

Channelling Rubble:

Seven Streams of the River Ota and After Sorrow

James Frieze

Two recent New York productions—Ex Machina's *Seven Streams of the River Ota* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and Ping Chong and Company's *After Sorrow* at La Mama—take death as their point of departure. Fashioning the rubble of tragedies which kill people and obliterate cultures, these pieces confront the challenges that death poses to representation.

The first production of Robert Lepage's aptly named new company, Ex Machina, *Seven Streams of the River Ota*, is a seven-hour group-devised epic. In progress since the early 1990s, *Seven Streams* has been performed at various points in its development. This latest incarnation at BAM deploys a vast repertoire of stagecraft to examine, and at times defy, the limits of the stage.

The fourth and pivotal section, "The Mirror," features Jana Capek, a Czech Jew. Jana is visiting Hiroshima at the invitation of a woman named Ada Weber. A brief conversation ensues as Ada shows Jana to the room where she will stay. The conversation does little to establish their relationship or the reason for Jana's visit. When Ada leaves, Jana looks into the mirrored wall of her bedroom. She begins to flash back to 1943 where, aged eleven, she is befriended by Sarah Weber—Ada's mother—in the Jewish ghetto at Terezin during the Holocaust. During the course of the flashback, the "wall," really a set of panels, opens to reveal another mirror, also sectioned, which subsequently opens onto a third and final set of mirrors. With the aid of lighting from a variety of angles, the three sets of mirrors create a series of images which are intricate and often dazzling.

Because the downstage mirror initially appears to be the back wall of the playing area, the cross-reflective space behind it appears, literally and symbolically, to be a sphere beyond the stage. This impression is intensified by the fragmentary nature of the images cast upon and within the mirror world. The bunk-bed dormitory—a cramped space opened as a chink in the mirrored wall—houses bits of bodies. Legs hang down limply while arms are busy in dismembered activity. It is a horribly foreboding image: these bodies already

James Frieze is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His dissertation is titled *The Articulation of Difference: Staging Identity in the U.S.A., 1986-92*. Mr. Frieze's writing has appeared in *Performing Arts Journal*, *Theatre Journal* and *Theatre Studies*.

look like the remnants that many of them will become. In front of the array of actual and reflected images, the Jana of “now” lies on the ground of memory. Incongruously whole, she is overwhelmed by the fragmentation of her past.

In earlier versions of the play, Jana was a photographer. She shed that role when a new character emerged from the company’s improvisations, an American army photographer named Luke O’Connor. Lepage has said that the atom bomb turned Hiroshima into a piece of photographic paper, bodies imprinted in the earth. *Seven Streams* interrogates the extent to which images capture death and escape it, the extent to which various representational media fix or transform the images which they store. In “Moving Pictures” (Section One, set in 1945), Luke is making a visual record of the damage caused by the bomb in Hiroshima. He carefully plants and re-plants his tripod, taking pictures of the house where a young woman, Nozomi, lives with her mother-in-law. Nozomi insists that she too is damaged, and must be photographed. From a spectatorial perspective, Nozomi’s disfigurement is profound because it is shielded. Never leaving the house, a space of unspoken knowledge, Nozomi is seen only in silhouette and, even then, never frontally. Lepage implies that the house, and Nozomi herself, are more significant measures of genocide than the army’s photographs of facades.

When Luke meets Nozomi, the audience is not invited. Those who read the program in advance know that Luke and Nozomi will have a son together. The play itself, however, studiously avoids naturalism and domesticity, moving rapidly on to other continents, characters and metaphors. In some respects, Lepage’s theatre is highly theatrical, in others anti-theatrical. He enjoys the visceral conflict of perspectives, but finds naturalistic mise-en-scenes inherently unsatisfying:

The perspective in theater tends to be so expansive or wide-ranging that I find it hard to create intimate close-ups, blow-ups of small details, and ways to isolate things, to concentrate fully on them. However, the frame around the theatrical action allows me to create these filmic effects without a huge budget. . . You can position a character downstage, saying such and such, while upstage, behind him, you can position a big icon which is suggesting something altogether different. The frame is a way of putting *everything*—including the fragmented body—into parentheses. (Salter 76)

In *Seven Streams*, the framing of the “theatrical action” is obsessive. Repeatedly, Lepage “isolates” a narrow area of space, putting its contents into “parentheses.”

By setting the contents of a given field of action against elements beyond that field, he establishes a series of dialogues between the solid and the fleeting, the manifest and the mystical.

