

Reflected and Refracted: Metatheatrics in Taiwan

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Several self-reflexive metatheatrical plays have recently appeared on the Postmodern stage in Taipei, Taiwan. This new trend places the evolution of the Taiwan theatre itself on stage in order to scrutinise, mock, explore, and defend the various processes involved in its development. Since the early 1980s, Taipei has been the scene of a new theatre movement now called "little theatre" (xiao juchang) that broke with the realistic theatre that had been the dominant form of spoken theatre on the island. The "little theatre" troupes incorporated aspects of Peking Opera, traditional Taiwanese performing arts, Western texts and drama theories, and avant-garde techniques such as those found in the works of Robert Wilson, Jerzy Grotowski, Ariane Mnouchkine, and Richard Schechner.

Many of these troupes, however, have encountered difficulties in regard to production. Like small troupes everywhere, their financial support is sporadic, and in addition, they face a dearth of both suitable venues and inspired scripts written by local playwrights. Acting students from the three drama departments on the island are more drawn to television work than the stage, and an insufficient number of actors, especially men, are willing to devote the time and effort necessary to develop the skills for stage acting. The audience, too, is much more attuned to film and television than to live performance of a non-traditional sort. Taiwan has no repertory company, and no full-time stage actors of spoken drama. The troupes are comprised of a director and a very small core of cast and crew members. All others needed for a performance are brought in on an ad hoc basis, and therefore many stage productions are somewhat compromised by the time constraints of actors who have other jobs.

Spoken drama, in contrast to the traditional musical drama (often called "opera" in the West), was imported from the West during the early part of this century, and reached China and Taiwan primarily through translations and performances from Japan. While spoken drama was performed in Mandarin on the mainland, its development in Taiwan continued to be heavily influenced by Japan because the Japanese colonized the island from 1895 to 1945. Performances were only in Taiwanese and Japanese, and during the war with China (1937-45),

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the Japanese government strictly regulated the content of the plays and expunged any signs of nationalist sentiment.

In 1949, the Nationalist Chinese regime fled to Taiwan and relocated the capital of the Republic of China to Taipei. It also instituted Mandarin as the language of public discourse and imposed even more stringent censorship. Only in the 1980s with the advent of political, linguistic, and social reforms, did the theatre begin to explore its own artistic potential and its relationship with the new cultural environment. The current metatheatrical productions dramatize this search for appropriate theatrical styles and an identity within the post-industrial society.

The psychological and intellectual quandaries addressed in these productions include the low social status given to stage actors in Chinese society, the external pressures on a theatre practitioner to conform and to succeed monetarily, the difficulty of separating one's stage persona from one's off-stage identity, and the problems involved in adapting foreign texts and performance styles to make them accessible and relevant to a Taiwanese audience. However, the participants of the "little theatre" troupes continue to make use of what opportunities they can, relying on the steady interest in theatre from college-age youth, the occasional government or corporate largess, and their own past achievements that have gradually created a theatrical foundation on which to build. Taipei's first International Drama Festival in 1993 gave many dramatists and spectators their first close hand look at some of the world's greatest theatre companies and has raised dramatists' aspirations as well as audience expectations.

Even so, many of the same inhibiting factors keep recurring to undermine the artistic integrity of theatrical endeavor. Like Pirandello, who made a success out of failure by dramatizing his writer's block in the script of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, several of Taiwan's director/playwrights have taken to staging the problems that beset them in reality, converting obstacles into successful productions.

The 1986 production of Performance Workshop's (Biaoyen gongzuo fang) *Secret Love for the Peach Blossom Spring* (*Anlian taohuayuan*) was the result of Director Lai Shengquan's initial frustration at the lack of rehearsal space.¹ Revived in 1991 and then made into a film in 1992, the play is structured around two troupes competing for the same rehearsal stage. They end up sharing it, alternating their dress rehearsals so that the two plays—a farce and a melodrama—so juxtaposed, provide a commentary on each others' content and performance styles.

