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Another Midsummer Night's Dream in Ho Chi Minh City

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This report details the activities of the Ho Chi Minh City theatre company North-East-West-South (NEWS), cofounded and codirected by the author, noting the adaptation of Shakespeare to a Vietnamese milieu.

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In the 2009 North-East-West-South (NEWS) production of *Another Midsummer Night's Dream* in Ho Chi Minh City, Bottom is turned into a monkey, not an ass (Plate 8). The Vietnamese traditional opera *hát bội* play *Tiet Dinh San Begs Phan Le Hue* (*Tiết Dinh San cầu Phan Lê Huệ*) replaces the rude mechanicals' play *Pyramus and Thisbe*. Projections of trees from a park in Ho Chi Minh City spin to create the magical forest, while actors themselves play other shrubs. Oberon asks where "Athens" is, and Puck responds, "The [Ho Chi Minh] City." Stripping the plot down to its essence, the all-Vietnamese cast improvised their Vietnamese Shakespeare to tell Shakespeare's story through *hát bội* movement, Vietnamese pop and folk song, and comedic acting (*hài*) of the southern region.

In 2007, Cliff Moustache, artistic director of Nordic Black Theatre from Oslo, and I co-founded NEWS, an intercultural performance group in Ho Chi Minh City composed of Vietnamese professional actors in contemporary drama, theatre students, members of the Ho

Chi Minh City Hát Bội Theatre (Nhà Hát Nghệ Thuật Hát Bội), and artists from Norway and the United States. Named by a Vietnamese member who emphasized the global dimension of our group in the title North-East-West-South, NEWS works to create a global language of performance and to build strategies for intercultural collaboration.

As one of the main sponsors of NEWS, Nordic Black Theatre was officially founded as an independent theatre company in Norway in 1991. It is today the only floating theatre in the city of Oslo, with its ship MS *Innvik* anchored at the port of Oslo a little more than a hundred meters from the Opera House of Oslo. Nordic Black Theatre runs a theatre school called Nordic Black Xpress, founded in 1993 “to serve the local community by recruiting ethnic minority youths in the field of art and culture.” In 1997, Nordic Black Theatre launched a free theatre school, running once a week, for children ages eight to eleven and twelve to fifteen whose parents could not afford to pay for theatre education for their children. Working as one of Norway’s only “multicultural” theater companies, Nordic Black Theatre, according to Moustache (2010), seeks

1. To stimulate and create work in local arenas, with professional actors of international background.
2. To establish trans-cultural expressions in the field of theatre in Norway.
3. To share cultural experiences among artists from other respective theatres and countries.
4. To extend the educational opportunity of our artists through exposure to other artistic resources, both human and material.

Nordic Black Theatre also seeks to increase equality of access in theatre education and the arts inside and outside of Norway: “We have today contributed to many new faces in the fields of film, dance, theatre, TV and radio. These fields were earlier invisible in recruiting ethnic minority actors.” The theatre fortifies the connection between the “local community and the artist” as a means of using art as public service and to develop “new audiences” from culturally diverse backgrounds.

NEWS formed from the serendipity of intercultural work in Vietnam. During my dissertation fieldwork from October 2006 through July 2007, I was in Hanoi at the nationally funded International Festival of Theatre in December 2006, where I met Moustache, who presented his play *Afro-Euro*. Born in Saigon, I immigrated to San Diego, California, with my family in 1985, at the age of six. After receiving my BA and MA in Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities from Stanford University,

I entered the graduate program in Performance Studies at UC Berkeley, where I conducted fieldwork in Vietnam funded by Fulbright-Hays Dissertation Research Abroad and UC Pacific-Rim Research Program Fellowships. My dissertation and current book project consider the political efficacy of the melodramatic mode in constructing national identity during colonialism, socialist development, and neoliberalism in twentieth-century Vietnam. My postdoctoral research also investigates the political efficacy and shifting meanings of melodrama across the Vietnamese diaspora. Before my work in Vietnam I was involved in directing such plays as Wakako Yamauchi's *I2-I-A* and Michael Golamco's *Achievers* at Stanford University, and Samuel Beckett's *Rockaby* and *Come and Go*, and the Junction Avenue Theater's *Tooth and Nail* at UC Berkeley. I was especially interested in exploring strategies for formal experimentation and devising theatre in global settings.

Born in the Seychelles Islands, Moustache was educated at Poole College of Arts and Landowne Arts in Dorset, England. In addition to being the artistic director of Nordic Black Theatre, he has directed in Russia, Poland, and Norway, his country of residence. Moustache describes his work as a combination of "street performance, music-dance-drama, and improvisation." He worked with Peter Brooks and borrows freely from techniques and ideas of Michael Chekov, Augusto Boal, Konstantin Stanislavsky, street performance (which he has done for years), and South and West African dance. Moustache's recent directing credits include a rap music adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, with music from Prokofiev performed by the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra at the Oslo Concert Hall, and a theatrical adaptation of the 1972 Jamaican cult film *The Harder They Come*, directed by Perry Henzel.

