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Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater (review)

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GAO XINGJIAN AND TRANSCULTURAL CHINESE THEATER. By Sy Ren Quah. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004. 225 + xi pp. Cloth \$48.00.

This book by the Singapore-based playwright and scholar Sy Ren Quah is the first comprehensive study in English of Gao Xingjian, the first Nobel Laureate writing in Chinese. Gao, a versatile artist with French citizenship who has been living in exile in Paris since 1987, has written prolifically in both French and Chinese. But until recently his reputation has been confined within the academic circles acquainted with Chinese literature. However, Gao suddenly became the center of feverish debates about his true politics when he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2000. The aura of the Nobel Prize and Gao's aspiration to world citizenship complicate these debates regarding whether he should be viewed as a French, Chinese, or global author. Quah's study of Gao's theater opens with a brilliant account of the crux of arguments about his identity and interrogates the concept of theatrical interculturalism. *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater* is an important contribution to the fields of transcultural theater and Chinese drama.

As a versatile artist and an exile, Gao possesses multiple artistic and cultural identities. He is known as a novelist, poet, visual artist, playwright, and theater director. Quah's book is a timely contribution to the study of Gao as a playwright and the emerging genre known as Chinese transcultural theater. Quah draws upon interviews with Gao and other theater practitioners and observations of Gao's plays on stage. The book also includes a biography of Gao and in-depth examinations of Gao's representative theater works. Quah's balanced historical and contemporary critical perspectives make his book of particular interest to scholars interested in the contested categories of "transcultural performance," "world theater," and "contemporary Chinese drama."

Readers interested in the theoretical debates about interculturalism and transculturalism will find the introduction thought-provoking. In Quah's view, Gao's hybrid mode of representation has the potential to incorporate "the intercultural," "the intracultural," and "the transcultural" (p. 14). Therefore, Quah chooses to use the more generic term "transculturalism." Here Quah acknowledges yet complicates Indian theater practitioner Rustom Bharucha's critique of the French critic Patrice Pavis' "subtly orientalist," albeit idealistic, concept of transculturalism. Quah points out that the circumstances of modern Chinese theater differ greatly from those of the Indian subcontinent. Gao's theater is not confined to a single area of national or class culture. Quah concludes that "to posit Gao's theater as transcultural is to recognize both the historical genesis of modern Chinese theater [as a theater of appropriation] as well as Gao's indebtedness to that tradition" (p. 14).

Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater brings to light a number of important theoretical issues surrounding the politics and alternative aesthetics of Gao's theater. Quah treats Gao's dramas not as isolated artistic innovations but as a cultural phenomenon in an age of globalization and argues that Gao's pursuit of a "Modern Eastern Theater" is a challenge to orthodox

Western ideologies. As such, Gao's "Omnipotent Theater" is conceived as a new expressive mode that promotes artistic and intellectual freedom for this very private person who brings his life experience to bear upon his art. Quah's view of Gao's work is consistent with response from most critics, including Gilbert Fong, one of the major writers on Gao's *oeuvre*.

Chapters 1 and 2 trace the development of Gao's aesthetic programs side by side with a contextualized, chronological account of Gao's life. Chapter 1 delineates the influence of socialist realism based on Stanislavski's method, a pervasive mode of representation on playwrights in the pre-1980s China. It argues that Gao's spirit of revolt is evident in his early embrace of both the Brechtian tradition and traditional Chinese theater during this time. Chapter 2 traces how Gao emerged as an avant-garde playwright, hailed by many in the West as the first playwright to introduce the Theater of Absurd to a Chinese audience in the 1980s. This chapter examines Gao's early plays, such as *Alarm Signal* and *Bus Stop* in relation to Beckett, and Gao's ideas of multivocality and polyphony.

In chapters 3 and 4, Quah turns to Gao's creation of alternative space, temporality, and voices on stage. He argues that Gao's conception of theater as an intellectual space re-establishes the artistic subjectivity of the playwright, actors, and the audience. *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater* ends with an optimistic picture of transcultural theater and Gao's drama. Quah believes that the coldness and ambiguity of Gao's drama signifies Gao's preference for a peripheral position from which he is free to engage "the problems of humanity" (p. 187) without the burden of such ideologies as nationalism. As Gao's works become central to courses on world literature and drama, Quah's book will be a valuable reading.

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SNOW IN AUGUST. By Gao Xingjian. Translated by Gilbert C. F. Fong. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2003. 83 + xxiv pp. Cloth \$15.00; Paper \$11.00.

Gilbert Fong's lucid translation of the Chinese Nobel Laureate Gao Xingjian's *Snow in August* is a welcome addition to the growing body of Gao's works available in English. Fong has already translated a number of Gao's plays and published them as a collection under the title *The Other Shore: Plays by Gao Xingjian* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1999). *Snow in August* is both readable and suitable for performance. Therefore, like *The Other Shore*, this single play volume lends itself to use in both drama and acting courses. Fong has retained most of the wordplay and puns and has preserved the sudden changes in register and the style of Gao's original Chinese.

Snow in August comes with an informative introduction to the play