The farce is based on a famous Chinese tale, *The Peach Blossom Spring*, about a poor fisherman who discovers a Utopia, and then after leaving it, cannot find it again. In the play, he flees from his nagging wife and her lover, and stumbles on a paradise inhabited by none other than the perfected versions of his

wife and her lover. They live together harmoniously until he decides to return home in the hope of bringing his real wife back with him. But he discovers she has already married her lover and has a child. Now, the fisherman can return to neither place and is excluded from both his former reality and fantasy. The farce is performed in the broad comic style characteristic of traditional Chinese slapstick and modern television comedy but ends on a more serious note by leaving the fisherman contemplating his dilemma.

The melodrama, *Secret Love*, is representative of the many stories about the personal tragedies that occurred to the uprooted mainlanders who fled with Chiang Kai-shek to Taiwan. A young engaged couple on the mainland is separated by the civil war. The man flees to Taiwan and forty years later, ill in the hospital, puts an ad in the newspaper with the hope it might be seen by his former lover. She comes to the hospital only to tell him that all this time, unbeknownst to either of them, she has been living not far from him in Taipei. They have both married local people and raised children, but while the man cannot forget his first love, the woman refuses to indulge in nostalgic sentimentality. The dramatization takes on a poignant twist when the director reveals he has scripted his own unhappy love affair. He perpetually berates the actors for their inability to reproduce the situation exactly as it exists in his memory.

Secret Love for the Peach Blossom Spring intertwines the two types of theatre most popular in Taiwan—the farce and the melodrama. In traditional Chinese theatre it is not unusual to find pathos and burlesque side by side, and even those involved in modern productions often consider a performance a success if it provokes both tears and laughter from the audience. *Secret Love for the Peach Blossom Spring* does both, but at the same time, more sophisticated observers have suggested it also satirizes the exaggeration implicit in these two forms. The broad over-acted gestures and the indulgence in sentiment seem to be targets, although this did not stop the audience from enjoying these very qualities it was accustomed to.

The directors of the two plays continually criticize each others' productions; the director of the melodrama is pained and offended by the coarseness of the farce, while the comedy director is alternately bored and amused by the pathos of melodrama. Yet only by considering them as one whole does one see that through their over-dramatization they parody each other.²

The Performance Workshop has created most of its plays through structured improvisations that are then scripted by Lai. Many of the actors in the troupe are the sons and daughters of displaced mainlanders who originally saw Taiwan as a place of exile. The theme of nostalgia, as well as its antidote of "you can't go home again," is the *modus operandi* of both plays-within-a-play. The production

managed to integrate the cultural roots belonging to Chinese everywhere with a segment of modern history particularly significant in the Taiwanese consciousness.

Lai, however, sees it primarily as a play about theatre, and theatre's ability to temporarily transcend reality and allow both spectators and participants to revisit the past or enter Utopia in a suspended state of illusion. But in the end, when both cast and audience leave, all must deal with whatever disappointments await them outside the theatre.

A production by Godot Theatre (Guotuo juchang) called *Lighting Count Nine, Stand-by* (*Dengguang jiu miao, qing junbei*, 1989)³ also deals with the problem of distinguishing stage reality from the demands of life outside the theatre. Moreover, it reveals the limitations placed on performances when only very young actors are available. Playwright/director Liang Zhimin incorporated much of the conversation he had overheard backstage when directing a student production of *Romeo and Juliet* for his graduation project at the National School for the Arts. Their youth, limited stage experience, and haphazard introduction to Stanislavskian training methods had left the students confused as how to tap into their personal lives to inform their characterizations without losing themselves in the process.

Liang mentioned that while he was writing the play, a rash of suicides committed by young people in public places was being much discussed in the media. He believed that some of these suicides were an extreme form of self-dramatization and the result of an over-idealized sensibility unable to come to grips with reality. He then combined this notion with the theatre's tendency to blur the lines separating reality from fantasy.

Inspired also by the Mickey Rooney-Ursula Andress film *The Manipulator* in which a schizophrenic makeup artist abducts an actress and forces her to act in his movie, Liang wrote about an aging crippled actor, Wang, who abducts a young singer, Guo, in order to compel him to participate in his final enactment of *Romeo and Juliet*. Since Wang can no longer attract an audience, he kidnaps one. Liang mentions that he made the victim a singer rather than an actor, because no stage actor in Taiwan was famous enough to warrant kidnapping!