At the festival both Moustache and I were deeply touched by Vietnamese theatre, especially traditional forms such as *hát bội* that were losing audience support. We met extraordinary and well-trained actors from the Ho Chi Minh City Hát Bội Theatre, one of only ten professional troupes of *hát bội* still active in Vietnam, and one of the few theatre groups still operating under state funding after the implementation of market reforms with the Sixth Party Congress in 1986 (Turley and Selden 1993; Arkadie and Mallon 2003). With market reform and the policy of privatization declared in the 90/CP Decision for "Socialisation"¹ in 1997 (Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, n.d., "Vietnam Cultural Policy"), national theatres have dramatically lost funding from the state and have been since left to mobilize funding from private sectors and audiences to support artistic production (see Stock 2003: 219–220; Diamond 1997: 372). At the same time, the state has nevertheless maintained its tight censorship of the political content and aesthetic

form of performing arts production (fieldnotes November 2006). The 1998 Resolution 5 of the Party Central Committee countered what the state perceived as a dilution and contamination of traditional culture after market reform by calling on citizens to “build and develop a progressive Vietnamese culture imbued with national identity,” stressing the return to traditional values and the active preservation of the “important intangible heritage” of traditional performing arts (Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, n.d., “Vietnam Cultural Policy”). Following the 1998 Resolution, with Decision 5652/QĐ-UB, the Hát Bội Theatre Troupe (Đoàn Nghệ Thuật Hát Bội), first formed in 1977, officially became the Ho Chi Minh City Hát Bội Theatre in May 2001. As a national theatre under state funding, managed by playwright Anh Kiệt, the group aims to organize the research of *hát bội*, to “preserve the development of the national tradition,” organize domestic and international artistic exchanges and performances of *hát bội*, increase professionalization, meet and develop audiences’ demands for *hát bội* performance, develop pedagogy and training, and increase the “quality of political and organizational knowledge and expertise for directors, performers, and managers of the theater” (Hội chợ quảng cáo trên internet, n.d.). Regularly, members travel to communal houses, temples, and community theatres to perform ceremonies in local areas such as Cu Chi, Hố Môn, and Cần Giờ, and District 12. The company often performs in traditional festivals such as the Vietnamese New Year or Mid-Autumn Festivals, and arts festivals such as the National Theatre Festival, the International Theatre Festival, and Festival Hue.

One of the most innovative productions by this group in the recent years was the production of *Sanh Vi Tưống, Tử Vi Thần* (Serving the General in Life, Serving the People in Death), written by Hữu Danh and directed by Trần Ngọc Giàu. This 1997 *hát bội* production, according to the theatre, explored ways of experimenting with *hát bội* and supposedly aimed at serving a foreign audience. The production included no dialogue and no singing, both central components of *hát bội*, and instead relied primarily on music, lighting, and conventions of movement from *hát bội* to create an intricately timed and choreographed performance. Though the 1997 winter and spring performances received a fair amount of praise and attention from the press for creating “new life” in its versatile integrations of music, lighting, and *hát bội* movement, the production did not draw dramatically larger audiences to watch *hát bội*, and at the same time created controversy over how much *hát bội* could change and what constituted authentic *hát bội*. As reviewer Hoàng Hoài Sơn points out, People’s Artist of *hát bội* Đinh Bằng Phi praised this experiment but hesitated to call it *hát bội*. As a lecturer at the Ho Chi Minh College of Film expressed, “In

hát bội there are many melodies and if we only use movement, lighting, and sound to present the form to foreigners, can they fully recognize it for what it is?" (Hoàng Hoài Sơn 2007). Director Trần Ngọc Giàu responded to these criticisms by explaining: "Lately viewers have been struggling to identify with *hát bội* partly because of its [sino-based] dialogue. At the same time, the trend of international modern theatre, for example spoken drama, has been to simplify itself, decrease dialogue, and increase physical movement. This work is a well-meaning attempt to simplify and modernize *hát bội* for foreign and domestic audiences to rediscover [*hát bội*]" (Hoàng Hoài Sơn 2007). While the production gained enough attention to be invited to perform as part of the 2008 National Festival of Experimental Theatre in Hanoi, it received no awards during the festival. The director told me that it faced much criticism for its deviations from *hát bội* (fieldnotes March 2009). This debate pointed to the challenges of *hát bội* contemporary performance in balancing touristic and nationalist demands to perform authenticity while struggling to innovate itself and meet the needs of audiences. Such conflicts explain why a Distinguished Artist of *hát bội* in the theatre told me that often she experienced "self-pity" (*tử thân*) in her hard work of learning to perfect the traditional form, facing dwindling audiences, and receiving low pay (fieldnotes December 2006). At a parade at the Fairy Waterfall Amusement Park (Suối Tiên) that the group invited me to, I was astonished to see *hát bội* performers of the group march between circus animals and give performances of both *hát bội* and of themselves as *hát bội* performers to domestic and foreign audiences (fieldnotes July 2007).

The talent, skill, and dedication of *hát bội* performers and the innovation of productions such as *Serving the General in Life, Serving the People in Death* left deep impressions with me and Moustache. Interested in exploring potentials of collaboration and experimentation, Moustache returned to Vietnam to work with me to run free theatre workshops on physical theater with students at the College of Theatre and Film in Ho Chi Minh City in March and November 2007, which culminated in a workshop performance of *Journey to Identity* in November 2007. Our objective in our work was to open up avenues of exchange in artistic practice among international artists and to explore methods of collaborating and devising theatre that empowered each artist to become an active creator. We were inspired to create an ongoing group after we saw the positive effect of our group in increasing opportunities of theatre education and exchange in Vietnam. We created NEWS to facilitate greater consistency of membership and group development for long-term projects. As our work developed, we made connections that helped us begin to work with the Ho Chi Minh City Hát Bội

Theatre to continue to extend the kinds of innovations that they had explored with *hát bội*.

