

Drawing Fire

**THE JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
FOR FINE ART EDUCATION**

Vol. 2 No. 2 Winter 1998

ISSN 1358-0973

The Performance of Ethnicity and Sexuality

HOW TO survive as an Asian Drag Queen and live to tell the tale

The definition of performance according to Marvin Carlson includes a reference to the performative element of movement in social situations.¹ A connection is made between performance in everyday life, including gatherings, to behaviour during sports and rituals, as well as play and person to person body language interaction. Ted Polhemus describes how the Masai tribe's physical movements may be regarded as a social signifier of ethnicity by referring to their posture and gait as specifically performative.² This information in itself may seem obvious but is often neglected in discussions of the sociology of ethnicity or in choreological studies.³ I am interested in performance in this context both as a practising artist and as a cultural critic. In this paper I discuss the use of performance in my theatre and film work and how its use signifies a specific ethnicity, politics and sexuality; in other words how to be an Asian drag queen.

When this paper was originally presented at the 'Articulating Emotions, Performing Passions' seminar I began my presentation by dancing in full white Kathak⁴ costume with dancing bells on my ankles. The dance was originally conceived as part of a monologue, *Paki Boy*, which I had performed at the Oval House Theatre in 1996. The piece was originally contextualised as a dream duet with a video projection of a female Kathak dancer, and the whole sequence lasted about five minutes.⁵ The main point in the inclusion of this sequence was to demonstrate the inner reality of the dancer (myself) against the background of my own outwardly British Asian identity. The sequence was as much a representation of the emotional release dancing provided for him, just as it did in his youth. Even though he was dancing at Indian weddings to earn money, he relished it. The use of performance to represent British Asian identity in this context is important to my own experience of becoming aware of my Asianness and my growing interest in dance as a creative device.

This dance extract from *Paki Boy* is a performative and visual representation of a British Asian identity that incorporates issues of sexuality and gender, subjects which hold deep personal significance, and I began working on these themes when I realised that I could not see my own experience of living in Britain represented in the mainstream media. My own position within the society that I inhabit is denied, silenced or simply not discussed in the press and broadcasting services. When there is a mention of minority groups or of subcultures, it is usually as a mat-

ter of negatively labelling them.⁶ This symbolic annihilation reinforces the marginalisation of minority groups in society.

The importance of media representations is that they position people's subjectivities and audiences then make identifications with those positions. The theoretical intersections of postmodernist, poststructuralist and postcolonialist critiques of identity have had a profound influence on my work. What all these theories have in common is their assault on the concept of a unified core identity that is supposed by the Cartesian notion of 'I think therefore I am'. All these theories reject this basic concept, which is also the foundation of a rational behaviourist psychology that dominates much of the 'scientific' discourse on identity.

In terms of an analysis of subjectivities, postmodernism assumes an ahistorical approach, poststructuralism reincorporates history as an integral element within human subjectivity. Postcolonialism is not only diachronic, but also questions the power relations between societies that have had histories or relationships of domination and subjugation. The construction of a multifaceted identification is therefore no longer a cause for concern, but indeed a *cause-célèbre* in the arts. It is no longer thought to be transgressive merely to be dealing with issues of politics, ethnicity and gender, rather it is the recognition of an interdependence and confluence of identities that holds greater claim to cultural currency.

The idea that to be transgressive one had to be *avant-garde* in art died in the Sixties. Frederic Jameson describes the current capitalist situation as an economic world order that appropriates, incorporates and consumes transgression into chic, so to be an Asian drag queen on the performance circuit may not be seen as a transgressive act, for it too could be viewed as fetishising an identity for momentary consumption.⁷ As an artist it is always difficult to produce work if one is constantly censoring to see if one is being politically correct or transgressive, or, if one is trying to resist the commodification of art which is the nature of global capitalist consumer culture.

Some cultural theorists in the early eighties, Charles Jencks and Hal Foster in particular, pinned their hopes on postmodernism as a way of opening up debates and ideas.⁸ Hal Foster states that postmodernism works from a level of resistance as opposed to an art practice that is transgressive suggesting in this construct that postmodernist art is a

practice that is political, in a way that does not break out of the tabooed bounds of normative culture, but raises questions instead from within the cultural field. However, in its extreme form this tendency leads us to infer that there is a limitless play of signifiers in the realm of the political real and the economic world. The work of what might be politically possible, the problems of ethical and moral judgements disappear under the weight of multiple antagonisms and significations. All these assaults on Western epistemes (Michel Foucault's term for 'bodies of knowledge'), are not only relativising Western narratives but are also the effect of the rise of other cultures to prominence. These are in effect the analyses of modernity and colonialism, the description of instability of the nation-state and of national economies. This has had the consequence of fragmenting collective social identities. These identifications, or social formations (class, race, nation, gender and belonging to Western culture), were thought of as all-encompassing and unifying factors which allowed us to understand ourselves, as well as being adopted as the mantra of political activists over the last thirty years.