Spanning the panoramic width of BAM's Majestic Theatre stage is a segmented facade which acts as a projection screen that becomes the proscenium of a Bunraku puppet theater, and (as in "The Mirror") opens to reveal highly theatrical secrets. The downstage half of the space, the area in front of this factory of illusion is totally unfurnished, and is used for more mundane scenes. "The Interview"—the sixth section of the play—takes place in 1995 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing. Jana—who, after the Holocaust, became an angry avant-garde artist—now lives in a Zen monastery. A huge video monitor above the crew (dropped into the facade of the high-tech skene building) displays Jana's face as it is filmed, live and in minute detail. Upstage left, in dim half-light, the interview crew of cameraman, sound recorder, and interviewer Patricia Lapointe appear pathetic as they attempt to image Jana.

Once the conversation has been filmed, the framing of it begins in earnest. To the great amusement of the BAM audience, and the more serene amusement of Jana, Patricia shoots "the questions" and then some "reaction shots." Happily empathetic, she upstages Jana and distorts her answers by re-contextualizing them. Immediately after the shooting is over, Jana turns into the image-maker. Patricia, and her diplomat husband Walter, become the image that Jana makes. High above Jana, in a tiny box of an editing suite, Patricia is crowning the interview: she wants to superimpose the explosion of the atomic bomb onto Jana's skull. While Lepage attempts to establish a dialogue between the frame and the framer, between cultural death and its effect on people's lives, Patricia's superimposition of bomb on skull collapses these distinctions.



Luke O'Connor (Patrick Goyette) and Nozomi Yamashira (Anne-Marie Cadieux) of *Ex Machina* in *Seven Streams of the River Ota* (photo courtesy of Brooklyn Academy of Music).

With a dash of pop psychology, not to mention a plot twist of surreal improbability, Jana applies Zen principles to “cure” Patricia after the latter breaks up with her husband. This scenario is not out of place in a production which, by this point, has become a series of inter-continental, inter-generational convergences on a Dickensian scale. It is death, and the need to memorialize death, that brings people together.

Section Two begins with Jeffrey Yamashita, the son of Luke and Nozomi, moving into a ludicrously over-crowded New York apartment in 1965. Out of the window of the bathroom—in which all of the building’s residents seem to spend most of their time—Jeffrey peeks into the living-room of a dying man and his son. The living-room is Jeffrey’s fascinating “beyond.” When the son angrily charges Jeffrey with spying, Jeffrey explains that he was just watching their television, an ironic reference to the power of images to bring people into the same frame. The old man is Luke O’Connor; the son is his American child, also named Jeffrey. When Luke dies, the two Jeffreys become friends. Ada Weber—the hinge between the first sections of the play and the Jana scenes—is a new tenant who falls in love with Jeffrey O’Connor as she helps him to come to terms with Luke’s death. Section Three, twenty years later, finds Ada in Amsterdam, where Jeffrey O’Connor has asked her to meet him. She presents Jeffrey with a stolen library book containing photographs of Nozomi, the originals having been destroyed by a fire. Jeffrey then reveals to her that he has AIDS, and that his immune system no longer responds to medication. He needs to marry a Dutch citizen so that he can legally choose to die there. As a doctor administers a lethal injection, Jeffrey is “surrounded by the people he loves”—Jeffrey Yamashita and his wife Hanako, and Ada.

What is remarkable about the personal deaths in *Seven Streams* is that they transcend sterility. Rather than dying in a hospital, Jeffrey frames his own death as an assertion of life. The presentation of the stolen book of photographs ties Jeffrey’s death cozily to that of his father, giving it a meaning framed by representation. Even in the chilling circumstances of the Terezin ghetto, Sarah Weber’s death is shrouded in warmth as it is re-enacted in Jana’s imagination. Sarah, an opera singer, tells Jana early in the scene about the role of Madame Butterfly. When she dies, Sarah is dressed in her Butterfly kimono. In Jana’s imaginative re-enactment, Sarah wakes to sing the suicide aria. “You came to me from paradise,” she sings, descending to the ground like an angel. “Look closely at the face of your mother so a trace will remain to you. Look closely. Goodbye my love, good bye; go. Play . . . play.” Having descended, Sarah turns away and retreats upstage. As she does so, three reflected images of her converge, Jana’s face appearing in their midst.