NEWS was founded in June 2008 during preparations for the performance of our first full-length play *Journey and Destination*. The group is currently composed of ten Vietnamese students and graduates of the College of Theatre and Film in Ho Chi Minh City; four professional spoken drama and traditional theatre actors; eight professional members from the Ho Chi Minh City Hát Bội Theatre; Vietnamese translator and administrator Cao Minh Phương; Vietnamese American writer, playwright, and director Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc; and Cliff Moustache and I as artistic directors. NEWS Nordic Black Theatre for its productions of *Journey and Destination* (2008) and *Another Midsummer Night's Dream* (2009), and has collaborated in these productions with the Institute of Cultural Exchange with France (IDECAF) based in Ho Chi Minh City, the Ho Chi Minh City Hát Bội Theatre, and the College of Theatre and Film in Ho Chi Minh City. Funding from the Norwegian embassy and Nordic Black Theatre has provided travel and housing expenses for non-Vietnamese members, and per diems for the translator and Vietnam-based actors in the troupe during workshops, rehearsals, and performances. As of today, our group is unregistered within Vietnam as an officially state-recognized institution. We considered registering as a club (*câu lạc bộ*) under the sponsorship of the Ho Chi Minh City Hát Bội Theatre. To get status as a club, we needed the sponsorship of a state-recognized company; such status would give us official recognition with the state and allow us to undergo censor-previews to receive official performance permits required before all public performances. However, so far the paperwork has yet to come through, making us unable to undergo censorship previews to official performance permits. Rather we must perform under the name of an existing state-recognized group or under the display of an educational workshop.

Before *Another Midsummer Night's Dream*, the group's major work, *Journey and Destination*, was performed at the famous city IDECAF Theatre from 29 to 30 June 2008, officially as a workshop performance at the end of a theatre class for (and sponsored by) the Ho Chi Minh City Hát Bội Theatre. It explored questions linking identity to migration by working with actors to create performances based on their personal stories of travel from their hometowns to Ho Chi Minh City for study, work, and/or marriage. Working collaboratively, each participant created biographical short works using his own life experiences and dance, music, and conventions from theatrical forms such as *hát bội* and *cải lương* in his or her training. The group explored such ques-

tions as: What is identity? What is my identity? How does my identity relate to my community? Is identity static or mobile? What is identity's relationship to place, to "home"? Through exercises in improvisation and play development, the troupe tied their stories together to create a performance portraying the process of identity making as a journey of struggle and discovery—from countryside to city, from birth to old age, and from naiveté to artistic expression. The end result was an explosive performance that created a "collage" of the performers' different stories merging into one story of identity and migration.

Choosing *Another Midsummer Night's Dream*, we saw that the themes of "freedom of love," parental authority, and individual freedom fit concerns in contemporary Vietnamese literature and society as traditional values and global youth culture confront one another. Shakespeare was also a means to explore the convergence of East and West. Shakespeare performance had been becoming increasingly global because of not only its entwinement with colonial and postcolonial history (see Worthen 2003: 123–124) but also the potential ways that it can be reread and restaged for resistant purposes. Cliff and I aimed to see how Western theatre techniques and Vietnamese theatre forms such as *hát bội* could innovate one another. We wanted to increase visibility of deeply rich but out-of-fashion forms such as *hát bội* and offer opportunities to Vietnamese, Vietnamese American, and Norwegian students and professionals to experience creating theatre across cultural and linguistic lines.

***Hát Bội* and Shakespeare in Vietnam**

Neither *hát bội* nor Shakespeare have the attention of the Vietnamese contemporary audience. To understand our production, it is important to explain first the situation of this genre that forms a foundation of our performance, and next the perception of the English author in the country.

Also known as *tuồng*, *hát bội* was a court entertainment that originated in the thirteenth century. The nascent form of *hát bội* existed in Vietnam before Trần Hưng Đạo defeated Mongolian invaders and captured the Chinese actor Lý Nguyên Cát, a performer of the Chinese opera genre *zaju*. Lý Nguyên Cát was taken to the Đại Việt court in Ha Noi in 1285, where he was known to have taught the techniques of *zaju* to help develop the form of court entertainment. To Trần Văn Khải, *hát bội* was unique because Vietnamese artists knew how to innovate Chinese movement and form with content and rhythms from Vietnam to "create a way of singing unique to Vietnam" (Trần Văn Khải 1970: 9). According to Duane Huach, Đào Duy Từ (1572–1634), an official advi-

sor to the Nguyễn princes, was one of the main figures to bring *hát bội* south to Phú Xuân (Huế). Đào Duy Từ developed *hát nam*, or southern songs, from songs of the Cham people mixed with Vietnamese lyrics (Huach 1972: 13–14). In the eighteenth century, performances of *hát bội* featured actors using makeup and stage costumes, performing in the open air rather than proscenium stages. Emperor Minh Mạng particularly pushed the development of *hát bội* by bringing in Chinese actors from Guangzhou to the Hue court theatre to introduce techniques of Cantonese opera. The form reached its apex under the patronage of King Tự Đức (1847–1883), who supported performers and built two theatres for *hát bội* performance. During this time, playwright-poet-director Đào Tấn is credited with developing more than forty plays for *hát bội*, making the form popular among the common people by organizing public performances in Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi, Phú Yên, and Bình Định (Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, n.d., “Classical Theatre”). By 1945, *hát bội*, written in Sino-Vietnamese script, which few audiences could understand, was losing its popular audience to *aii lương*, which partly grew out of forms of renovated *hát bội*.

