, nearly transparent. Everything is in lightness, in evidence. With *Performer*, performing can become near process. (Grotowski 1997: 377)

For Grotowski, “process” and “essence” are not far apart. In fact, they are linked to each other, able to become the life of the I-I, and virtually leads to the *body of essence*.⁵ Namely, the I-I is the process-essence of the *body of essence*. Or the successful *abhinaya* refers to the state that the self-who-is-observing is moved by the self-who-is-performing.

Grotowski also stresses that “*Performer* should ground his work in a precise structure—making efforts, because persistence and respect for details are the rigor which allow to become present the I-I” (Grotowski, “*Performer*” 378). Here, we are reminded once again that rigorous efforts are the channel to essence and the passage to get access to the unseen “nature of the Absolute.” Like Grotowski, Jayanta believes that essence or the Absolute, the universal entity and the real nature of *be-ing* and becoming, is intrinsic and innate in human beings. It exists in oneself and requires one to look inward on the one hand, and demands one to work rigorously through psychophysical means such as yoga, Thang Ta martial arts, *vipassana* meditation, and the enactment of the *rasa* theory on the other hand. Thus, in terms of presentation strategy, Jayanta’s approach is not to present the object as we see or know it in reality or in everyday life pattern but to present it aesthetically or artistically so that the spectator can experience “the unseen true nature of life” or have a taste of the object’s essence (Jayanta).⁶

⁵ As Grotowski writes, “In the way of *Performer*—he perceives essence during its osmosis with the body, and then works the process; he develops the I-I. . . . When the channel I-I is traced, the teacher can disappear and *Performer* continue toward the body of essence” (“*Performer*” 378). He then further notes, “To nourish the life of the I-I, *Performer* must develop not an organism-mass, an organism of muscles, athletic, but an organism-channel through which the energies circulate, the energies transform, the subtle is touched” (“*Performer*” 378).

⁶ Take the production of *The Messenger* (《失落天語》) (2018) for example. Jayanta used his signature “dance-like physical language” and “music-like oral expressions” to tell the story of a “gifted” child who has the special ability to communicate with the birds but suffers from her mom’s misunderstanding and her will to bring him back to the normal life. Jayanta’s aesthetic

For Jayanta, what Sri Ebotombi imparted to him was not real theatrical practice but the poetics of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* per se. His notion of the theatre of essence is not unlike that of his guru (Jayanta) because they are both derived from the same source, especially the theory of *rasa*. Other than the connotation of “taste,” “flavor,” “emotion,” and “delight,” one of the essential meanings of this untranslatable Sanskrit word *rasa* is “essence.”⁷ The primary agenda of *rasa* is aimed at not just achieving high levels of performance and appreciation but also attaining the “essence” of ultimate spiritual goals, namely a divine performance-feast for all.⁸ Far from rejecting the body for its materiality, *rasa* celebrates its potential to express the transformative ability of its underlying divine nature. To experience *rasa* is to savor the “essence” of the great aesthetic power of the arts⁹ and divine bliss (*ananda*)¹⁰ at the same time. Also, the *rasa* theory is known for its strong performance orientation. It values highly the “essence” of the performer-spectator interaction and their reciprocal relationship.

The only difference is that he thinks that his guru “is more focused on reestablishing the actual nature of Indian theatre and finding a position in the world theatre as an alternative approach for contemporary theater.” “But all his resources,” Jayanta continues, “very much depend on traditional culture of his hometown. He didn’t develop a scientific training technique for that. His method is more of a regional aesthetics.” That said, Jayanta considers that his contribution lies in

treatment allows the audience to sense, interpret, and savor the mute communications and invisible emotions circulated among the characters in the performing space in their own ways. In a more recent production of Albert Camus’s *Caligula* (《追月狂君-卡里古拉》) (2020), Jayanta, again, employed his signature “dance-like physical language” and “music-like oral expressions” to enact the story of Caligula’s quest for the Absolute and his absurd passion to exercise his freedom, through relentless murders and all kinds of perverted acts. Jayanta’s stylized treatment of physical actions and language articulations allows the audience to feel and sense the unknown force lurking behind Caligula’s willful rages and drives.

⁷ The Sanskrit word *rasa* means “essence,” “taste,” or “flavour,” literally “sap” or “juice.” Please consult the entry “*Rasa*,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*: <https://www.britannica.com/art/rasa>. Accessed 14 February 2021. Also, Ayurvedic medicine names *rasa* as one of the seven essences that “maintain the integrity of the organism” (Khare 180).

⁸ As Susan L. Schwartz points out in her seminal book *Rasa: Performing the Divine in India*, the highest achievement of a performance is “the experience of *rasa*,” which is a divine experience shared by all, including actor, audience, author, and all the participants (21-25).

⁹ As written in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, “Just like the taste of food, is determined by combination of vegetables, spices and other articles such as sugar and salt, the audience tastes dominant states of a drama through expression of words, gestures and temperaments” (Muni 105-06).

¹⁰ According to Abhinavagupta, one of the greatest commentators on the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the term *rasa* points to a state of heightened consciousness, awareness, and bliss: “in art the purified state of undifferentiated experience was *rasa* or *ananda*” (qtd. in Vatsyayan 153).

expanding his guru's idea by including other Asian performance traditions as well as using a more structured and systematic, and therefore more scientific, way to train his actors. Even though both Jayanta and his guru take the *Nāṭyaśāstra* tradition very seriously, their attitude and approach are quite far apart from each other. Whereas his guru was quite by the book in terms of interpreting and practicing the teachings of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Jayanta, in contrast, has a different take. Instead of conforming to what's said in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, he is more flexible and practical, and is very observant of those principles which have high relevance to current social, cultural, and theatrical context. (Jayanta).

Jayanta's multivalent and systematic approach is exactly what intrigues me about his arts. He is well-versed in contemporary actor training methods, East and West. His EX-Theatre Asia is able to use all kinds of traditions at will and carry out projects in an innovative way. His theatre is known for its stylized and aestheticized productions which stage scripts from different countries,¹¹ employ languages of different ethnic groups,¹² and incorporates multiple Asian traditions, such as Japanese *buyō* and theatre arts, Chinese Beijing opera and *Taijiquan*, Indian traditional dance, yoga, and martial arts, Nanguan songs and Taiwanese indigenous dance arts, and more. (Lin 17). In this respect, I think Jayanta (and Pei-Ann as well) is indebted to the trainings he received at the Intercultural Theatre Institute (ITI), an intercultural theatre program founded in 2000 by Singapore's acclaimed theatre practitioners and cultural thought leaders, Kuo Pao Kun (1939-2002) and T. Sasitharan. ITI's aims are "to train artists who are capable of working across cultural, linguistic, social and national boundaries, unleashing the immense

¹¹ The scripts from different countries form a very rich and impressive list: 《我要上天的那一晚》by Singaporean playwright Kuo Pao Kun (郭寶崑), *Hayavadana* (《馬頭人頭馬》) by Indian playwright Girish Karnad, *La storia di una tigre (The Tale of A Tiger)* (《老虎和士兵》) by Italian playwright Dario Fo, *The Island* (《島》) by South African playwright Athol Fugard, *When We Dead Awaken* (《復甦》) by Henrik Ibsen, *An Autobiography of a Monkey* (《猴賽雷》) by Albert Bigelow Paine, *Red Demon* (《赤鬼》) by Japanese playwright Hideki Noda (野田秀樹), and those adapted from Indian folklores, including *A True Calling* (《假戲真作》), *Numit Kappa* (《沒日沒夜》), and *The Messenger* (《失落天語》) (Lin 18). Please consult Wei-Yu Lin's article for more detailed discussion and information.