There is however another field of study that has produced and reproduced critiques of colonialism and slavery, and this is postcolonial theory. It is an area of study which has variously been influenced by Edward Said's, *Orientalism*, Frantz Fanon's, *Black Skin White Masks*, and Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism.⁹ Postcolonialism may be seen as a counter-discourse to the more relativist postmodern theoretical approach. This theory has provided an important focus for my work because, as some exponents in this field such as Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak have argued, our experience of history and location are imbricated within culture and the aesthetic forms it contains.¹⁰

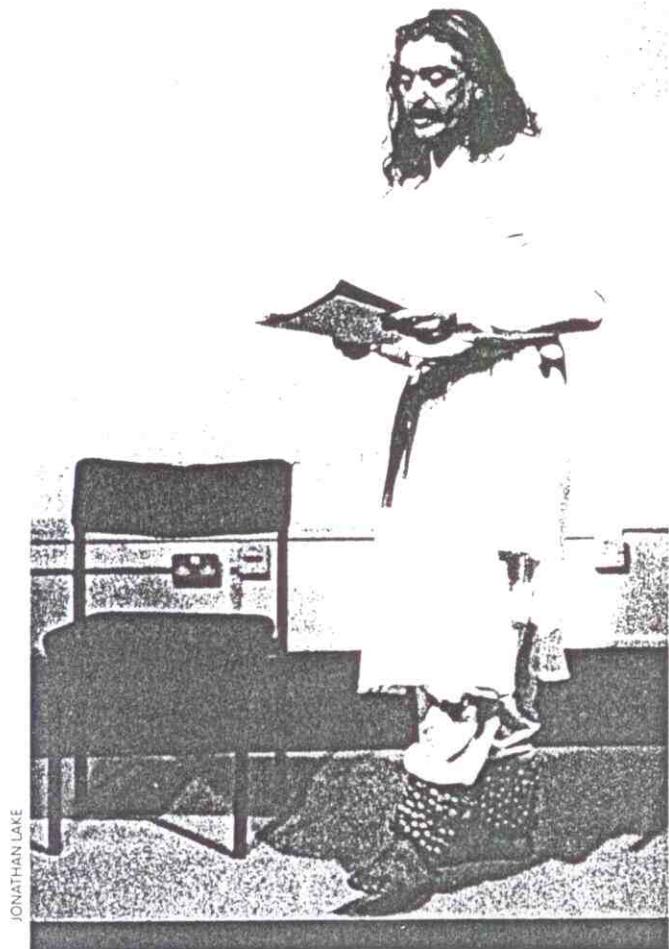
But how do these theories reflect my experience as an Asian, in a dominantly white host society, which, positions me as a postcolonial subject cross cut by the formations of gender, ethnicity, class and sexuality? Currently, there is a veritable flood of texts on postcoloniality proving how persuasive and important this particular theory has been for individuals who are culturally marginalised in and by the West. Among the various positions it offers are the 'another-time, another-space' that Fanon imagined and the postcolonial space of mimicry, hybridity, or the 'Third Space' proposed by Homi Bhabha.¹¹

My performance work specifically deals with articulating a third position in its presentation of the complexity of postcolonial subjectivity. There is no unified Asian community that can be represented with one voice or one stable identification. The Asian community in Britain is more sharply divided than ever through the rise of religious fundamentalism, exemplified specifically by the Rushdie affair where translocal communities responded to a religious dictate from Iran.¹² The communalism between Muslim, Hindu and Sikh groups in India is experienced here in Britain as gang violence. There is strong dictator-

ial, paternalistic control within families and severe punishment for any transgression against family, tradition or community. An example of this is the recent case in Bradford where a woman youth worker has had to have police protection as a result of threats from local Asian men, because she was providing information on lesbianism, to young Asian women in the course of sex education talks. In the wider understanding of society, lesbianism may well be regarded as one expression of sexuality among several alternatives, but within the prescribed fundamentalist community, such freedom is denied.