As the Vietnamese Communist Party following the models of Russian and Chinese Marxism adopted socialist realism, outlined in Trường Chinh’s 1943 “Thesis on Culture,” as a cultural policy for nation building from the First Indochina War (1946–1954), traditional forms such as *hát bội* were criticized for degenerate formalism and inability to “address modern life” (Phan et al. 2001: 617–618). More recently the party has reversed its position and moved to reclaim, preserve, and develop the traditional arts in policies such as the 1998 Resolution Five of the Eighth Party Congress, titled “Building and Developing a Progressive Vietnamese Culture Rich in National Character.” Under this policy, selected *hát bội* groups are under the supervision of and receive limited funding from the government to perform Vietnamese culture and national identity. As a result, the ability of *hát bội* to innovate itself is limited by its stature as a national protected art that must stay authentic to its historically “set” form.

Respondents (predominantly students and some tradesmen and professionals) to a survey I gave identified Shakespeare as a famous seventeenth-century British playwright.² One enthusiastic cast member wrote of the “giant” playwright: “After the chance of reading his plays and acting out scenes from his plays, I have really respected him and think he is extraordinary; his plays reach deep into the spirit and mind of human beings.” Audience members often associated his plays with “tragedy” (some were surprised about the comedic nature of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*), “romance,” and stories exploring human conditions and social problems such as “filial piety.” Shakespeare is part of

the core literature and theatre curriculum in Vietnamese high schools and higher education. Most theatre students expressed familiarity with his works and were exposed to Shakespearean monologues in acting training. Respondents named plays they associated with Shakespeare, predominantly *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*. Popular culture was also a source of Shakespeare knowledge: respondents mentioned Baz Luhrmann's film *Romeo + Juliet* and John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love*. However, because of the dense nature of Vietnamese Shakespeare translations and the tendency to perform Shakespeare in a "classical" and "Western" manner (i.e., formal presentational acting, period dress, etc.), Shakespeare is still predominantly inaccessible in the Vietnamese mainstream. Respondents expressed intrigue for Shakespeare's "creative," "interesting," and "surprising" works and "poetic language," but also articulated the plays' "confusing," "formal," "poetic," and distant nature. According to Vietnamese-American director Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc, Shakespeare is not the "Nguyễn Du"³ of Vietnam; rather Shakespeare is done in Vietnam by foreign directors, because he is their "Nguyễn Du" (2009).

The actors in our ensemble did not seem overly conscious of the authority of Shakespeare; rather Shakespeare was another qualified Western playwright. However, Shakespeare did seem to call forth a proper stateliness. Watching student performances of *Othello* and *Macbeth* as part of student directors' exams at the College of Theatre and Film, I was struck by how rigid the performance was and how distant the actors were behind big European costumes and exalted word choices of the translated texts. This mode of presenting Shakespeare is expected; an audience member of our performance wrote in her survey of her desire to see a more "original" (*chính thống*) version of Shakespeare than we shared. A conceptualization of a "proper" and "original" way of doing Shakespeare also surfaced in the cast: Actors pointed out that our play was nothing like the "Shakespeare" they knew. Although Shakespeare is not the "Nguyễn Du" of Vietnam, the playwright marks an imaginary of a Western "other" for these contemporary actors, students, and audience members. For theatre students at the College of Theatre and Film, Shakespeare was a Western "other" world they emulated in their performance, and at the same time, something they aspired to make unique with their own creative ingenuity. To play Shakespeare and make him one's own was empowering and transforming for the actors in our ensemble.

Contemporary Intercultural Theater in Vietnam

Since the 1990s, Vietnamese theatre involving collaborations between Vietnamese and foreign artists has begun to experiment in a

terrain of government-censored theatre. Recently the performance of plays such as the Youth Theatre's *Tragedy of Macbeth* in 2002 and *A Doll's House* in 2008 have facilitated Vietnam's participation in world festivals on Shakespeare and Ibsen, respectively. Performance collaborations between foreign artists and Vietnamese companies or directors have increased in the last decade. In 2000 Lorelle Browning, an English professor at Pacific University in Oregon and founder of Vietnamese-American Theater Exchange (VATE) with Ford Foundation support, produced bilingual productions of Tennessee Williams's *A Glass Menagerie* and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, codirected by Doãn Hoàng Giang (chairman of the Arts Council of the Stage Artists' Association) and Allen Nause (Oregon Artists Repertory Theatre). American filmmaker Tom Weidlinger's documentary about the VATE Shakespeare production (*A Dream in Hanoi*, 2002) details the conflicts in the intercultural process, dramatizing American participants' claims of greater authority to interpret "Shakespeare." As NEWS formed in 2007, a Vietnamese-language production of Tennessee Williams's *Summer and Smoke* (*Mùa Hè Và Khói*) was directed by David Chapman, an American professional director and Luce fellow. It was performed by his students at the College of Theatre and Film in May of that year, under the sponsorship of the Asia Foundation and the Henry Luce Foundation. *Sand Castle* (2006) and *Antigone Vietnam* (2008) were written and directed by Frenchman Alain Destandau with funding from French and Vietnamese sources. Both projects are joint productions of the Central Tuong Theatre and France's Monte-Charge Theatre and featured Vietnamese *hát bội* and French mask drama.