¹² As Wei-Yu Lin points out in her perceptive article "The Performance Text Which Cannot Be Seen in the Script—The Theatre Aesthetics of EX-Theatre Asia" (「劇本裡看不到的表演文本—『EX-亞洲劇團』的劇場美學」), EX-Theatre Asia often employs two or more languages in their productions. These languages include Indian Manipuri dialect, Chinese, indigenous tribal languages in Taiwan, Malay, Taiwanese, Hakka, Japanese, etc. Oftentimes, the languages used have something to do with either the scripts or actors' ethnic backgrounds. The plays such as *A True Calling* (《假戲真作》), *Monkey the Great* (《猴賽雷》), and *Red Demon* (《赤鬼》) are the best examples (Lin 19).

potential of theatre to bring together, empower and ultimately harness the energies of diverse communities throughout the world.”¹³ Altogether Jayanta studied at ITI for one year and a half from 2001 to 2002. His experience in learning different Asian traditional art forms made him think and reflect on his native traditions he had always taken for granted and considered outdated. This exposure, as Jayanta describes, compelled him to look into “the fundamental differences and similarities within these traditions” (Jayanta). It, in turn, led him to experiment with technical and aesthetic touch in his theatre work. During this period at ITI, Jayanta, under direct guidance of Pao-Kun Kuo, was constantly inspired by Kuo’s progressive and provocative thoughts on theatre (Jayanta). It is evident that Jayanta’s fluid cultural background contributes in shaping his theatre vision and his arts.¹⁴ This is also the reason why that what he attempts to achieve deviates from his guru’s doings and the goals of the theatre of roots movement. And yet while embarking on a path of his own by experimenting with intercultural theatre, Jayanta always holds on to his indigenous perspective and concern.

In addition to the word “essence,” “the Absolute” is another keyword that captures our attention in Jayanta’s definition. What is “the Absolute”? What is unusual is that this somewhat mysterious term is mentioned twice in a very brief definition. It points to the ultimate reality a theatre practitioner wants to make manifest or make visible so that the audience can experience it or savor it like *rasa*. In other words, the purpose of the theatre of essence is to realize or to make aware “the universal nature of the self beyond the daily life” named “the Absolute” (Jayanta).¹⁵ Its main concern is very much like Peter Brook’s holy theatre, that is, to make the invisible visible or to unveil the hidden core of the Absolute. As Brook writes,

I am calling it the Holy Theatre for short, but it could be called The Theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible: the notion that the stage is a place where the invisible can appear has a deep hold on our thoughts. We are all aware that most of life escapes our senses: a most powerful

¹³ This mission statement is quoted from the ITI website: <https://www.iti.edu.sg/about/who-we-are/>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2020.

¹⁴ In his article “Towards the Theatre of Essence,” Usham Rojio uses the concept of “cultural fluidity” to interpret Jayanta’s enterprise and career as a theatre practitioner. I find it fruitful and inspiring to discuss Jayanta’s project from this perspective (Rojio 58-66).

¹⁵ As Jayanta writes, “each existing physical object around us has its unique quality. That uniqueness can’t be experienced by merely knowing from its physical appearance. It needs an effort or process to realize or experience the actual quality of a given object” (Jayanta).

explanation of the various arts is that they talk of patterns which we can only begin to recognize when they manifest themselves as rhythms or shapes. (Brook 42)

In the meantime, Jayanta's definition of the theatre of essence constantly reminds me of the Sanskrit word *Atman*. Meaning essence, breath, spirit, soul, inner self, true self, universal self, etc., *Atman*, according to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is "the universal self, identical with the eternal core of the personality that after death either transmigrates to a new life or attains release (*moksha*) from the bonds of existence. . . . *Atman* also underlies all the activities of a person, as *Brahman* (the Absolute) underlies the workings of the universe. *Atman* is part of the universal *Brahman*, with which it can commune or even fuse."¹⁶ From the vantage point of *Atman*, we can see that Jayanta's theatre of essence has a lofty goal. Like the ancient Greek aphorism "know thyself" inscribed in the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, *Atman* aims to help the actor and the spectator alike to acquire self-knowledge and realize one's true self which is identical with the transcendent self, *Brahman*.

With the purpose to expose and to attain the Absolute, the goal of the theatre of essence all of a sudden becomes philosophical, spiritual, transcendental, and even religious. Through theatre, one is able to acquire self-knowledge (*Atma jnana*) and to attain spiritual enlightenment (*moksha*) and bliss (*ananda*). From the physical to the metaphysical, the theatre of essence not only recognizes and celebrates the immanent innermost essence of each human being but also aims to invite the actor and the audience to have a taste of *rasa* and to achieve liberation and blissfulness together.

Jayanta's Dramaturgy and Theatricality: Towards a System of Actor Training for the Theatre of Essence

*"The Actor is an Athlete of the Heart":
Rasa—The Theory and Practice at Work*

"The actor is an athlete of the heart" (Artaud 133) is a catchphrase in Artaud's perceptive article "Affective Athleticism" in which he rightly points out the vital role of the affect or emotions in an actor's performance. Artaud's insights on affect

¹⁶ See "Atman."

(Artaud 133-41) along with his extended interest and passion for “the Great Mysteries” (Artaud 51) and the ritual theatre are anticipated by the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, an ancient Indian treatise on the performing arts. Religious in its nature, this treatise, often called the *Nāṭyaveda*, is the “fifth *Veda*” often attributed to the sage Bharata-Muni, covering the principles of dramaturgy and stagecraft as handed down to Bharata by the god Brahma who created the *Nāṭyaveda* from the four *Vedas*. This treatise, “part theatrical manual, part philosophy of aesthetics, part mythological history, part theology” (Schwartz 12), has exerted a long and lasting impact on theatre, dance, music, and literary traditions in India and beyond. In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, performing arts are deemed as a form of ritual ceremony (*yajna*) or offering to the gods. They start with a *puja*, a consecration ceremony, to pay tribute to the deities. Their eventual goals are not for entertainment only, but to serve as an aid to the learning of beauty, truth, virtue, courage, love, proper behavior, ethical and moral fortitude, and adoration of the divine. Within this framework, an actor, under the aegis of god(s), is not only a vessel of divine will but also “a man of action” (Grotowski, “Performer” 376) as defined by Jerzy Grotowski: “He is a doer, a priest, a warrior: he is outside aesthetic genres” (Grotowski, “Performer” 376).

Of all the theories in the treatise, the theory of *rasa* (Chapters 6 and 7) stands out as a predominant theory of affect and emotions. But what is this thing called *rasa*? Bharata-Muni writes:

Because it [performance] is enjoyably tasted, it is called *rasa*. How does the enjoyment come? Persons who eat prepared food mixed with different condiments and sauces, etc., if they are sensitive, enjoy the different tastes and then feel pleasure; likewise, sensitive spectators, after enjoying the various emotions expressed by the actors through words, gestures and feelings feel pleasure, etc. This feeling by the spectators is here explained as the *rasa-s* of *natya*. (Muni 55)

Rasa(s) is (are) the various emotions (*bhavas*) expressed, mixed, and presented by the actor and felt by the audience. Technically, the mission of a well-trained performer is to produce a *rasic* performance through a creative synthesis and expression of *vibhava* (determinants), *anubhava* (consequents), and *vyabicharibhava* (transitory states).

