

# The Tea Cup and the Oscar

For absolutely a few brief seconds in the middle of *'Exotic Animal'*, far from the principle segment of the show, the performer Ming Poon bursts into screeching manic laughter. It was a crack in the dam. To me, this slash of laughter that rang through the silence at the English Theatre Berlin represented the tremendous tension and contradictory pulls that the foreign body of the artist – our “exotic animal” – wades through.



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“Please! Please can you help me? Do you have any ideas? What should I do?!”, choreographer Ming Poon’s eyes skim through the audience. His expression is earnest in its request, urgency chases his voice and his body gestures towards fidgety nervousness. The clock on the wall behind Poon is counting down. There isn’t much time!

By this point in *‘Exotic Animal’*, Poon has won the audience’s empathy and support. The scene is set for an important dance audition with high stress and competition. Success in this audition could temporarily secure his financial situation and visa status. By making us confidantes to his insecurities and vulnerabilities in this process, he subsumes us in his mission. We root for him and want him to get the gig! So when the jury at the audition asks Poon to do something from his own country or do “something more Chinese”, he looks to the audience for help. “What do I do to be more Chinese?” Beginning with a trickle and with some trepidation, but soon with a flood of confidence and laughter, the choreographic suggestions pour in

“Tai Chi!”

“Quigong”

“Balance a tea cup on your palm as you move it in a Tai Chi-inspired eight-shaped arc”

“Play a Harp” {imitating a tune}

“noodles! – make noodles, become a noodle”

“What would Chairman Mao do? Wave, Wave at the people”

“Say a Chinese word”

“Do some Kung Fu moves like Jackie Chan!”

“Bruce Lee”

“BOM BOM BOM {mimicking of Gong like drum-sounds}”

“Do the Asian squat and shit out dumplings”

“Dragon dance on Chinese New Year”



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Poon responds to the suggestions swiftly – he becomes a moulding clay that simultaneously asks the audience questions about visual, aural, sonic and textural qualities to sharpen their suggestions. Through his urgent questions, he ekes out the details. He adapts and embellishes his movements according to the audience members' answers. What size is the tea cup? How heavy is it? What is the expression on the dragon's face? Can you suggest a Chinese word? What action would Chairman Mao actually do?

In driving towards these specifications, Poon also delivers the audience to the stereotypical references we hold with respect to the term “Chinese”. While the references aren’t always verbalised, they are silently realized in our minds. Even if one remains silent and doesn’t shout out a suggestion towards Poon, we stand exposed to oneself.



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The choreographer displays an extraordinary ability to read, mould and navigate the audience in a live performance. He lays bare his “game” from the very beginning – distinguishing the audience from the safe online spectators of previous showings of *‘Exotic Animal’* – and thereby pushes those present to test the edges of a certain safe bubble. The poised political correctness of the group appears to perform a delicate dance with how each person participates in this collaborative choreographic performance. Through humour, through Poon’s act of vulnerability and “failure” at various levels, the many responses and coping mechanisms become apparent. In this manner, *‘Exotic Animal’* opens up the many audiences within the audience, each coming from varied experiences and perspectives – as White, BIPOC and Asian persons with diverse histories.

Hailing from Singapore and of Chinese ethnicity, Poon comes from an amalgamation of cultures. Biographical instances experienced by him and many others inform *‘Exotic Animal’* – reflecting moments when artists are expected openly or indirectly to perform a culture. In this case, for instance, the rich pluralism of cultures of a single land are fused, flattened, confused and homogenized with a generic Asian identity.