When the play begins, Wang has already lost himself in the role of Romeo and would rather die as Romeo than outlive the part, but his girlfriend, Lin, who plays Juliet, still struggles between her commitment to the part she must play and her longing for the outside world. However, she has little idea about that world since her imagination is as circumscribed by Juliet's youthful inexperience as the actions of Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are by Shakespeare's text.

The script follows the basic structure of the Shakespearean play but alternates between scenes taken from *Romeo and Juliet*, and Wang's ongoing

monologue about the his dedication to the acting profession. Guo, bound to a chair, is, at first, a captive audience and then, an unwilling participant. The actor playing Wang (all the *dramatis personae* use the actors' real names) had to shift back and forth from his portrayal of the youthful passionate Romeo to the demented older actor. Although Wang acknowledges no reality other than the theatre, age catches up with him and forces him to confront his mortality. The play is an elaborate prelude to his final suicide, but when Lin as Juliet actually kills herself, he is so overwhelmed by the sight of her real blood, he cannot follow through without Guo's assistance.

In that the play focuses on the discrepancy between Wang's age and that of Romeo, it inadvertently brings to light a substantial obstacle in the development of Taiwan theatre—the lack of mature stage actors in the spoken theatre. This is especially true in the "little theatre" companies since the movement itself was a youthful rebellion against the stagnant realism that television had long ago appropriated. Liang Zhimin, like his classmates, was initially attracted to *Romeo and Juliet* because of the poignancy of the lovers' extreme youth. He decided to further dramatize this by having an older actor play Romeo and be caught in the limbo between his actual age and his stage age. The situation of an older actor playing a young character, however, has an established precedent in traditional Chinese theatre. In Peking Opera, for example, a student trains for a particular role that he or she will play throughout his or her career. A boy who learns the young scholar-lover role will continue to perform that part into his fifties or sixties. Knowledgeable spectators delight in the artistry of an older actor portraying a young character. In *Lighting Counting Nine, Please Stand-by*, this convention was reversed by necessity. Because Liang could not find an older actor for the part, a very young actor had to play both the aging actor, Wang, and his youthful alter ego, Romeo.

Most stage actors are in their twenties and only indulge in the performing arts for a few years before they are persuaded by either their parents or the society at large to get serious and find a real job. Young men are especially subject to this kind of pressure. The people who remain associated with the theatre tend to move on to teaching, directing, or playwrighting; very few continue to remain exclusively actors when they reach their thirties, and those that do are tethered to television hack work, the rice bowl of all Taiwan's actors. The characterization of Wang toys with both the traditional convention and the modern reality. Ironically, at the end of the play, the dying Wang tells the captive singer that he is talented, but still too young; his musical performances lack depth because he has not experienced and suffered enough.

The U Theatre's (Yu juchang) production of *The Tiger Approaches the Scholar* (*Laohu jin shi*, 1992)⁴ indirectly addresses the issue of the artist in

society and how she or he must believe in his art in order not to succumb to social pressure to become something else. An artist who deviates not only from mainstream society but from the artistic community as well risks profound alienation. Headed by Liu Jingmin, U Theatre has embarked on a radical course and isolated itself from the urban theatre scene. The troupe premiered *The Tiger Approaches the Scholar* at its outdoor mountain retreat on the outskirts of Taipei where it regularly rehearses.

Taken from a medieval Chinese tale *Moon on the Mountaintop* as retold by Japanese writer Nakajima Ton, the plot concerns a young scholar who gives up his official post to devote all of his time to writing poetry until becoming so poor and eccentric, he is shunned by his family and community. As a result, he turns into a tiger and retreats to the woods. In a chance encounter with a former friend, he explains that his transformation was due in part to society's cruel lack of understanding about the nature of his ambition, but also to his own lack of self-confidence in his literary abilities.

The U Theatre is perhaps the most experimental of all the currently performing troupes; it incorporates styles and techniques from traditional Taiwanese theatre, Chinese martial arts, Noh drama, Grotowski's Poor Theatre, and keeps its distance from all the other troupes which it considers commercial or social rather than truly artistic or cultural. Though it has its avid supporters, others in the Taipei theatre scene criticize it for being too eclectic, ascetic, and arcane. And so, in many respects, *The Tiger Approaches the Scholar* is a presentation of U's own self image as a not well-understood troupe striving to maintain its individual identity and integrity.