Theatre with intercultural personnel has had mixed success within the strict theatre censorship in Vietnam. An "artistic committee" (*hội đồng nghệ thuật*) composed of local ministry of culture members, members from the Commission on Ideology and Culture, and members of the Stage Artists' Association previews all plays in a formal examination (*phúc khảo*) before they are issued a permit for public performance under edicts against works that "violate the law," works that are "reactionary" (antinationalist, antisocialist, or arouse sentiments against the party and government), or works that are "degenerate" (considered promiscuous or obscene) (Commission of Ideology and Culture 1990). The Ministry of Culture controls the permit's life span, and has been known to revoke the permit in the middle of a performance's run, or right before the play debuts, without clear explanation (fieldnotes).

In 2001 *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Nguyễn Đình Thi, Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc, and British director Robert Chamberlain, used a Boal-inspired "forum theatre" model to make audience members think

about the play in relationship to issues faced by youths in contemporary Vietnamese society. The play began with actors playing vagabond youths, holding signs showing reasons why they became runaways, and responding to audience members who could walk up and talk to them. As a producer recalls, Robert Chamberlain's original idea was to make the actors act as prisoners, but she suggested the role of runaways to avoid censorship. At key moments in the play, such as Mercutio's and Romeo's deaths, actors asked audience members whether they would allow the characters to die and how they would prevent the characters' deaths. At the end of the play, the cast presented audience members with a questionnaire with the questions, "What difficulties are youths facing today? Can the difficulties be overcome? If so, how?" (Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc 2009). Probably because of the "forum theatre" model and concerns about how the play's interactivity would provoke the audience, the directors were unable to acquire a permit for public performance from the censor committee. Instead, the play was allowed to be performed only in a pedagogical setting at the College of Theatre and Film and the University of Literature and Society, since works in educational institutions do not require formal examination by the "artistic committee," but are at the discretion of the institution officials.

In 2006 an adaptation of Friedrich Durrenmatt's *The Visit*, titled *The Millionaire Visits Home* (*Bà Tỷ Phú Về Quê*), was directed by Swiss director Rudolph Straub and performed by the Vietnam Dramatic Theatre (*Nhà Hát Kịch Việt Nam*) with the sponsorship of the Hanoi Goethe Institute. Phạm Thị Hoài's pointed adaptation of the betrayal of human values to capitalism placed in a Vietnamese setting was rejected by the Ministry of Culture and Information, and a more conservative Lê Chu Cầu translation was allowed instead. The questions the play opened about the economic, social, and political state of the country, the return of affluent past citizens, and ethical corruption in *đổi mới* ("renovation," i.e., post-1986) Vietnam caused controversy. The play ran only once in Ho Chi Minh City and once in Hanoi, despite significant investment by a state-funded theatre company.

Such roadblocks reveal the semi-official status of experimental intercultural theatre in Vietnam. Aware of this situation, NEWS used the status as a group working in a pedagogical environment to allow a limited means of performing, first at the school and then in public, but merely as a display of an educational workshop.⁴ Intercultural theatre in Vietnam raises questions about the ethics of intercultural representation among parties of different levels of power and access to international and local cultural, financial, and institutional resources. Such productions also arouse anxieties of the Vietnamese censors and the-

atre management toward content and formal features pushing boundaries of socialist realist contemporary theater.

Methods of Interculturalism

By calling our work “*Another*,” Moustache and I stressed the uniqueness of this ensemble’s interpretation of Shakespeare. As codirectors, we were available only for a limited time, so we had only an intensive two-week rehearsal period. We cast people based on commitment to the project and background in theatre. Moustache spoke English and I used a mixture of Vietnamese and English as we coached the ensemble of actors (some of whom spoke some English) with the help of a translator, Cao Minh Phương.

Rather than choosing a Vietnamese translation of Shakespeare’s poetic but complicated language, we reduced the text to a few important pieces of dialogue that captured abstract ideas, action, and movement. Improvised dialogue filled in the rest. We started with a script that was composed of the story that followed the story of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, but one that tried to capture the complexity of the ideas in the play by making crystal clear the actions and spatial and temporal shifts of the play. We did this because we believed that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in particular was a powerful play with ideas that resounded in the setting, plot elements, and shifts of time and space in the play as much as it did in the dialogue. We also wanted to see how the members of the cast would creatively tell the story and believed that freeing cast members from lengthy translated dialogue would help them use alternative modes of performance—such as movement, dance, and music—to tell the story in their own way. Due to the short rehearsal period, we relied on actors to come up with much of the performance, from movement to dialogue to costumes. As we pieced the “story” together each day, actors would bring in their movements, speeches, dialogues, musical instruments, and costumes to contribute to the performance. Working with a small budget, the actors even created costumes themselves, altering traditional and casual clothes they already had, selecting jewelry and accessories, and crafting their own grass skirts for the “woods” (see Figure 1).

As directors we focused on the physicality of our actors. Our daily exercises strengthened actors’ bodies and heightened their sensual awareness. Games revolving around rhythm, music, and movement helped actors’ concentration, physicality, and response to their surroundings. Theatre games facilitated intercultural connection and helped members overcome linguistic and cultural boundaries. The ensemble played games that demanded they communicate nonverbally. Using African dance and music, for example, we worked on drumming