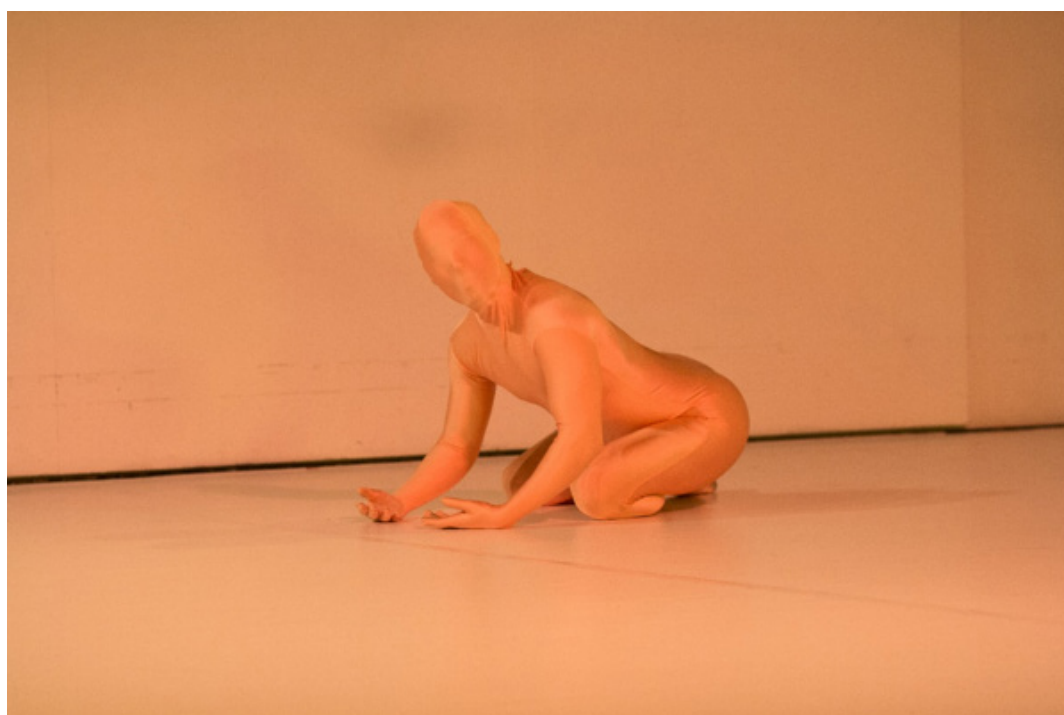
Through the audition scenario, *'Exotic Animal'* addresses the effects of exoticization particularly when practiced in systems of unequal power relations. Distinct from outright racism, exoticization and well-meaning curiosities about the "other" are often reductive. The European art economy with its diversity and inclusion policies is still largely experienced to be tokenistic by those who it wishes to include. And when diversity is merely a consumable commodity, the idea of the exotic becomes the shallow currency. Unfortunately, what is not displayed in this profit-loss balance sheet of cultural policies is the artistic intellect that is lost.



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Towards the end of the performance, Poon returns to the stage in a pale leotard that stretches across his entire body, including his face. The bright yellow that tinged his previous costume has now seeped onto the walls and we see him as a muscled monochromatic human figure without any defined facial features. In a quiet movement score, Poon performs a reduced version of the "Chinese" solo that had been collaboratively created moments earlier. The postures he holds sometimes remind me of Hellenic marble statues or an Avengers character. Someone comments later that the figure reminded them of the Oscar award's iconic statue. I am struck by this diversity in perspectives that this faceless figure afforded, in comparison to the Chinese references that come up earlier in the show.

When Poon demands details about the tea cup particularly with respect to its Chinese qualities, most audience members are likely to have a vague imagination regarding its size, design, ornamentation etc. In comparison, the faceless being enjoys the freedom to be anyone.



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*'Exotic Animal'* is experienced as an alive and ongoing conflict to create a collaborative dance performance, reflective of the multi-layered tension within the creative ecology. There is indeed the quest to pursue curiosity – an individual's independent artistic curiosity, the curiosity about other persons and cultures, and curiosity about fellow audience members, among others. It acknowledges the funding box-ticking, the self-doubt, the camaraderie and negotiation of power. And finally, there is hope. Hope that the so-called exotic artist, our "exotic animal", is not reduced to a one-trick pony.

*'Exotic Animal'* was performed at the English Theatre Berlin in front of a live audience on 16 and 17 December 2022. This text written by Parvathi Ramanathan is commissioned by the artist.