The tiger, having explained his predicament to his friend, then begs him to write out poems that he, as a tiger with a human mind, has created but now no longer has the means to write down. The scholar obliges him, and the tiger returns to his lonely existence in the forest. The parallel between the troupe and its play suggests that it is still wrestling with the outcome of its uncompromising nature.

Although all of these performances include some representation of how the various companies perceive themselves as theatrical entities, the play that most directly addresses the state of Taiwan theatre in general is *Shamlet*, (*Shameileite*, 1992), by Li Guoxiu, the playwright/director of Screen Theatre Company (Pingfeng biaooyen ban, commonly known as Pingfeng).⁵ Billed as a "comedy of revenge," the play is a farce similar in structure to Michael Frayn's *Noises Off!* and follows a second-rate troupe on tour performing *Hamlet* around the island. A fan of Mel Brooks, Li also seems to have incorporated some of the sight gags from Brook's film *To Be or Not to Be*. The script is so rife with self-parody that although the performance was a sellout everywhere, perhaps only spectators

familiar with the intrigues of Taiwan theatre itself could fully appreciate the scope of its humor.

Li Guoxiu has been directing and writing for Pingfeng since its inception in 1986. An original member of the Lan Ling Theatre that was responsible for launching the "little theatre" movement in 1980, Li is one of the most popular comic actors and has been dubbed "Taiwan's Moliere" for his clever scripts. He began to write a play about a play but then became so intrigued by the off-stage lives of his actor-characters that he added a third dimension to the script and elaborated on the idea that actors are "the abstract and brief chronicles of the time," mirroring both society and the theatre itself.

The play begins with a curtain call—the end of opening night in Taipei, and then proceeds to a rehearsal of the duel scene (*Hamlet* V.ii.) for the next night's performance in another town. As the troupe travels from city to city, we see different parts of *Hamlet* incompetently performed and rehearsed, while at the same time, the sexual intrigues, social pressures, and career ambitions of the troupe members impinge more and more upon their performances. When one actor is indisposed, another must take over his role, and as they gradually all fall prey to accident or plot, they end up exchanging roles several times over. Finally, the chaos brought on by their squabbles collides with the disastrous conclusion of Shakespeare's tragedy and the performance-within-a-performance collapses in confusion. *Shamlet* is *Hamlet* taken through the Looking Glass; it turns everything upside down and backwards. Unlike *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, *Shamlet* deconstructs the *Hamlet* text to raise social rather than philosophical issues in a metatheatrical context.

To give the audience a clue that what occurs on stage is going to be transparent and self-reflexive, Li Guoxiu inverts the Chinese characters in all the actors' names to create the *dramatis personae*; thus he himself who plays the troupe manager is called Li Xiuguo and the original Pingfeng troupe becomes its comic alter ego—Fengping. Since several members of the *Shamlet* cast are popular singers and television entertainers, by scrambling the actors' names, Li keeps the spectators aware that they are watching their favorite stars. The names of mass media entertainers draw audiences to Pingfeng performances and, without a television screen or camera appearing on stage, *Shamlet*, incorporates the relation between the stage and television. Not only do these performers play caricatures of their real selves as television personalities, but also several of the subplots involve the actor-characters in Fengping striving to leave their unremunerative stage work for the fame and glory of television.

Stage acting as a profession in China has generally suffered from the same anti-theatrical prejudice that has existed in the West. The young actor who is initially cast as Hamlet suffers from a lack of self-confidence because his father

objects to him appearing on stage, thinking it an undignified waste of time. This, as mentioned before, is not an uncommon problem facing male actors. They contend not only with pressures from outside, but also feel undermined internally, unable to dismiss familial and social claims. After the first performance, the young actor languishes in a Hamlet-like moroseness on the sidelines, while all the other actors battle to take over his role.

Li further emphasizes the problem of a working in a "disreputable" profession in a scene in which the troupe manager's wife leaves him for a regular nine-to-five man, his "blood" brother. She expresses her contempt for his obsession with his mediocre company and his inability to provide a stable income. As she leaves, she tosses him a bottle of oil used for removing makeup and tells him to see if he can find himself under all the greasepaint. Most of the spoken theatre troupes in Taiwan are run by husband and wife teams, either director-producer or director-actor collaborations. Li seems to suggest that this is a necessary arrangement since a spouse not involved with the theatre would be intolerant of its demands.

