

Performance Review

The Politics of Compassion in Theatre and the Economics of Emotions: *Alladeen* at the 2004 Melbourne International Arts Festival

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Part of the 2004 Melbourne International Arts Festival program, *Alladeen* was a theatrical performance about workers who have become performers in early twenty-first century global corporate culture.[1] It depicts how some North American telecommunications call-centres now operate out of Bangalore, India. A joint project created by New York's The Builders Association and London's motiroti, it juxtaposed live performance, filmed documentary footage and computer-generated multimedia effects in scenarios about fused national identity and linguistic dexterity. A reference to the story of Aladdin and the magic of a wish-fulfilling genie was suggestive of Edward Said's analysis of Western culture imagining the East through its production of 'orientalism'. But *Alladeen's* artistic significance belongs within the politics of the present, highlighting the impasse of global capitalism, as its technology brings diverse worlds closer together while reinforcing cultural hegemony.

One of the strongest elements of *Alladeen* was a documentary of interviews with call-centre workers who appear as a group of educated, articulate young Indians with the cleverness to assume a North American accent and persona at will. Some demonstrate skills that rival those of an accomplished theatre actor and, clearly, actors and theatre artists are also workers in a global economy, as

international festivals demonstrate. Indians have a distinctive culture although English is widely spoken—a legacy of colonialism and regional rivalries after independence. Twentieth-century Indian class politics aside, the prevalence of English makes India attractive to corporate enterprises from English-speaking countries wishing to relocate to countries in which they can pay cheaper wages. At present India remains an autonomous social and artistic culture without the kind of wholesale television and cinema penetration from the USA experienced, for example, in Australia. Indians, generally, do have to learn about American popular culture and lifestyle in a way that Australians, who have been exposed daily to American accents from childhood, do not. *Alladeen* finds humour in having to teach Indians about the sitcom *Friends*, and about baseball and other well-known practices.

Several questions arise from how workplace performances blur into theatrical performances in *Alladeen*. What is the economic currency of these performances? What did the documentary footage reveal that the fictional scenario could not; and where can this theatrical production be located within a wider politic that confronts an impersonal global corporate culture? (Would New Delhi-based Arjun Raina's production on call-centres, *A Terrible Beauty is Born*, which played at American university venues in October 2004 receive the same attention from international arts festival directors?)
(<http://www.arjunraina.com/index.htm>)

The filmed call-centre workers dwarfed the live actors on stage, who were initially hard to see, literally because the large close-up images of heads and shoulders on a stage-length rectangular screen towered above them, and because these offered an intimate view of the workers. In the Melbourne venue, the reconstituted call-centre with live actors in a line across the stage at computer terminals with head-phones, seemed more remote, because their facial expression was comparatively less visible. In the scenarios presented by the actors, an Indian woman struggled to become American and was threatened with the sack, while the central character of Joey tried to entice her to go out with him.

The disembodied voices of North Americans on the other end of telephones became the source of wry humor, with quirky requests and revelations of weird behaviour. Drug-taking Americans tried to book airline tickets, and Joey tried to sell an American man extra services from his telephone company. Both the live performers and the call-centre workers came across as heroic in response to these American clowns. At the beginning and end of *Alladeen*, sophisticated linguists switched effortlessly between languages as they walked the streets of New York and London, and seemed completely atypical of their respective nation's populations. These multi-linguists are the worker-inhabitants of the twenty-first century moving between crowded cities across the globe.

Alladeen was indicative of political theatre of the present that does not attempt to deliver overarching message or polemic. Instead, there was the quiet

desperation of a female actor-worker, as she revealed how her willingness to do call-centre work came from her absorption of 'the American dream' in which 'anyone-can-make-good', expanded to include Silicon Valley's absorption of computer-industry workers from India in the 1990s. Work in such call-centres reveals that technology's promise of immediate gratification with instant communication, if not mobility, does not apply to everyone. America beckons and seduces with its promise of inclusion to global workers, but it cannot deliver. And who is there to confront about this latest cultural imperialism that colonises wants and desires? Other workers? *Alladeen* shows the void at the heart of globalisation, that in a globalised economy there are no villages, no community and no people. Joey moves from his call-centre work in India to become a salesman in London. (Who takes his call-centre job in this cheap-skate globalism? A less-educated worker?)

In Australia, it is difficult to find any consistent viewpoints for this present time in the range of theatre productions concerned with larger political issues. Artistic representations of the problems facing disenfranchised groups do not convey the impression that structural change is imminent and, on the contrary, imply that utopian ideals of improving the world through political upheaval have been left behind. Political theatre seems to have absorbed twentieth-century lessons in which socialist grand plans for worker-led governments failed to deliver on their promises. Post-September 11, the greater cause of making revolution propelled by a self-sacrificing revolutionary vanguard on behalf of the powerless masses, now has a historical twist; religious fundamentalism has usurped neo-Marxist tactics. In theatre, fragmentary idealism coalesces around inclusiveness and championing the rights of disaffected people to be represented, and ideally, as and by themselves. The only consistent aim in current political theatre would seem to be to get others to listen attentively, respectfully and compassionately, a purpose evident also in *Alladeen*, and which gives this quintessentially post-dramatic work a core of idealism.