Over dinner in the lobby with other spectators (between the two halves of the production), I reflected that it is art (opera) that allows Jana to resist the loneliness and solemnity of death. Lepage frames both death and his own production as an animating communal event. The use of Madame Butterfly, however, an icon both colonizing and colonized, is one of several elements which, for me, soured the feast. The Madame Butterfly icon and scenario have yielded a series of narratives whose drama is predicated on the self-sacrifice of the woman. Butterfly's death both pays for and redeems the sins of men. James Moy contextualizes Butterfly within the specific history of European and American representations of Asianness. He states that twentieth-century versions of the Butterfly narrative have constituted Asianness as "an object to be looked at . . . pinned to a board with a precisely placed needle through its heart," (84). Is Butterfly deployed ironically, or merely for her inter-cultural, hyper-theatrical flavor? In practice, the question is somewhat moot, the hyper-theatricality overwhelming the irony. Like many a stadium rock concert, the play is so driven by aesthetic set-pieces, by the hyper-life of theatricality, that it provides an intense but strangely vacuous experience. The dinner went down smoothly, but the play too smoothly: its contents felt pre-digested.

The play is fittingly laid to rest with the scattering of Jeffrey Yamashita's ashes into Hiroshima Bay—the place where seven streams flow into the River Ota. *Seven Streams* depicts renaissance grounded in remembrance. The play is like the river: it holds the ashes of the twentieth century's most notorious killings within its whole, further eroding them, channelling and transporting them within its walls of space, time and action.

Like *Seven Streams*, *After Sorrow* transforms the rubble of personal death and cultural devastation with the tools of representation. *After Sorrow (Viet Nam)* (as it is titled in some of the publicity) is the final piece of Ping Chong's *East/West Trilogy*. As Chong sees it, the three pieces form a kind of "pyramid." *Deshima*, the American premiere of which occurred at La Mama in 1993, is the broad base of the pyramid, an epic spanning eras and continents; *Chinoiserie* (part of the BAM Next Wave Festival in 1995), focuses on China's relationship with Britain; and, now, as an apex, comes *After Sorrow*, a personal, anecdotal meditation consisting of four discrete pieces hauntingly scored by Josef Fung. While the pyramid motif captures the overall shape of the trilogy, it belies Chong's ability to elicit spiritual magnitude and historical significance from personal anecdotes. For a quarter of a century, his multi-media performances have fused the intimate and the epic.

Chong's work has often addressed the vulnerability of human beings, their mortality. *Nuit Blanche: A Select View of Earthlings* evokes the cosmic loneliness of humankind. In the allegorical *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Darkness*,

the desire for power and material gain is imaged as a contemporary plague. In a lengthy, bleakly comical danse macabre, skeletons and other representatives of the living dead take over an apartment peopled by yuppie Manhattanites. Warm and affirmative, *After Sorrow* dwells on the resilience of the human spirit. It celebrates the desire to overcome the finality of death and the vicissitudes of life.

After Sorrow takes its name from a book of the same title by an American named Lady Borton, a passage from which is adapted as the final segment of Chong's production. During the Vietnam War, Borton worked for Quaker Service, a humanitarian organization supplying a rehabilitation center in U.S.-backed South Vietnam and sending medical equipment to North Vietnam. Chong dramatizes Borton's visit to a village sixty miles southeast of Hanoi. She is the first foreigner who has been allowed to stay in the village since the War. After an alarmingly enthusiastic welcoming ceremony replete with fruit and gongs, she is en route to be cocooned at the Village Guest House when she is accosted by a woman in her sixties. The woman's only words to her are: "One, two: ba, my!" Borton explains that "'my' means 'beautiful' and, ironically, also 'America.' 'Ba' means 'Mrs.' and also 'woman.'" In defiance of the village authorities, "Mrs. Beautiful" whisks Borton home with her, much to the latter's amazement.

Borton's narration is performed on tape by Louise Smith; dancer Muna Tseng is visually present as Mrs. Beautiful. Upstage left, on a diagonal, is what looks like an altar—a table with orange candle-like lanterns and a black and white photograph of a boy. The rest of the stage is a field of seedling shoots. While Mrs. Beautiful picks the seedlings, the lighting changes to reveal that the shoots are orange and that the coat which Mrs. Beautiful wears is blood red.

The mise-en-scene foreshadows the tale that Mrs. Beautiful eventually relates to her visitor. In a field, Mrs. Beautiful's son found a small orange object. Curious about what it was, he took it home, put it on the table, and went to fetch some friends. The object—a "baby bomb"—fell on the floor, killing four people, including Mrs. Beautiful's son, and wounding five.

Previously cryptic in her utterances, Mrs. Beautiful describes the bomb in a tone that is sensuous and calm: "it bursts into hundreds of darts, like straight pins but with flanges of steel." The visual and metaphorical parallelism between the bomb and the seedlings is striking. The bomb functions for Mrs. Beautiful much as the poisoned crop does: as a symbol of death and a point of departure. The parallel is framed by the fact that Borton's visit coincides with the growth of the first milk fruit since Agent Orange.