For Richard Schechner, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is “much more powerful as an embodied set of ideas and practices than as a written text” because it “is more danced than read,” forming the core of a multiplicity of Indian classic dance theatre

genres such as *kathak*, *kathakali*, *odissi*, and *Bharatanatyam* (28). He calls the *rasa* theory “rasaesthetics” (29) and developed the Rasaboxes exercise along with several of his colleagues at East Coast Artists, especially Michele Minnick and Paula Murray Cole, in the 1990s (39, 48). With one *rasa* written in each box, this exercise is open-ended in spirit and requires rigorous trainings to master diverse emotional intensities, transitions, and combinations. In fact, the *abhinaya* or the art of expression of *rasa* is an ongoing exercise which has no end in sight. As Bharata-Muni says in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*: “It is impossible . . . to know all about *natya* since there is no limit to *bhava-s* (emotions) and no end to the arts involved. It is not possible to have a thorough knowledge of even one of them, leave alone so many of them” (Muni 53).

In her article, “Rasaboxes Performer Training,” Michele Minnick maintains that the key design of the Rasaboxes exercise is “the spatialization of emotions” (40). In other words, they use space to delineate each *rasa*, and allow the individual performer to find his/her own expression of the emotion(s) contained within a particular box. The effect is that they liberate the codified expression of emotion attached to particular gestures and facial expressions as in classical Indian dance. Minnick finds that

because of its focus on physical embodiment/expression, Rasaboxes training can serve to deepen a performer’s ability to find authentic emotional connections.... Unlike many other forms of actor training—in which the actor is encouraged to lose himself, to act on impulse, to give way to inspiration—the Rasaboxes encourage the actor to approach his craft as a conscious, body-oriented process to which he holds the keys and the tools for his own development. (Minnick 40)

Of the varied advantages of the Rasaboxes exercise mentioned in Minnick’s discussion, two points strike at the very core of actor training concerns: First, “The Rasaboxes can free performers from questions about ‘motivation,’ allowing them to think of and use emotion in a more playful adventurous way” (Minnick 41); Second, an embodied psychophysical emotion can “energize the space between one performer and another, and between performer and spectator” (Minnick 41).

In his own training sessions, Jayanta emulates and re-invents Richard Schechner’s Rasaboxes exercises. He guides his actors/students to master facial, vocal, and physical emotional expressions by using eight *rasa*-sentiment

boxes—love (*sringara*), mirth (*hasya*), anger (*raudra*), compassion (*karuna*), disgust (*bibhitsa*), horror (*bahyanak*), heroism (*veera*), and amazement (*adbhuta*).¹⁷ When practicing Rasaboxes, actors/students move from box to box and change emotional expressions as they move into a new box. Different *rasa*-sentiments oftentimes involve at once different muscles of an actor’s body and different types of breathing techniques. Actors/students learn to control muscles and use different breathing patterns to express certain emotions. They also explore to make a distinction between inner feelings (subjective experience) and outer emotions (public expression of feelings). After practicing the changing of emotions, they practice emotion layering, trying to combine two or more emotions together and with different levels of intensity. As they practice more and more, their clichéd emotional expressions¹⁸ decrease and more sophisticated and personal emotional interpretations rise. Also, Rasaboxes train actors/students to work with their bodymind holistically as the body/mind/breathing/emotions are treated and integrated as a single system. For Jayanta, breathing on the stage is not normal breathing. It often works with particular emotion(s) and is what contributes to evoke the *rasa* of a performance.¹⁹ In the end, Rasaboxes trainings can help trigger a visceral or *rasic* performance in an actor which in turn can engage and affect the audience inside out.

In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, this performer-spectator rapport is greatly emphasized. If *abhinaya* literally means “leading an audience towards” the experience (*bhava*) of a sentiment (*rasa*), the purpose of performing arts aims exactly to reach this ultimate performance state, in which both performers and spectators alike are mesmerized by the performance and savor a taste of *rasa* together. When this happens, all the people or participants involved heighten their consciousness, discover their true self (the universal self or *Atman*), and experience the essence of their being in the form of *ananda*, trance, *moksha*, or ecstasy.

To a certain degree, Jayanta’s theatre of “essence” is exactly a theatre of “*rasa*” for, according to Paula Murray Cole,²⁰ “[*r*]asa means ‘essence,’ and that

¹⁷ Abhinavagupta, a Kashmiri Saivite (worshiper of Shiva) and one of the most important interpreters of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* in the 10th-century, added a ninth *rasa*, *shanta* (bliss).

¹⁸ For example, big laughs for mirth (*hasya*), clenched fists for anger (*raudra*), weeping for compassion (*karuna*), and so on.

¹⁹ There are many kinds of breathing methods (*pranayama*), which include diaphragmatic or abdominal breathing, chest breathing, clavicular breathing, etc. One of the breathing exercises the students practice is called “*ujjaya* breathing” (sound breathing) (Jayanta).

²⁰ Paula Murray Cole was Jayanta’s Rasaboxes teacher in a London workshop in 2016. Jayanta got acquainted with the Rasaboxes exercise by reading Schechner at National School of Drama (NSD). It was around 1998-99 the students at NSD were introduced the Rasaboxes exercise in the

essence has the power to move us, to transform and shape our responses. It comes from outside our bodies, is smelled, tasted, ingested. Its particular properties change us, transform our chemistry and shape our psychophysical expressive behavior” (45). When an actor practices *rasas* hard enough, he/she, for sure, is going to become “an athlete of the emotions.”



class. In 2004, Jayanta was involved in one project in Japan. There Abhilash Pilai, the director of the play and his senior from NSD, used Rasaboxes as an actor casting method.



Fig. 1. Emotions & Rasaboxes Training Session.

Teacher Chongtham Jayanta Meeti (江譚佳彦) and Students. Photo courtesy of EX-Theatre Asia.

Jayanta's Dramaturgy and Theatricality: The Style (Vṛtti), the Art of Acting (Abhinaya), and the Performance of Rasa

When confronting a dramatic text, Jayanta—as a director, dramaturg, and playwright—is more concerned with treating the text in theatrical terms and transforming it into a performance text than representing/re-presenting it intact. He adapts and directs plays by Indian and Manipuri writers/playwrights (*Hayavadana* by Girish Karnad, *A True Calling* based on Vijayadan Dheta's story, *Numit Kappa* by Kshetri Sanajaoba, etc.) and Western writers/playwrights (*The Tale of A Tiger* by Italian playwright Dario Fo, *The Island* by South African playwright Athol Fugard, *When We Dead Awaken* by Henrik Ibsen, *An Autobiography of a Monkey* by Albert Bigelow Paine, etc.). These materials cover several different genres such as myth, folklore, narrative, and play. In dealing with the dramaturgy and theatricality of these materials, Jayanta's main concerns are to create a script full of poetic images and symbolic actions, and then transform them into stylized and aestheticized visual, vocal, and plastic forms.