FIGURE 1. Titania's "changeling boy" (Phạm Khải Thư, fourth from left) in the woods (Võ Kiều Oanh, Nguyễn Thị Thu Lai, Nhan Toàn, Cao Thi Phong). (Photo: Phạm Đăng Quỳnh)

and keeping rhythm, alternating songs or rhythms slowly by responding to each other's transitions, or passing melodies and rhythms to one another. Another example of team-building exercises we often did was to stand in a circle and pass an invisible object that we cherish to the person next to us; with great concentration we would hear each other's breaths and receive each other's invisible gifts, tied together by an invisible line of electricity. Viola Spolin's games, such as Mirror and Dodge Ball, formed the core concepts of our improvisational and team-building exercises to help with skills of self-awareness, collaboration, and creativity. Taking these concepts, we developed other improvisational games, as well as played popular Vietnamese games such as Û (name for a sound), *Cướp cờ* (Capture the Flag), *Lồng chim* (The Nest), *Mèo đuổi chuột* (Cat Chases Mouse), and *Trồng chuối* (Growing Bananas).⁵

These exercises helped us shift into unified physical, creative, and spontaneous communication. A member of the ensemble in the Hat Boi Theatre Company wrote:

Our way of working binds and unites each person to form a “block” so that we can connect and improve. It demands that you and others concentrate and constantly be willing to assist someone else when working. A brief loss of concentration of one individual can ruin it all. . . . I learned how to keep rhythm, vocalize, and harmonize. Every person is necessary. If anyone is missing, the atmosphere of work will be compromised. We would find it very difficult to connect.⁶

One cast member in *Another Midsummer Night's Dream* wrote, “This way of working . . . helped free me from inertia in my life . . . it made me stronger.” He felt that physical work boosted his “creative energy” and “confidence,” gave him “ideas for his roles,” led to his discovery of his own weaknesses, and a realization that he needed to discover more about art to enrich himself.⁷

This mode of working outside of a rigid “script” was new to our Vietnamese actors of both traditional and spoken drama.⁸ Actors were both extremely intrigued by this creative process and made anxious by it.⁹ The process put the cast at a more egalitarian level with the directors than they had experienced. We asked them what they wanted to do and the script was written through their improvisation. We iterated many times, “This is *your* performance”; “This is *your* way of telling the story.” Normal divides in the actor pool did not apply as much: There were two “Excellent Artists” in our cast, as artists of national stature receive distinctions from the government, such as “Excellent Artist” (*nghệ sĩ ưu tú*), or most elite, “People’s Artist” (*nghệ sĩ nhân dân*). Here these two important artists worked within the ensemble as equal members, even

if they had more experience and training. Rather, experienced artists played crucial roles in mentoring younger actors. Several people commented that on the program and in the casting, the actors were treated as members in an ensemble rather than “stars.”¹⁰

In our performance, the stage could be transformed into any time or space via the concept of *ước lệ* (convention) in *hát bội*. Our “poor” stage, accompanied with a projection of images, was an open space transformed by the actors’ actions and interactions with the audience. Since the projector was placed downstage a little above the height of the stage, actors walking onstage would block the projection and become a “screen” for the projection itself. Another concept came from *hát chầu*, which were performances by *hát bội* actors at communal houses or temples for ceremonies and religious holidays. In recent performances of *hát chầu*, experienced actors would show their creativity in *ứng tác*, or improvisation, merging and synthesizing movements, characters, and dramatic situations from different classical plays to improvise a brand new drama. Improvising in *hát chầu* can be done only by the most experienced *hát bội* performers who have the classical repertoire so ingrained in their bodies that they can fluidly shift from one citation to the next in response to other actors and the evolving story. According to *cải lương* performer and historian Nguyễn Phương (2010), this improvisation in *hát chầu* represents a degradation of the quality of *hát chầu* performance because it means actors no longer have the capacity to perform full plays, as they had in the past, and must combine only excerpts of plays they are still capable of performing. To others, it requires a versatility in *hát bội* that allows for fluid improvisation.

As in *hát chầu* improvisation, the workshop process involved NEWS actors’ ability to reach into their artistic and personal experiences synthesizing movements and situations as sources to enrich their performance. Actress Ngọc Dung, a distinguished *hát bội* performer trained since the age of five, used such *hát bội* plays as *Hồ Nguyệt Cô Transforms to a Fox* (*Hồ Nguyệt Cô Hoá Cáo*) to devise movements for Bottom.¹¹ Ngọc Dung used the transformation of an animal into human and back to play Bottom’s transformation. Thus her performance is a multitextured and multitextual one converging Shakespeare with the story of *Hồ Nguyệt Cô Hoá Cáo* via *Đổ* movement. Another actor, Nguyễn Hoàn, drew on portrayals of fantastical monks in plays such as *Tiết Đĩnh San Begs Phan Le Hue* (*Tiết Đĩnh San cầu Phan Lê Huệ*) to portray Puck. The lover’s quarrel, misrecognition, and final reunion from *Tiết Đĩnh San Begs Phan Le Hue* replaced “Pyramus and Thisbe” as the rude-mechanical’s performance, allowing audiences to see a parody of a *hát bội* scene. The dramatic and performance texts from *hát bội* interwove

with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to create multiple times and fictional spaces of imagination.

While experienced *hát bội* performers used movements from *hát bội* to create their role, young performers relied on southern Vietnamese comedic form *hài* to emphasize the absurd character of love in Shakespeare's play. Actors playing Lysander, Helena, and Demetrius, trained in *hát bội* and *cải lương* opera styles, opted not to use a psychological-based representation of the struggles of love. Instead they exaggerated the comedic and absurd elements. When Lysander enters the woods declaring "I love you" and chases Helena about the stage singing a contemporary pop song, she, dressed in a glittery short red dress, turns and says, "Mother, are you crazy?" The actors relied on vernacular language and a "country" accent popular in southern comedy to increase the hilarity, using variously pop music, a folk song, and a classical poem by Hàn Mặc Tử, a twentieth-century poet. The humor rose from the unexpected juxtaposition of material from different times and places.