Aside from the pejorative connotations associated with acting, Taiwan stage actors also have to confront their own lack of training and the occasional inadequacies of the technical crew. Much of the humor in *Shamlet* is based on technical and linguistic mishaps. For example, when Hamlet encounters his father's ghost on the ramparts, the ghost at cockcrow tells Hamlet to flee. He repeats this several times before realizing that he is the one who must flee, and then the hoist attached to him that is supposed to allow him to fly off into the firmament does not move, leaving him stranded on stage. The audience holds its breath, not knowing whether the technical failure is intentional or not. Only when it becomes clearly evident that it is, does laughter, tinged with relief, break out.

Because such problems do occur on the Taiwan stage, the audience has become accustomed to less than perfect performances, while at the same time is critical of technical mistakes that disrupt the theatrical illusion. The spectators especially enjoyed this gag which not only makes fun of the incompetence of the troupe but of their own expectations as well.

Mistaken cues, wrong entrances and exits, misplaced props, wrong backdrops, forgotten lines are all exposed, expanded and exploited, for each error requires the cast to improvise within the *Hamlet* context and attempt to carry on. In the last scene, the backdrop of a wooded glen used for the graveyard scene accidentally drops down instead that for the throne room. Gertrude wryly comments that Nature is an appropriate setting for a duel, and the scene continues until a page announces the court is ready for their return and the other backdrop suddenly falls into place. Another time, Hamlet discovers he has no

sword in his scabbard when he wants Horatio to swear on his sword and must borrow one from Horatio. Claudius forgets to put the poison pearl in the goblet and Gertrude dies before it is found.

And, as if making fun of their incompetence were not enough, *Shamlet* mocks the servility of the arts toward their fickle sponsors. When the Players come—the *Shamlet* actors dressed as clownish versions of themselves—they perform a song and dance, slavishly appealing to Hamlet to employ them. They sit on their haunches, panting and grinning like little dogs eager to do his bidding. Li, as the Players' director, even licks Hamlet's feet as they exit. Li plays the scene for its immediate comic effect, but its extensive meaning is one of extreme self-parody.

Accused of being too commercial and selling out to commercial interests, Li is one of the most successful theatre entrepreneurs and has financial backing from the enormous 7-Eleven chain. Advertisements of 7-Eleven products appear in Pingfeng posters and programs, and Pingfeng posters appear in the hundreds of 7-Eleven stores about the island. This close alliance between the troupe and its sponsor is something of an anathema to the more purist troupes, but Li shows he is able to put even this relationship in a humorous perspective.

Where he can, Li uses *Hamlet* as a point of reference for all the subplots but he does not always strive for a clear one-to-one correspondence. The young actor's father who does not want him to "act" is contrasted with Hamlet's father who does want him to "act;" the manager's wife leaving with the manager's mundane friend is an obvious reference to Gertrude's marriage to Claudius; the casting director who plays Claudius is always trying to usurp power from the manager, and casts the television actor in the role of Hamlet in the hope that the move will help him get a television job; the secret love affair between the playboy television actor and the pop singer who plays Gertrude is not only a distortion of Hamlet and Ophelia's love, but an arch twist on Hamlet's Oedipal tendencies; the eavesdropper who listens in on everyone's private conversations is the actor playing the ghost rather than Polonius; and the poor girl playing Ophelia suffers from inconvenient attacks of diarrhea caused by some mysterious poisoning.⁶ Everyone is involved in a plot against the others and all put their personal ambitions and desires before troupe solidarity and the integrity of the performance.

As a consequence of their schemes and additional unforeseen external incidents, the cast shifts roles in every performance. Everyone begins to forget not only his or her lines and cues but even which character he or she is currently playing, and mid-action they lapse back into one of their previous roles.

In the last two scenes, it becomes apparent that *Hamlet* is not only a pre-text for *Shamlet*, but a pretext as well. Just before the final performance in the

southern port town of Gaoxiong, a cast member informs the troupe manager that of Shakespeare's thirty-eight plays, none was called *Shamlet*. A printer's error that substituted the first character of Shakespeare's name "Sha" for the first character of Hamlet's "Ha," has been misleading them the entire time. The beleaguered manager replies that it is too late to change. He invokes Hamlet's line "What is Hecuba to me or I to Hecuba?" to declare his independence from the English playwright. *Hamlet*, he claims, is only an excuse, a pretext for his own drama about the here and now. He asserts, that small-timer though he is, he is more important than Shakespeare because the Elizabethan is dead and he is alive; living people are always more important because they still have potential.