For him, to understand the technique of all the ten varieties of play (*rūpa*) described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, one must have knowledge of the styles (*vṛtti*) of dramatic production (*nāṭya*) and performance (*prayoga*). There are all together four styles which were originally prepared by Bharata and presented to Brahma (*Nāṭyaśāstra* 1.41-43):

1. Vocal Action (the Verbal) (*bhāratī*)
2. Mental Action (the Grand) (*sāttvatī*)
3. Rigorous Action (the Energetic) (*ārabhaṭī*)
4. Graceful Action (the Graceful) (*kaiśikī*)

Each individual style is intertwined with other styles, and cannot be isolated from the others. Another keyword often mentioned and highlighted by Jayanta is “*abhinaya*,” meaning the art of acting or expression, or histrionic representation. According to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* 1.17-18, when Brahma created the *Nāṭyaveda* he took *abhinaya* from the *Yajurveda*. The purpose of *abhinaya* is to use exquisite acting skills to lead the audience to experience *rasa*. *Abhinaya* can be divided into four categories:

1. Physical expression (*aṅgika*)
2. Vocal expression (*vācika*)

3. Costumes, make-up, and scenography (*āhārya*)
4. The temperament (*sattvika*)

On a different scale, *abhinaya* can be distinguished into two kinds: 1. poetic and stylized acting (*natyadharmi abhinaya*) which follows a codified manner of presenting emotion and expression, and shows greater artistry. 2. realistic and everyday expression (*lokadharmi abhinaya*) which involves very natural expression and movement, as occurs in daily life. According to my personal observation, Jayanta opts for the first kind for his own brand of dramaturgy and theatricality without hesitation. He has expressed once and again that his approach is intended to help actors perfect their acting skills and move from the daily to the extra-daily level. As Jayanta suggests, “the approach of presentation is not presenting the thing as we see or know in reality but to modify it for the goal to experience its essence” (Jayanta). In like manner, he maintains that “all the constituents of theatrical techniques are a means to transform an ordinary worldly object into an aesthetic object or a universal object” (Jayanta). The theater of essence is not interested in “presenting the daily life pattern”; rather, it is meant to adopt “an artistic approach” so as to allow the audience “to experience the unseen true nature of life” (Jayanta).

For Grotowski, a *Performer*, with a capitalized P, “is not somebody who plays another . . . *Performer* is a state of being” (Grotowski 1997: 376). “One access to the creative way consists of discovering in yourself an ancient corporality to which you are bound by a strong ancestral relation. So you are neither in the character nor in the non-character” (Grotowski 1997: 378), Grotowski elaborates. Like Grotowski, Jayanta thinks that an actor’s mission is not to play or become a character but to embody the emotion(s), energy, and essence. Acting is not based on affective memory or emotional memory as emphasized in Method Acting. Rather, an actor needs to tap into his/her inner resources and consciousness, namely the essence itself, and enact either one or the multi-faceted quality of human nature and impulse. The purpose of the theatre of essence is to assist actors to go beyond mere intellect and thought and be aware of something as it is, something innate and ancestral. For him, theatre is a medium, a process, or a vehicle (*yana*), transporting its passengers, namely actors, spectators, and all the participants, to experience a *rasic* performance and to reach the Absolute or the ultimate reality.

The Use of Yoga, Meditation, and Thang Ta Martial Arts

Other than Rasaboxes, Jayanta employs yoga *asanas*, meditation, and Thang

Ta martial arts to train actor's psychophysical agility, bodily techniques, and spiritual mindfulness. As a theatre practitioner, he is fully aware of the significance of mindful energy flow in an actor's performance. He selects some of Thang Ta's basic moves to help train an actor's breathing and energy use. These exercises enable an actor to use his/her body's resources holistically, creatively, and mindfully because Thang Ta has its essential spiritual character and stresses meditative practices.

Thang Ta is a popular term for the ancient Manipuri martial arts known as Huyen Lallong. It is an art of sword (Thang) and spear (Ta) developed from the war environment of the tiny state of Manipur in north-east India.²¹ Before the British Empire came on the scene in 1824, Manipur was an independent kingdom since the early Christian era. Geopolitically, it played an important role in medieval times. Surrounding Manipur, there were many independent states caught between India and China. They were constantly at war with each other. The constant life and death struggles between clans, tribes and states helped local people devise martial arts to safeguard their own lives and at the same time develop an inward attitude to face problems of life, death and afterlife. According to Arambam and Nongmaithem, Thang Ta has now become an expressive art form which still retains its fighting character. It was "prohibited during the period of the colonial raj (1891-1947)" and "survived during the period of Manipur's integration with the Indian Union in 1949." Since 1976, Thang Ta has been "shown in festivals and performance platforms abroad."²² In Jayanta's own Thang Ta training sessions, actors are expected to practice a set of selected movements drawn from Thang Ta with agility. Other than the velocity and precision, he hopes that his actors can master the cleverness of the feet movements and carry the body in the air beautifully.

In addition, Jayanta's eye training method is called *trataka*. It is a kind of yoga eye exercise. By fixing the gaze, one is able to calm the restless mind. While enhancing the ability to concentrate, *trataka* increases the power of memory and brings the mind to a state of attention, focus, and awareness. In similar fashion, Jayanta asks his actors/students to practice their voice articulation exercises at a target. Through Thang Ta and other practices, I gradually came to realize that Jayanta's homeland Manipur has various intriguing theatrical and martial arts traditions as well as rich ceremonial and ritualistic performances which enrich and

²¹ Jayanta learned Thang Ta in a drama course during his university years (1992-97).

²² Please consult the following website for the article "Thang Ta Martial Art of Manipur: A Culture of Performance" by Lokendra Arambam and Khilton Nongmaithem: <http://www.thang-ta.com/>. Accessed 29 January 2020.

equip him with a bunch of tools, source materials, and inspirations for devising workable training exercises.





Fig. 2. Meditation and Yoga Training Session.

Teacher Chongtham Jayanta Meeti (江譚佳彦) and Students. Photo courtesy of EX-Theatre Asia.



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Fig. 3. Thang Ta Martial Arts Training Session.

Teacher Chingtham Ranjeet Khuman and Students. Photo courtesy of EX-Theatre Asia.

The Essential Voice Training—The Magic of Nanguan Songs

When I learned Jayanta included Nanguan singing (but not acting) in his actor training program, I was quite surprised but not baffled. I got acquainted with Nanguan Xi through my contact with Gang-a Tsui Theater (江之翠劇場) and learned to appreciate Nanguan singing bit by bit. I surmised that it is the melody of Nanguan singing that attracted Jayanta. In my interview with Jayanta on 6 August 2019, he told me that he was drawn to Nanguan singing for several reasons: 1. Nanguan singing comes straight from dantian; 2. Every single word in Nanguan

song is pronounced with many sounds and variations which resemble Indian raga music in many ways; 3. The vocal quality of Nanguan singing has a unique and ancient feel, sounding distant and sad; 4. The melody pattern of Nanguan is more flexible than that of Kunqu (Jayanta).

In a word, the reason that Jayanta is attracted to the quality of the sound value in Nanguan singing is because it carries “certain emotional value in itself” (Jayanta). In like manner, Indian raga “doesn’t rely on words but on different combinations of seven tones to express all kinds of the emotions and feelings” (Jayanta). In his opinion, both music styles use improvised variations within a prescribed melodic framework so as to manifest the emotional qualities of their tonal systems. Also, both express the sound from dantian and not from throat. These are the points that Jayanta considers very important for his actor training.