For an audience accustomed to a formal and temporally situated Shakespeare, these citations caused surprised laughter. Identifying the "postmodern mixing" in the production, journalist Nguyễn Vinh asserts that the actors' irreverence to Shakespeare using "low" southern comedy allows a means through which the "absurd dreams" in Vietnamese contemporary life become displayed (2009). The use of *hài* in our play locates southern comedy as one particular form of performance in contemporary Vietnamese mainstream theatre, which allows room for nonlinearity, absurdity, anachronism, direct reference to audience, and a generally flexible attitude in the name of "fun" for aesthetic transgression. These formal characteristics of *hài* (comedy) push the boundaries of contemporary (socialist) realism and melodrama that dominate Vietnamese contemporary theater.

Audience Response and Potentials of Shakespeare in Vietnam

Reactions to a survey I gave to viewers revealed that audiences, composed of college students (primarily) as well as professionals, theatre practitioners, and members of the working class, found the play "funny," "pleasurable," "enjoyable." They felt drawn by the suspenseful, interactive show that they found hard to predict. Many found the show filled with "surprise." One pointed out that juxtapositions of cultural and aesthetic elements punctuated the humor of the performance. They described it as "unusual" and "interesting." Actors were praised for working well together, connecting with the audience, and performing with energy. According to one graduate from the directing

program at the College of Theatre and Film in Ho Chi Minh City, the success of the play was its “atmosphere.” “After seeing it I feel love for everyone,” said another audience member. The audience also reacted to the different juxtapositions and mixings in the play: “There were lots of mixing of genres—quick, active, juxtapositions of scenes, energy in the acting.” Many communicated how much the performance “broke boundaries” (*phá cách*). The play was “experimental,” “revolutionary,” and “pushed the envelope” (*đột phá*).

A majority pointed out that the play was “very Vietnamese” and that the production made a complicated play “close” to the people in Vietnam: “[The play is] deserving of praise for bringing Shakespeare close to the Vietnamese people”; “Because of your mixing of West and East you have brought it closer to me.” The play showed one member that “The content of Shakespeare’s play is really deep, and Vietnamese theater is excellent.” Others mentioned that the use of *hát bội* movements gave them greater appreciation of the beauty of Vietnamese theatre and the versatility of *hát bội* actors (see Figure 2). The element of *hài* comedy particularly made the play very “Vietnamese.”

Viewers also noted that they were challenged during the performance of *Another Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The interactive style and the genre mixing of the play surprised audience members deeply. Some were used to clearly demarcated genre divisions. Some thought the mixture of styles and cultures seemed “fitting,” while others believed that they did not mix. Some audience members also revealed a conviction that theatre should upkeep moral values and demonstrate “good” language (something our improvised performance did not always do). Audience members wanted more attention to keeping Shakespeare’s “literariness even if it’s an adaptation,” and one said the quality of the language used by the actors was not high, pointing to a curse word that was used, as well as the southern vernacular used by the cast. Some also pointed to Helena’s sexy red dress as risqué. An audience member commented: “The play affected the beauty, purity, and innocence of [Vietnamese people] deeply. It makes Vietnamese people a comedy for others. It is cheap.” There is also a frequent assumption that “good” theatre was a “rich” theatre with a lot of stage props, designed sets, and costumes. While some believed that more investment in props, costumes, and sets would enhance the attractiveness of the show, one noticed that the show demonstrated that a “simple” stage composed of lighting and projection can be effective. Several noted that while they were intrigued with our performance, they yearned for a more “classical,” “Western style” Shakespeare that was *chính thống* (original).

Audience reactions show that our performance, which mixed performance styles, types of dress, times, places, and cultural texts,



FIGURE 2. Theseus (Cao Thành Danh) and Hippolyta (Lê Thị Kim Phượng) wore traditional dress in the play's opening scene localizing the performance. (Photo: Phạm Đăng Quỳnh)

was considered highly “unusual” compared to more typical realist performances in the city that were more linear and coherent, particular in time and place, constant in genre, and predictable in its coding of moral and political values. This had not always been the case, however. The southern “reformed opera” *cải lương* that originated in the first two decades of the twentieth century during French colonialism was an eclectic mix of renovated *hát bội*, Vietnamese chamber music (*nhạc tài tử*), dramatic singing called *ca ra bộ*, Western chamber music, Western spoken drama, and narratives from Chinese, French, and Vietnamese

sources. According to folklorists like Huỳnh Ngọc Trang, such a spirit of syncretic mixing had always been part of the rich identity of the south that had historically converged international cultures (Taylor 2003: 147). As my dissertation details, *cải lương*'s highly affective and syncretic form had, through the First and Second Indochina Wars and the postwar, conflicted with the Vietnamese Communist Party's socialist realist and nation-building policies that perceived *cải lương*'s raw emotions and formal hybridity as threatening in its generation of multiplicity of meanings and connections to a history of colonialism. The intertextuality of this postmodern intercultural Shakespeare reveals potentials in which Shakespeare can be made to act by indexing other syncretic traditions that have had resistant potential in Vietnam.