Li Guoxiu satirizes the idolization of the English playwright by exaggerating the inconsistencies in the text such as why some characters can see the ghost while others cannot, and why Gertrude is never allowed to give her reasons for marrying Claudius. He also targets the snob appeal implicit in a Taiwan troupe's decision to perform a Shakespearean play, the epitome of "foreign high culture." By having such a motley group of actors perform *Hamlet*, his alter ego Li Xiuguo must make success out of failure by claiming to be something other than Shakespeare.

Shamlet is uniquely Taiwanese, and therefore reflects not only Taiwanese theatrical conditions, but the society as well. In the final scene, the actors have been shifted from role to role once too often and the whole scene collapses after an absurd attempt to sort every part out fails. All action comes to a halt as the cast stands paralysed unable to resolve the self-made calamity. Finally, the manager steps forward to explain that "all of us have at least two selves but we cannot let one interfere with the work of another." That each member of the cast has selfishly put his or her personal ambitions ahead of the success of the troupe as a whole has resulted not only in the humiliation of the troupe but in personal failures for all of them as well. After his reprimand, the troupe vows to put personal differences aside and cooperate, thus demonstrating the ability of the living to improve upon the mistakes of the dead, whether kings or playwrights. "We will return," shouts the ever hopeful troupe manager as the curtain comes down.

Shamlet is a response both to the pre-eminence of the Elizabethan playwright whose reputation overwhelms the confidence of the young Taiwanese playwright, and to the selfish materialism of contemporary Taiwan society which threatens to subvert the collaboration necessary for theatrical performance. Li Guoxiu, as one of the central figures in Taiwan's Postmodern theatre, has been somewhat frustrated by the lack of cooperation among the various troupes. He started a theatre magazine to serve all practitioners of the theatre but it lasted only three issues because no one contributed the information needed to keep it

going. He is fond of saying "*Taiwan juchang you huodong, meiyou yundong*" (Taiwan theatre has many activities but no movement).

Most of the metatheatrical productions treat the theatre as a microcosm of the society and direct their satire toward both theatre practices in particular and the society in general. However, though they consciously investigate the various problems that beset them, they sometimes also unintentionally verge on self-parody. Thus, the reflection of self and society in the script becomes refracted in performance. A dying exile's tragic realization too broadly acted becomes melodramatic self-parody; a young actor playing an old actor who wants to remain a young lover becomes romantic self-parody; a troupe casting itself in the role of a misunderstood poet-turned-tiger becomes eccentric self-parody; and a playwright who attempts to include all the flaws possible on the Taiwan stage but can only reconcile them with a *deus ex machina* figure delivering a moral message becomes didactic self-parody. No doubt, the future may see such compensatory excesses themselves placed on stage.

Notes

1. Lai Shengquan, *Secret Love of the Peach Blossom Spring (Anlian taohuayuan)*. (Taipei: Crown Publishers, 1986).
2. Liu Guangneng, "Two Peach Blossom Springs: One Mistaken Love" ("Liang chu taohuayuan; i yang cuo lian"), *Con-temporary Monthly (Dangdai zazhi)* (May 1986): 92-96.
3. Unpublished playscript.
4. Unpublished playscript. See Catherine Diamond "The Masking and Unmasking of Yu Theatre," *Asian Theatre Journal* 10, no.1 (Spring 1993): 101-114.
5. Li Guoxiu, *Shamlet (Shameileite)*. (Taipei: Bookman Publishers, 1992).
6. Ji Yuran, "Deconstructing Hamlet: Critiquing Li Guoxiu's *Shamlet*" (Zhijie Hameileite: Ping Li Guoxiu de Shameileite), *Con-temporary Monthly (Dangdai zazhi)* (June 1992): 86-95.



Figure 1: Shaunille Perry as Laura and Doris Williams as Amanda in the 1947 production at Howard University. Photo courtesy of James. W. Butcher.