During the Nanguan singing training sessions, the actors followed the guidance of Nanguan masters and tried to master the singing scales and vocal qualities of Nanguan as much as possible. However, due to the limited training time, the actors still have a long way to go to assimilate fully the advantages of Nanguan singing mentioned above.





Fig. 4. Nanguan Singing Training Session.
 Teachers, Ya-Lan Lin (林雅嵐) & Chia-Wen Chen (陳佳雯), and Students.
 Photo courtesy of EX-Theatre Asia.

Unto a Theatre Monastery

As stipulated in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the primary goal of a performer's art is to perfect one's acting skill (*abhinaya*) and employ all the means at his/her command to bring about a flavored performance so as to charm and transport the spectator into a higher realm of spirituality, full of love, peace, and devotion. Jayanta considers the *Nāṭyaśāstra* his Bible and identifies with many of the teachings in this treatise. He refers to its contents in his lectures from time to time and constantly reminds his actors/students to refine their acting skills and to arouse joy in the spectator with exquisite movements since only through the medium of the actor's superb art of communication can an actor help the spectator experience the *rasa* and the blissful state of being.

Jayanta requires his actors/students to make a mindful psychophysical preparation before each training session starts. "If you want to make acting a profession, you have to keep on practicing every day." "Keep challenging yourself and continuing your practice," Jayanta reminds his actors/students time and again. But a perfect *abhinaya* is never easy to come by. Rigorous trainings day in and day out on emotional expressions, physical techniques, rote recitation, and vocal articulation are something a devoted performer cannot do without. The ideal actor training, as envisioned by Jayanta, is best executed and experienced as a way of "monastery life" (Jayanta). By conjuring up the word "monastery," Jayanta does not refer to the word's literal sense, meaning "the residence of a religious community" or "the religious community itself," but was meant to evoke the spirit and essence

of the word. He knows full well that actors using the “sacred space” of the “theatre monastery” are not sanctified religious persons bound by religious vows. Rather they are people with talents, skills, energy, and determination who commit themselves to the actor’s art and craft. For Jayanta, it is best that the actors are equipped with the monastery mindset and are willing to conform themselves to so-called monastery rules. As Jayanta writes, “In the conventional sense, firstly, devotion is a must; secondly, a disciplined life needs to be observed; thirdly, a daily practice routine is required as a practical means to achieve what one wants to pursue” (Jayanta). In saying so, Jayanta implies that being an actor is a way of life and a state of being. An actor is someone who is willing to give up the worldly or ordinary life and go after something extraordinary and higher instead. “Devotion is not a blind faith but a selfless affection and dedication to one’s art and craft with all of one’s energy, body, mind, emotion, attention, and concentration. Otherwise it’s just a waste of time” (Jayanta), Jayanta adds.

In this theatre monastery, what Jayanta demands is in fact a kind of *bhakti* devotionism; that is, an act of religious-like observance and an attitude of religious-like zeal and devotion. As he maintains, “Theatre is dealing with the nature of human being and one’s relation to other beings. It needs a sharp, alert, and concentrated mind to observe oneself and beyond” (Jayanta). The monastery mindset or lifestyle is, for him, “the fundamental core of the creative action . . . So in my theatre of essence, I design lessons like meditation, breathing exercises, physical trainings, emotional practices, etc., so that my actors can truly know themselves as well as the truthful nature of being” (Jayanta).

Jayanta’s portrayal of an actor constantly reminds me of Grotowski’s “holy actor” who, unlike the “courtesan actor” who wastes and prostitutes their talents, leads an ascetic life and gives totally, “in one’s deepest intimacy, with confidence, as when one gives oneself in love” (*Towards* 38). “Here lies the key. Self-penetration, trance, excess, the formal discipline itself—all this can be realized, provided one has given oneself fully, humbly and without defense. This act culminates in a climax. It brings relief” (*Towards* 38), Grotowski elaborates. All the more, this actor “is not afraid to go beyond all normally acceptable limits, attains a kind of inner harmony and peace of mind” (*Towards* 45).

For me, Jayanta’s theatre of essence is religious in nature. In his theatre monastery, actors are theatre *sadhakas/sadhus* or *Performers* in the Grotowskian sense, who pursue a way of life designed to realize the goal of one’s ultimate ideal or awareness—whether it is merging with one’s eternal source, “the Absolute,” or the realization of one’s “universal Self,” as Jayanta defines—through a yogi-like

sadhana quest or practice which includes all kinds of rigorous psychophysical and spiritual exercises.

Jayanta's Theatre of Essence in the Making—A Critical Appraisal

Roots and Routes: An Intercultural and Glocal Perspective

Jayanta, an Indian? Yes, that is for certain as he was born in the capital city Imphal of Manipur, a northeastern state in India. And yet, in some respects, he is more a Manipuri artist to me because his upbringing as a theatre practitioner was nurtured by a rich environment of performing arts culture such as traditional Manipuri dance, Thang Ta martial arts, and varied folk rituals. Due to its geopolitical location, Manipur has served as crossroads of multiple Asian economic and cultural exchanges for centuries. Before it was defeated by the British in 1891 in the Anglo-Manipuri war of Khongjom, the sovereignty of Manipur had existed for more than three millenniums. It is reported that Manipur has had a long record of insurgency and inter-ethnic violence. What's more, internal dispute and differing visions for the future have resulted in more insurgency in the state because separatists seek independence from India. An introduction of Jayanta as an author in *Selected Plays of EX-Theatre Asia* confirms the political unrest in Manipur and yet it also emphasizes Manipur's rich performing arts traditions:

Because of its geographical location, Jayanta's hometown, Manipur, is an important military spot. The political and economic turbulence have made the local people full of defiant spirit. Surprisingly, it also resulted in the development of the traditional performing arts. The languages of India change from village to village. The languages are often mixed and physical movement is thus emphasized. Such a cultural background encouraged Jayanta to explore physical expression and the use of language. (Jayanta, "About" 366)

Drawn upon the rich cultural heritage of Manipur, Jayanta's actor training approach and theatre practice contribute to the formation of his vision of the theatre of essence. In the meantime, this theatre vision is further substantiated by the *rasa* theory and other theories of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

In the wake of his forerunners, Jayanta has appropriated and experimented

with the rich theatrical and martial arts traditions from his homeland Manipur and his native land India. Like Ratan Thiyam and Sanakhya Ebotombi Haorokcham who embraced both Manipuri and Indian traditions, Jayanta makes use of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* tradition extensively, especially the theory of *rasa*, in his theatre of essence. As Jayanta explains, “the movement of the theater of roots started at 60s and 70s so our generation was not directly involved. But both Ratan Thiyam and my teacher Ebotombi were part of that movement. We grew up watching their plays and experienced their influences on our concepts of theater, aesthetics, philosophy, etc. Ratan Thiyam did not teach me directly but his works are an example for many artists of my generation” (Jayanta). The artistic rootedness in Manipur, the “Manipuriness,” certainly was Thiyam and Ebotombi’s way to assert their native identity. But whether they were happy to be totally assimilated into what can be called “Indianness” is a subtle question which requires further research. As Subhash Chandra Das points out, “There is a pervading feeling in Manipur that their land has been deceitfully and unlawfully annexed to the Indian Territory in 1947 after almost a two thousand-year history of independence. Consequently, assimilation to the great Indian tradition and culture has never been a complete process; there has always been a feeling of alienation from the mainstream among the Manipuris” (108).