Pantheistically live, physical things in *After Sorrow* are sites of joy and of horror, of vivacity and morbidity. "L'histoire Chinoise"—the first of the four sections—is carefully framed to convey the poignancy and resonance of small



Mrs. Beautiful (Muna Tseng) in *After Sorrow* by Ping Chong and Company (photo by Beatriz Schiller provided courtesy of Ping Chong and Company)

details. A nineteenth-century “moderately well to do lady” recounts the day that her father sold her for ninety dollars—ten dollars for each year of her life. The Woman, played by Tseng, details the preparation for the sale with exquisite precision. She describes how her mother braided her hair —with a “familiar crisscrossing” rhythm, but with the telltale addition of a hibiscus blossom—before dressing her in embroidered satin. Her mother cried only after she had served the usual bowl of hot rice porridge, embellished on this occasion with one of the girl’s favorite delicacies: “flaky melon cakes studded with cubes of pork fat.”

Once the stuff of pleasure, the pork-studded melon cakes come to symbolize treachery. Everything that Muna Tseng touches is miked, including the large palm-thatched fan that she carries, and the drum stool on which she sits. Tseng’s back is to the audience as the narrative begins on tape. On the line introducing the mother’s role in the preparations, Tseng spins around to face front. The stool appears to rotate of its own volition, as if organically connected to both the Woman and the stage floor. At various times, in a gesture without apparent effort, Tseng snaps the fan. It is as if there is a biotic connection of the Woman to the physical props, and of the environment depicted in the narrative to the architecture of representation. Tseng’s performative restoration of the Woman’s story seems to bring to life both the remembered events and the instruments of remembrance.

“98.6: A Convergence in 15 Minutes” is a dance solo performed by Tseng. Throughout this (third) phase of the production, the following words are verbally and visually reiterated: “The things they share/The full mystery of an other.” A succession of slides displays these words in different sizes, colors, typefaces and locations within the frame of the projection screen. Chong’s transient hieroglyphics dramatize the charging of the verbal and visual signs of performance with spirit.

“98.6” interweaves autobiographical anecdotes told live by Tseng and on tape by Chong. Tseng’s narrative culminates with the death of her brother from AIDS, Chong’s with the death of his grandmother at her eighty-first birthday party. While “L’histoire Chinoise” and “After Sorrow” depict loss and separation, “98.6” celebrates the ability of art to bring people together in spite of literal absence:

She is here this very evening
before your very eyes, dancing.
He is here too as an after glow,

a digital hop, skip and jump,
 a voice in a room tapping
 against the thin membrane of
 your collective eardrum.

The sensual liveness of Chong's grandmother is reinforced by the fact that she appears to have orchestrated her own death. Having planned the party a year in advance, she "falls asleep" at the dinner table surrounded by her children. In Tseng's case, the vivacity of her brother is fortified by a particular abiding memory of him. In 1978, her brother decided to become a "cultural ambassador to China." Turning himself into a "conceptual work of art," he put on a "classic Mao suit and had his picture taken in it, all over the world." When his parents visit, they take him to an exclusive restaurant called "Windows on the World" at the World Trade Center. He wears the Mao suit, the only one he owns, and is treated "like a VIP, a gentleman from the East, an emissary from Cathay." His parents are not amused. "We escaped from China because of this," they murmur. "How could you do this to us?" Associated for Muna Tseng's parents with the violation of humanity, the suit, through her brother's performance, effects respect. The wearing of the suit is a trope of animation, and of reversal. The irony of the reversal is deepened by the transcendently scopic name "Windows on the World," and by the restaurant's location at the World Trade Center, a citadel of capitalism.

After Sorrow is itself animated by tropes of animation. While there is no through-line of plot and character between the four sections, a kind of continuity emerges out of life forces sounding through inanimate objects. In Chong's world, as in Lepage's, media seem able to embody and sign systems are always in flux. Signs, bombs, and technology are instruments of war and of art. They can enliven and can kill, can build community or can flatter to deceive.

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Works Cited

- Borton, Lady. *After Sorrow: An American Among the Vietnamese*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1996.
- Chong, Ping. *After Sorrow*. Ping Chong and Company in collaboration with Muna Tseng Dance Projects. La Mama Experimental Theatre Club. January 31—February 15, 1997.
- _____. "Foreword," *East/West Trilogy*. (Unpublished manuscript), 1997.

- Ex Machina. *Seven Streams of the River Ota*. Directed by Robert Lepage. Brooklyn Academy of Music, Majestic Theater, December 7, 1996.
- Moy, James. *Marginal Sights*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993.
- Salter, Denis. "Borderlines: An Interview with Robert Lepage and Le Theatre Repere," *Theater*, Spring 1993, p. 76.