Recent new productions in Australia can be typified by their politics of compassion. The numerous productions about the plight of asylum seekers imprisoned under Government policy range from documenting the experiences of asylum-seekers to fictionalised versions of events.[2] It would seem that the theatre-maker as activist functions like a social worker or psychologist, so is the social outcome merely therapeutic, and for whom? Across Australian culture, the political activist has been reborn in the twenty-first century as a lobbyist (who must also be a fundraiser) within the framework of the current strategy to compel so-called democratic governments to rectify injustice. As with most kinds of political lobbying, the consequences of this theatre work are, at best, very uneven.

Nonetheless, theatre and other arts are ideal media for a politics of compassion. Who better to understand stories intended to elicit empathy from listeners than theatre-makers? Actors work with the cultural languages of emotion since their

professional purpose is to elicit emotional responses, albeit with artificially induced ones, that potentially also condition emotional responses in the broader culture. There is a consummate type of 'emotion work' of the kind which Arlie Hochschild first identified in the USA's service industry of airline work where sales are dependent on customers being welcomed and reassured.[3] By any cultural measure, emotion work is, of course, gendered.

In addressing the questions posed by *Alladeen*, the production itself is a superb example of emotional subtlety. But its substance is also about the economic production of selective emotions within global service and sale industries. There is an expectation that service industries in the early twenty-first century will deliver cheerfulness, politeness and the requisite charm through brightly engaging small talk based on American precedents. Possibly a globally understood sales tactic, emotional engagement is nonetheless culturally-specific. Sales people telephoning potential customers in North America must gain their attention in a sociable exchange. When Indian call-centre workers learn how to work in another culture they are also learning how to do economic transactions in the emotions of that culture. They must learn not only the words but the voice intonations that convey emotional meanings. *Friends* is not just a leading American sitcom, it contains an emotional typography that Indian workers need to acquire for communication; they must leave a phone customer feeling good about him or herself during and at the end of the 'show'.

Documentary footage may be an effective medium to enable people to speak for themselves, and *Alladeen* was not alone in its use of documentary footage at the 2004 Melbourne International Arts Festival. The live performance *Sandakan Threnody*, with music by Jonathan Mills and directed by Singapore's Ong Keng Sen, used projections of filmed interviews with the adult children of a World War Two Australian prisoner of war and a Japanese commander. Interestingly, these were the most emotionally-charged segments of that production. In a variant, David Hare's *Via Dolorosa*, an autobiographical performance, delivered a spoken-word documentary of his visit to Israel. In unravelling his preconceptions, he quotes extensively from the Jewish and Palestinian people he met. Hare's approach has echoes of the clever mimicry of black-American Anna Deveare Smith's solo performances, in which she performs the thirty-plus people that she interviewed across race and gender. Also in the 2004 Festival was the installation *The Diary Project*, in which Roberta Bosetti and Renato Cuocolo read from and enacted a daily diary of their personal life written earlier in the year, while living for three weeks in a Victorian Arts Centre studio reconstructed as their home. In the explorations of contemporary performance, at least, the distinctions between living and performing have been collapsed for some years.

In a global economy where the currency of emotions is now transacted through workplaces using telecommunications, perhaps the fictionalised emotions of theatre no longer resonate with the impact that they once had. Workplace emotions are artificial, because workers in information high-tech industries are

required to perform their friendliness and convey a warm interest in other people throughout their working hours. The performance of selective emotions is a workplace norm.

Alladeen finished with male and female characters going into a karaoke bar, a space where customers could sing emotively to recorded music or dance with a machine. The live characters talked on their mobile phones as if it was much easier to make disembodied emotional connections using technology even in their leisure time.

Alladeen also suggested a larger point about the economics of emotions. The computer-generated imagery that dominated the stage and the live performance produced a visually dynamic aesthetic. It did not disturb or arouse antagonism and, instead, it lulled the spectator into an appreciative attentiveness with its visual sensuousness. The undulating emotionality delivered by *Alladeen's* screen imagery can be said to have had an enticing but soothing emotional impact that reiterates how electronic music and visual entertainments operate globally, captivating and capturing spectator sensibilities (if not also colonising). Is there also a warning about how such all-powerful audio and visual technologies can induce passivity and inertia in delivering their mesmerising emotional experiences? Screen images and sound that placate and nullify might also foil concerted resistance to the economic manipulation of emotions in a global context.

Endnotes

[1] Viewed at the Playhouse, Melbourne International Festival, 7 October 2004. Directed by Marianne Weems of The Builders Association and designed by Keith Khan of motiroti and Ali Zaidi.

[2] For example, Geoffrey Milne. 'Drama through the Wire', paper presented at the Australasian Drama Studies Conference, Victoria University of New Zealand, Wellington, 30 June 2004, lists 20 productions since 2001.

[3] Arlie Russell Hochschild *The Managed Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).