Anyhow, for Jayanta, both Thiyam and Ebotombi have exerted a great influence on him and inspired him to find his own signature in his theatre (Jayanta). Judging from Manipuri contemporary theatre history, I will argue that Jayanta belongs to the very young generation of the lineage of Manipuri playwrights and theatre directors who emerged decades after India’s Independence in 1947, and Jayanta’s theatre of essence is an extension of the theatre of roots movement, a movement rebelling against British “colonial cultural superiority” (Mee 1) and the eventual colonizing of Indian theatre culture (Mee 1). Nevertheless, unlike his Manipuri gurus such as Thiyam and Ebotombi, Jayanta, multifaceted in his roots and routes, embarked on his journey to Taiwan and has continued to explore various indigenous traditions. As a result, his attempts have amalgamated whatever traditions which come in handy for him, be it Western, Chinese, Taiwanese, Hakka, Japanese, Manipuri, or Indian. In so doing, he engages himself not only in these intercultural theatre practices but also in building up a new glocal species of theatre vision and practices in Taiwan.²³

By examining his initiative of the theatre of essence, his brand of actor

²³ The glocal viewpoint adopted here deems glocalization “as the interpenetration of the global and the local, resulting in unique outcomes in different geographic areas” (Ritzer 193).

training method and his stage productions, we can easily sense Jayanta's deep intimacy with native or local traditions, myths and folklores. In his training sessions and workshops, Jayanta often invites teachers/gurus, both domestic and from abroad, to work with his actors/students and workshop participants. By re-creating and applying the *Nāṭyaśāstra* traditions of India in general and the martial arts traditions of Manipur in particular, Jayanta successfully relocates them in the context of present Taiwanese theatrical and cultural milieu and mixes them with various Taiwanese and Asian theatrical elements and components. It is worthwhile to note that no matter what traditions or art forms that he appropriates, he will always pay heed to refashion them and use them in a well-integrated manner.

Like many of the Asian theatres, Jayanta's theatre of essence is determinedly a stylized theatre. It is not only because stylization is, as Suresh Awasthi has noted, "the hallmark of Indian traditional theatre for centuries" and "the essence of the theatre of roots" (Awasthi 51) but also because the stylized approach to theatre can bring about "a revolutionary change in the art and techniques of the actor and in the entire process of transforming the dramatic text into performance text" (Awasthi 51). Like most of the established performers of Asian traditional theatres who have gone through a full course of training and experienced years of hardship in perfecting their trade, an able and dedicated performer of the theatre of essence also needs to complete a long and rigorous training in order to achieve a stylized performance.

All about the Theatre of Essence—Critiques and Appraisals

Jayanta maintains that his brand of acting approach is one which can coordinate the actor's bodymind, resist the temptation of representation and realistic characterization, and undermine the mind/body binary which has for centuries prevailed in many Western acting theories and practices. Nevertheless, the lofty goal and the ambiguous idealism of his theatre as well as the gap between his theatre company's amateur performance and his own transcendental vision invites criticism. Theatre critic Dun-Chi Chang (張敦智), in his article "The Divided Subtopics of 'The Theatre of Essence': Performance Tools/Aesthetic System," brings forth a couple of criticisms and concerns raised by theatre scholars about Jayanta's theatre of essence. Rather than engaging the viewers' intellectual capacity, Jayanta's *rasic* performance attempts to appeal to the audience's affective and aesthetic sensitivity. However, according to theatre scholar and critic Shan-Lu Yu, when it comes to the rapport between the actor and the audience, what Jayanta desires may not happen for the audience will bring their perspectives into the

theatre and re-contextualize the performance according to their own understanding. Also, since the *mise-en-scène* of Jayanta's theatre comes from Western theatre tradition, for theatre director Yu-hui Fu (傅裕惠), this fact makes it difficult for Jayanta to create new actor-audience interaction and rapport. For Chang himself, the problem of Jayanta's theatre and theory lies in the gap between the performance skills of the actor and the aesthetic idealism of the *rasa* theory. The majority of Jayanta's actors are amateurs and they are unable to live up to the lofty goal that Jayanta has set for them. Chang thinks that these amateurs have a long way to go before they become mature and enlightened performers.²⁴ As for myself, I also find Jayanta's approach problematic and have some reservations about it. His goal to integrate mind-body-soul through breathing, emotion-expressing, and vocal training, and eventually attain the essence of life through theatre is not at all realistic because it oftentimes requires years of rigorous training and uncompromising devotion on actor's part to cultivate an energy-flowing body and to acquire exquisite acting skills according to the teachings of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which could then be "translated" or "put to use" on stage, meeting the immediate demands of acting and engaging fully with other actors as well as the overall performance environment.

From the very beginning, Jayanta's aim has been to grope for a proper way to act, to fine-tune the bodymind, and to do theatre using this energy in a rightful manner in the broad spectrum of "the theatre of essence." However, judging from the long-term and rigorous training this approach requires, namely the day-in, day-out exercises in the so-called "monastic mode," I believe Jayanta will agree with me that only very few practitioners could attain the zenith state that he envisions, that is, the state of heightened consciousness and awareness, or some kind of liberation or enlightenment (*moksha*). Due to this reason, I am skeptical of his approach's efficacy and doubtful that this approach can be successfully implemented in training sessions and be effectively carried out in an accomplished manner when working under the time-bound and budget-bound commercial model. At best, we can say that Jayanta's theatre is some sort of hybrid or "syncretic theatre,"²⁵ and his approach is a "cocktail" therapy to cure or address the wrongs or

²⁴ Dun-Chi Chang (張敦智), "The Divided Subtopics of 'The Theatre of Essence': Performance Tools/Aesthetic System" (〈「本質劇場」的分裂子題：表演工具／美學體系〉), *Performing Arts Reviews* (《表演藝術評論台》). <https://pareviews.ncafroc.org.tw/?p=57764>. Accessed 7 Feb. 2021.

²⁵ According to Christopher Balme, syncretic theatre is "the amalgamation of indigenous performance forms with certain conventions and practices of the Euro-American theatrical tradition, to produce new theatrico-aesthetic principles" (180). Or it can be defined as "those theatrical products which result from the interplay between the Western theatrico-dramatic

limits of current more Western-oriented actor training methods. But whether his cocktail approach is a better solution to equip performers nowadays remains to be seen.

What's more, nurtured by the theatre of roots movement, interculturalism, and intercultural theatre, Jayanta's "cocktail" approach is built on an inter-exchange of multiple ethnic cultures, theatrical traditions, and varied conceptions of body, breathing, emotion, and energy. Jayanta seems to believe what he has proposed is applicable to all if an actor is disciplined and works hard enough. He fails to address the cultural differences embedded in the concepts such as body and energy and does not recognize that his intercultural enterprise is a contested site. For example, he evades the different social and religious frames of reference, especially the Indian way and the Chinese/Taiwanese/Hakka way. The Indian way always appeals to divinity and religious beliefs whereas the Chinese/Taiwanese/Hakka way tends to be more secular. As a result, Jayanta's cocktail or hybrid model lacks distinction, connection, and consistency, and remains skin-deep in a way. This deficiency might severely compromise the efficacy of each individual practice that he employs or appropriates.