The constraints placed on individuals to conform within the community are tremendous and should not be treated lightly. There is much at stake for all concerned. Asian women have to conform much more rigidly than men, but there is a point beyond which even men may not tread and sexuality is a taboo subject for both groups. The only available option is that of a heterosexual marriage in order to raise a family and this pertains to all three religious groups mentioned above. How it might be possible to challenge absolutist ideology is an ongoing question that will be continued to be asked into the new millennium. I approached the issue from a personal perspective in my first short film, *Destiny Desire Devotion*, which looked at the differences between an Asian mother and her gay son. I am not speaking for the wider Asian community when I attempt this representation, but am bringing my own experience to bear upon a situation that is seemingly unresolvable in the current climate of fundamentalism. I represent the point of view of an Asian mother and her struggle to come to terms with her gay son.

The representations of Asians that are still acceptable to the media are those of arranged marriages, extended family situations, brutal fathers and battered or oppressed women. For example, the latest offering from the Channel Four Films and British Film Institute co-production funded projects stable is *Flight*, written by Tanika Gupta, a film about an Asian woman escaping from an arranged marriage. In theatre, currently on tour is *East*, a play by Ayub Khan Din, as produced by the Tamasha Theatre Company. It deals with an Asian father's struggle to enforce his religious traditions and pass them on to his mixed race children. In both cases the father is represented as an authoritarian figure, and the children and wife are seen to have no voice, or at least one that is not heard by the father. My criticism is not that these popular and current representations are inauthentic, but that they are still typical within popular television and theatre, or to use an unfashionable but more accurate term, stereotypical. If, as I am suggesting above, there is no one monolithic Asian community, or that equally, at an individual level, no fixed core concept of identity, then surely these media representations should be reflecting the many different perspectives of the Asian community as well as the complex, fluid and multiple subjectivity of a postcolonial Asian individual. The difficulty arises precisely because,



Zahid Dar with dancing bells

in terms of the discourse of Asians in Britain in media representations, there are only certain hackneyed or stereotypical themes that are presented. This is not to say that there is never some transgressive element in these representations, but to suggest that performance based film and theatre work has a long way to go before it can be seen to be an arts practice which is challenging perceived notions of what Asians may say, or have said, about them. It is at this point of what might be acceptable where I am experimenting in my work to try to push the boundary of not only what might be said of Asians, but in what context and in what medium. To this end I am using a variety of media – film, dance, drama and performance art – in an attempt to express multiple layers and possibilities of ethnicity and sexuality within a political context.

With *Destiny Desire Devotion*, my intention was to make a film that utilised different layers of my personal experience, expressed analogously as both content and form. The story is about the conflict that exists for the mother between, on the one hand herself and her women relatives, and on the other her internal conflict with her belief system. This latter takes the form of her Muslim absolutist Islamic faith, which is in conflict with her son's diametrically opposed view in that he is an 'out gay' man who lives with his white lover. The form is affected by my own personal experience of Indian popular culture particularly Hindi films and British Asian contemporary popular music. The plot of the film deals with one of the taboo subjects of sexuality within the Asian community, as mentioned earlier, and is deliberately constructed in a style which would be accessible to the widest possible audience. It utilises a narrative structure with main protagonists following a plot through within a time frame that can be readily understood. This is in direct contradiction to contemporary film art practice which purports to be open to interpretation and is actually only speaking to a specifically educated and knowledgeable minority audience which is capable of interpreting specialised or élitist work.

The film was a reflection of my immediate experience, outside that of a traditional Asian marriage arranged by my parents. I do not live in an extended Asian family but instead in a pretend lesbian and gay family that stretches around the world from London, Lisbon, Paris and Berlin, to Karachi, Bombay, Delhi, then to Sidney, Auckland, Wellington, San Francisco, and New York and finally, to Bristol.¹³

The performance at the seminar was more experimental than the film. I took the risk of not being seen to be politically correct. In part my reason for doing this is due to the political thinking expressed by Fanon that,

the desire to attach oneself to tradition or bring abandoned traditions to life again does not only mean going against the current of history but also opposing one's own people.¹⁴

The burden of representation placed on black, Asian, women, disabled and other issues based artists does not only come from within their community, but also from the artistic community by whom their work is critiqued.

I adapted a section from the play *Paki Boy*, using a video projection of a film that I shot specifically for its production on the London stage.¹⁵ The play is about the life of an Asian drag queen and according to theatre programmers (except at the Oval House) thought to be too offensive for the Asian community.¹⁶ However the largely Asian, lesbian and gay audiences were positive and supportive of the piece. It was therefore instructive to realise that although it is important to consider audience response, it is equally valid to be transgressive and political by taking risks and evaluating them after their reception.