While critics such as Rustom Bharucha question the "ethics of representation" in intercultural theater in which the divestment of culture from its original place and content dissolves local culture into a global economy of Western, universalist performance (1993: 33), the intertextual and intercultural fragmentation of "original" local forms in this performance, generated by artists themselves, provides a new framework of viewing Vietnamese culture outside of official nationalist constructs. The ability to see Vietnamese culture "in fragments" and as a series of citations invites audience members to sense echoes of past sensations and memories in their experience; several audience members commented that the play was "very Vietnamese": "Only the names of the characters were 'Western,' and everything else was Vietnamese." At the same time viewers could reject this hybrid: Some refuted that it was "true to Shakespeare," or that the performance of Vietnamese culture on the stage was authentic or precise. In being able to ask whether the performance was "true to Shakespeare" or "true to Vietnam or *hát bội*," audience members are able to consider the performative nature of their national identity—momentarily, in between genre and normative and political boundaries. Multiple converging texts in Shakespeare, *hát bội*, and *hài* create possibilities to defamiliarize notions of "original" Shakespeare, authentic *hát bội*, and southern identity to allow "unusual" and varying imaginaries of Vietnamese national identity, too often denied, to audiences of contemporary performance.

NOTES

1. The 90/CP Decision of 1997 of "Socialisation" (*xã hội hóa*) of Education, Health, and Culture Activities, according to the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, called on the "Party Committee, the National Assembly, People's Committees, state agencies, mass organisations, economic institutions, businesses active in localities and indeed every Vietnamese citizen to join

together in mobilising resources for the ‘socialisation’ of education, culture and health. In this context, the aim of ‘socialisation’ is to optimise the value of existing government subsidy through the more efficient mobilisation of arts management manpower, and to diversify sources of financial support for artistic creativity—somewhat akin to ‘privatisation’ in other countries” (Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, n.d., “Vietnam Cultural Policy”).

2. Given at the end of the performance of *Another Midsummer Night’s Dream* at the College of Theatre and Film on 29 March 2009, my survey asked: “Before seeing this play, what was your impression of Shakespeare and his plays?” “Did our production change your opinion of Shakespeare and his plays?” The forty-four respondents (predominantly aged twenty to forty) were predominantly students, as well as theater practitioners, professionals and members of the working class. All quotes are from these surveys.

3. Nguyễn Du is the author of *The Tale of Kieu*, a long narrative poem known as a masterpiece of Vietnamese literature and an exceptional example of *chữ nôm*, or southern Vietnamese script.

4. We performed mainly at the College of Theatre and Film. Our performance at the IDECAF Theatre was considered a “presentational performance” at the end of a “physical theatre course” to allow public performance. Officials at the College of Theatre and Film, still considered holding an official censor preview for our performance because our production “involved foreigners,” but decided instead to bypass the censor preview by considering it an “educational” performance of the institution.

5. According to Cao Minh Phuong, in Û, there are two teams. A person making the “uuuu” sound tries to tag a person of the opposite team while having constantly to make the “uuuu” sound. The winning team tags all members of the opposite team. In Capture the Flag, there are two opposite teams, with a member from each team assigned to one number. When the referee calls a number, players from opposite teams must compete to capture the flag without being tagged by the opposing player. In Nest, some players are nests; others are birds. Whenever the referee gives the signal, each bird has to fly to another nest, and a player is out when he fails to find a nest. In Cat Chases Mouse, all players hold hands to form a circle, raising their arms to form “doorways.” The cat chases the mouse around the circle and through the doors. If the cat catches the mouse, he loses. In Growing Bananas, players use arms and legs to create “trees” for players to jump over, aiming to form trees tall enough to prevent others from successfully crossing.

6. A member of the ensemble, from actors’ responses to the author’s questionnaire, 30 March 2009.

7. A member of the ensemble, from actors’ responses to the author’s questionnaire, 30 March 2009.

8. In recent years, the censorship process has shifted from required preview of both script and performance to a preview of performance only for the issue of a performance permit. Yet playscripts still have to be formalized and refined to undergo selection by the “artistic committee” within the national theatres even to begin the process of funding productions. In order

to receive a performance permit, performance not based on a clear script, like ours, would be required to submit a script as part of the official censor preview.

9. One of the senior actors in the Hát Bội Theater Company would pull me aside often at the end of rehearsal to ask me to write down carefully her lines on a piece of paper (lines we improvised in rehearsal or wrote as the production developed), which she kept closely in her possession. It seemed that getting them down on paper really quelled her anxiety about the “openness” of the process, since she was accustomed to learning very precise movements, song, and dialogue as they were passed on from previous generations in *hát bội*. She would respond to my questions about what she wanted to do in the performance with “whatever Director Cliff wants.” At the same time, she got more and more accustomed to creating her own performances, especially when she could use one script with another creatively. When she decided that Bottom would transform into a monkey in our performance, being able to use the script of movements she learned in *hát bội* for her performance of Bottom seemed tremendously liberating to her. She embodied the monkey on her own through amazing versatility and experience, and from there asked us very few questions.

10. Currently, theatre in Ho Chi Minh City draws audiences through “stars.” These popular, distinguished performers would have their names emphasized in programs and announcements. Our production listed all cast members in alphabetical order and cast actors based on a member’s fit for a certain role rather than on his/her status as performer or ability to draw an audience.

11. A character in the *chèo* and *hát bội* classical play *Hồ Nguyệt Cô Hoá Cáo*, Hồ Nguyệt Cô is a weasel that had meditated and practiced for hundreds of years to transform into a beautiful woman with many talents and magical powers. As a woman, Hồ Nguyệt Cô marries Võ Tam Tư, a marshall of the queen Võ Tắc Thiên. But when she meets General Tiết Giao and falls in love with him, he deceives her into giving up a magic gem, and as a result turns back into an animal.

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