Also, Jayanta fails to discern the limitations at issue in his claims and tends to put forth his vision as a universal solution for the problems of actor training. In other words, he takes an uncritical stance in his intercultural enterprise. The question of his theatre of essence has nothing to do with exoticism and Indianness. It has more to do with its applicability, practicality, and efficacy. For me, Jayanta's approach has a close kinship to religious practice and to something sacred and spiritual. I argue that the nature of his vision and approach is not about actor training per se; rather, it should be deemed as a quasi-religious devotionism whose purpose is to bring about long and lasting change in the bodymind and in consciousness.

In the vexed debate over the theatre of essence, Jayanta's search for the Absolute and universals of performance, based on the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and derived from his life experiences and beliefs, risks charges of mysticism, esotericism, essentialism, and universalism. His mining of ancient Indian performance poetics, regional Manipuri traditions, and indigenous artistic practices seems like unabashed borrowings and appropriations. His hybrid or cocktail actor training method, which

tradition and the indigenous performance forms of a postcolonial culture" (180). Theatrical syncretism, Balme elaborates, "is in most cases a conscious, programmatic strategy to fashion a new form of theatre in the light of colonial or postcolonial experience. It is very often written and performed in a Europhone language but almost always manifests varying degrees of bi- or multi-lingualism" (180-81).

is equipped with elements predicated on the radical decontextualization of cultural practices and the aestheticization of performance traditions and styles, can also be deemed as an approach of fetishist collage. What's more, his transcendental theatre vision runs the risk of being accused of elitist cosmopolitanism.

Nevertheless, when all the suspicions have been raised and the critical charges have been laid, the fact remains that as an inheritor of the Indian theatre of roots movement and a living descendant of the intercultural theatre impulses, Jayanta is an earnest artistic director of a thriving regional theatre based in Maoli, which is equipped with a vigorous artistic vision that has spanned fifteen years and is supported by a fully articulated poetics of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and an open-minded attitude towards varied indigenous performing traditions. For me, whatever its shortcomings and imperfections, Jayanta's theatre of essence in the making constitutes one of the most serious and experimental attempts to approach the "Absolute" nature of acting from an intercultural perspective. His enterprise may be easily dismissed from the aesthetic high ground of performative objectivism and materialism but from the virtuoso high ground of theatre arts, the "essence" of the theatre of essence points to a realm of excellence in the arts that is able to fascinate actors and audience alike and transports them to the realm of spirituality.

By pointing out the self-justifying nature of Jayanta's approach, my purpose is not to undermine or dismiss his contributions to acting theory and practice outright. On the contrary, personally I identify with Jayanta's vision and approach and consider it one of the definitive ways to enact a meaningful theatre and to train a good actor. His model brings forth an alternative paradigm that provides holistic stimulus and much food for thought. Generally speaking, Jayanta's cocktail enterprise is rich and fertile. It resists any facile description or generalization. By qualifying the essence of a bodymind practice as a form of embodied knowledge, his vision/approach, for me, is indeed an alternative strategy to educate and inspire today's performers and spectators alike. It testifies to the importance of sustained embodied practice and experiment. There is no denying that his approach has the potential to transform the field in significant ways because it offers a new vision by showing us what a performer's bodymind can do and what constitutes a mindful performance in the 21st century.

Actors' Response to Jayanta's Actor Training Approach

In the summer of 2019, I conducted a fieldwork at the EX-Theatre Asia in Maoli when the Theatre of Essence Summer Training Camp was held. During my

stay there, I interviewed both Jayanta and his actors/students. For his actors/students, Jayanta's approach to actor training serves as a fruitful alternative that enables them to acquire a set of workable psychophysical acting techniques mentioned above for their pursuit in acting.

For those actors/students with a BA in Drama, they find that Jayanta's method is quite different from what they learned at school. At school, they focused on realism and were required to do a lot of intellectual homework, such as "play reading and analysis," "character analysis," "character lessons," "character journal," "a hundred questions about a character," and "character autobiography and stories writing," etc. In contrast, Jayanta's method is that of "physical theatre." He offers refined physical techniques and skills, and focuses on training and fine-tuning an actor's body parts, such as facial expressions, eye movements, hand gestures, exquisite footwork, vocal training, and voice and articulation, etc. During the training sessions, all physical actions are carried out using different combinations of energy level, tempo, rhythm, and style.²⁶ For those with a BA in non-Drama majors, they think that Jayanta's approach is very different from what they have experienced in other directors or theatre companies. Jayanta places heavy emphasis on the so-called "basics," such as breathing, energy use, and vocal articulation, and pays heed to the build-up of an actor's physique, such as the overall energy coordination and bodily movement integration.²⁷

Currently an undergraduate studying at the Department of Drama of National Taiwan University of Arts, Kuan-Tien Chen (陳寬田) got in touch with Jayanta's method when he was still a high school student at Holistic Education School in 2016. His observation of Jayanta is quite intriguing. He thinks that over the years Jayanta's method has become more and more systematic, and his exercises have become more and more exquisite. For him, Jayanta's trainings work from outside to

²⁶ The actors/students with a BA in Drama that I interviewed include Pei-Yi Lai (賴沛宜) (a BA graduate from the Drama Department of Chinese Culture University, joining EX-Theatre Asia in March 2017), Hsin-Yi Lee (李昕宜) (a BA graduate from the Department of Theatre Arts of National Sun Yat-sen University, joining EX-Theatre Asia in March 2017), Wei Lin (林緯) (a BA graduate from the Department of Theatre Arts of National Sun Yat-sen University, joining EX-Theatre Asia in July 2018), Po-Chih Yeh (葉柏芝), (a BA graduate from the Department of Theatre Arts of National Sun Yat-sen University, joining EX-Theatre Asia in July 2018), and Tai-lien Weng (翁岱廉) (a BA graduate from the Department of Drama Creation and Application of National University of Tainan, joining EX-Theatre Asia in 2015).

²⁷ Those with a BA in non-Drama majors that I interviewed include Hsin-Yi Lu (盧心怡) (a BA graduate from the Department of Fashion Design of Shih Chien University, joining EX-Theatre Asia in July 2018) and Jung-Ling Wu (吳融霖) (a BA graduate from the Department of Philosophy of Fu Jen Catholic University, joining EX-Theatre Asia in 2013).

inside and differ drastically from the usual trainings which work from inside to outside or from emotional memory or character psychology to physical action. “Don’t try to become a character,” Chen repeated Jayanta’s words verbatim, “but try to find a character’s essence.” Chen considers that this point is the most unique one of Jayanta’s teachings.²⁸

When it comes to the issue of characterization, Jayanta reminds his actors/students time and again that “don’t become a character.” Instead, according to Hsin-Yi Lee, he expects them to master the exercises of facial and emotional expressions, physical gestures, and bodily movements from the Rasaboxes exercises. “You are not playing a character. You are embodying various qualities of human nature” (Hsin-Yi Lee). What’s more, “breathing exercises are extremely crucial in characterization, for different emotional expressions need to employ different breathing patterns” (Lee). For Pei-Yi Lai, Jayanta is a perceptive teacher who can immediately detect actors/students’ acting problems and “teach them in accordance with their aptitude and level.” Both Pei-Yi Lai and Hsin-Yi Lee believe that they are able to realize their potential and develop their uniqueness under Jayanta’s vision and guidance for they are often encouraged to explore their own nature, develop so-called “self-awareness,” and even cultivate the “actor’s third eye.”