One has to build on political struggles that have relied on the strength of individuals who have argued, fought and won rights for blacks, Asians, women, the disabled, lesbians and gays. These formations may also be constructed as performative acts and no longer thought of as being essences of fixed identities, but they are still useful positions from which to argue, to fight and to win equality in terms of housing, employment and education. As well as these issues, it is now also a political battle among minorities to have equality in terms of being represented in the media. This does not always mean that only positive images are represented, but that a representative range of images is presented, showing a cross section of the community – a ‘warts and all approach’, rather than ‘warts only’.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 Carlson, Marvin, *Performance: a critical introduction*, London, Routledge, 1996.
- 2 Polhemus, Ted, ‘Dance, Gender and Culture,’ in Thomas, Helen, ed., *Dance Gender and Culture*, London, Macmillan, pp. 3–15.
- 3 An explanation of how performance may be regarded as a language form and considered semiotically is given in Pavis, Patrice, *Languages of the Stage*, New York, Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982.
- 4 Kathak is a northern Indian classical dance form that has its origins in the trading Kathi (or story tellers) of India and was subsequently influenced by Persian poetry and music during the Mughal period.
- 5 See photographs below.
- 6 See any tabloid newspaper for stories of illegal immigrants, benefit scrounging single mothers or lazy unemployed blacks.
- 7 Witness the issue of lesbianism as being something chic currently, there have been daytime television discussion programmes on the subject and full page colour spreads on lipstick lesbians, for example Joanna Briscoe interview in *The Independent*, 21/2/97, tabloid Section, p. 8. In the latter article Ruth Picardie describes Briscoe as a post-feminist dyke babe novelist.
- 8 Jencks, Charles, *What is Post-Modernism*, London, Academy Editions, 1986 and Foster, Hal, ‘(Post)Modernism’, *New German Critique*, vol. 33, 1984.
- 9 Seminal texts in the study of postcolonialism are Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, New York, Pantheon, 1978, Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin White Masks*, London, Pluto Press, 1986, (first English edition 1968) and deconstruction is exemplified in Derrida, Jacques *Writing and Difference*, London, Routledge, 1978.
- 10 Other key texts of postcolonialism are Bhabha, Homi, *Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994 and Spivak, Gayatri, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, London, Routledge, 1993. The work on deconstruction is exemplified in Derrida, Jacques, op. cit.
- 11 Bhabha, Homi, ‘The Third Space’, in Rutherford, Jonathan, *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, pp. 207–221. The third space is that process of combining elements of experience and subjective position that in their articulation become something more than the sum of their original elements, that is they articulate a third position. For example racial subjectivities, ethnicities do not simply co-exist alongside our sexuality, rather our sexuality is defined ethnically and our ethnicity is sexualised.
- 12 For a summary of the events that led to the Rushdie affair see Gabriel, John, *Racism, Culture, Markets*, London, Routledge, pp. 22–29. Briefly, the publication of Salman Rushdie’s novel, *Satanic Verses* in September 1988 led to protests by Muslims in Bradford in January 1989 and eventually a Fatwa issued from Iran by Ayatollah Khomeini on 14 February 1989.
- 13 I use the term pretend family because this is the term Margaret Thatcher applied to lesbian and gay couples and households mentioned specifically in the change in the Local Government Act 1986. This change in the Act became known as Clause 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 and inserted as Section 2A of the 1986 Act.
- 14 Fanon, Frantz, *Wretched of the Earth*, London, Penguin, 1985, p. 180. First English edition published in London, Macgibbon & Kee, 1965. First published in French as Maspéro, François (éditeur) *Les damnés de la terre*, France, 1961.
- 15 The play was written by Tenebris Light, performed and directed by myself at the Oval House Studio Theatre Upstairs, March 1996.
- 16 These were programmers from fringe theatres in areas with high concentrations of Asians, such as Birmingham and Leicester. Another concern expressed by a London based Asian programmer was that the play was attacking the community rather than challenging them. The same programmer then produced a comedy night which featured a foul mouthed drunkard who as part of the performance shouted abuse at the audience and the compere, his supposed nephew.

Zahid Dar is a film maker, actor and dancer who also writes and directs plays. He lives in Bristol and is currently writing commissioned work for BBC Radio 4