When being asked about their feelings towards Nanguan training, Po-Chih Yeh, Pei-Yi Lai, and Hsin-Yi Lee expressed that they like the tone, tune, and melody of Nanguan, and considered Nanguan vocal training very helpful for it teaches them how to use their dantian and vocal organs. For them, it is a very useful tool because one can learn to change one’s tone and voice and play with the variation expressions. They also emphasized that Nanguan vocal training helps them deliver their lines and enables them to use the right tone and tune at will. Regarding yoga and meditation practice, both Hsin-Yi Lu and Po-Chih Yeh like yoga and meditation practices a lot. They confirmed that when they meditate and do yoga, they look inward, cultivate mindfulness, and lower their stress levels. They found that after each practice session they connect better, focus better, and bring their body and mind together better. As for Thang Ta training, almost everyone said that Thang Ta training strengthens their bodily control and reinforces their muscular power and overall physical skills.

In a word, these actors/students think that Jayanta’s trainings provide them with a useful method through which they can cultivate more refined techniques and skills, and thus equip themselves with varied acting tools that they can use and play

²⁸ Kuan-Tien Chen (陳寬田) joined EX-Theatre Asia in 2016 when he was still a high school student of Holistic Education School (全人實驗高級中學).

with. They unanimously agree that they are empowered by Jayanta's approach, a psychophysical approach ideal not only for actor training alone but also for their physical, mindful, and spiritual practice. What impresses them most in Jayanta's undertaking is his showing by his own example. Being a director, actor, playwright, and artistic director of EX-Theatre Asia, he uses his own example to demonstrate that disciplined devotion, serious mindful practice, and solid psychophysical training are the means—perhaps the principal means—through which theatre practitioners come to realize their mindfulness, bodymind continuum, and heightened awareness of their being-in-the-world and acting-on-the-stage. Thus, his method is not just a discipline but an act of transformation.

While defining his vision and approach against the immediate past and carrying on a dialogue with the immediate future, Jayanta has never ceased to integrate and experiment with a variety of tools and practices. His theatre of essence serves as an important reminder of the fact that theatre is one of the optimal means to re-discover oneself, to give oneself totally, and to heighten one's consciousness beyond the bondage of one's national identity and culture.

Epilogue

Jayanta uses his theatre of essence as a means to hone up his actors' skills, to showcase the cultural richness of Asia, to assert his multi-faceted identities, to indicate the essence and the ultimate goal of theatre, and to reveal the nature of the Absolute. He is a theatre practitioner that has been exposed to many theatre forms and traditions, various styles and aesthetics, multi-cultures and languages, and different theatre movements and critical theories. Ratan Thiyam, Sanakhya Ebotombi Haorokcham, and Kuo Pao Kun, to name only a few, are the three guru-like masters who have exerted a great impact on Jayanta. Searching for his roots, questing for the Absolute, and experimenting with various dramatic traditions (such as the *Nāṭyaśāstra* tradition, Nanguan singing tradition, Western physical and realistic theatre traditions, native Manipuri traditions, and Chinese and local Taiwanese traditions etc.), Jayanta's theatre enterprise and stage productions are not just derivatives and extensions of the Indian theatre aesthetics, philosophy, and religion; rather, they constitute a matrix within which a variety of traditional theatre systems and modern theatre-making know-hows are contained and develop. They bring forth issues of fluid identity and cultural hybridity which are both perennial and contemporary. They manifest the intercultural breadth and heterogeneity by promoting the currency of exchange and the reciprocal encounter between theatre

artists and their audience and communities. With the view to providing a new perception of the performance and evolving a whole scheme of stylized aesthetics, I can feel a sincere and persistent endeavor on Jayanta's part to turn his roots and routes into the assets and advantages of his theatre of essence in the making. If successfully overcoming the pitfalls, limitations, difficulties, and all kinds of challenges and criticisms discussed above, his approach to actor training is a seminal platform for determined actors to attain both virtuosity and ecstasy in acting, and his theatre of essence is a visionary high ground of the Absolute for the devoted and the enlightened. The key concern is that Jayanta's enterprise demands day-to-day devoted practices which can be described as a *sadhana* practice for those who are involved in the project. With all these possible endeavors, it is very likely that a stylized theatre of essence will be created in the foreseeable future in the end.

In this paper, I have explored Jayanta's theatre vision as well as the theory and practice of the theatre of essence through identifying and analyzing his roots and routes. Even though based in Taiwan right now, Jayanta, for me, still belongs to the new wave of young directors nourished by the legacy of the theatre of roots movement. His theatre of essence enterprise is an extension of that movement and takes it further to give the movement new shoots and new directions. Jayanta's purpose is not to go back to traditions per se, say the *Nāṭyaśāstra* tradition, in a strictly verbatim manner. Rather, he challenges and attempts to refashion the traditions with new interpretations, innovative practices, artistic sensibilities, and spiritual concerns. The advantage of the theatre of essence in the making is that it recognizes the cultural strength and potentiality of regional practices. It also places great emphasis on the interactive relationship between performers and spectators. As is shown in real life, Jayanta's EX-Theatre Asia has become a training and experimental ground for budding theatre talents of Taiwan in the past few years.

Requiring a culmination of rigorous bodily training, aesthetic learnedness, spiritual growth, and earnest devotion, all of Jayanta's attempts are intended to create a new idiom and to bring about a new genre of theatre, namely the theatre of essence. Over the years, his actor training approach has gradually taken shape and is now equipped with concrete guidelines, workable routines, structured practices, and lofty goals. Though an enterprise in the making, Jayanta's theatre of essence is on its path to become a system with a distinct personal signature.

Last but not least, with his vision of a theatre as monastery, his theatre of essence serves as a constant psychophysical regenerative action which is geared for the altered state of consciousness and spiritual blissfulness, and in tune with the

pulsation of life, all in the form of the dance of Shiva and in the spirit of the *maya-lila* world view.

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About the Author

Tsu-Chung Su, PhD in Comparative Literature at the University of Washington, USA, is Professor of English at National Taiwan Normal University. He was President of the Taiwan Shakespeare Association from 2017/07 to 2019/06, President of the ROC English and American Literature Association from 2016/01 to 2017/12, and Vice President of the ROC Comparative Literature Association from 2010/06 to 2012/05. He was a Visiting Scholar at Aberystwyth University from 2012/09 to 2013/08, a Fulbright Scholar at Princeton University from 2007/08 to 2008/01, and a Visiting Scholar at Harvard University from 2002/08 to 2003/01. His areas of teaching and research interest include Nietzsche and his French legacy, theories of hysteria and melancholia, Shakespeare studies, performance studies, religious studies, and dramatic theory and criticism. He is the author of three monographs: *Artaud Event Book* (《亞陶事件簿》) (2018) and *The Anatomy of Hysteria* (2004), *The Writing of the Dionysian: The Dionysian in Modern Critical Theory* (1996). His recent publications include essays on Antonin Artaud, Eugenio Barba, Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, Richard Schechner, Phillip Zarrilli, and others.

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