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To be Killed, to be Absent

Let me start today discussion with common slang used by Hong Kong protesters: “We won’t cut the mat even if there is nuclear bombing”—meaning, “Even nukes won’t do us part.” Lots of new slang and vocabulary has been emerging during the 2019 Hong Kong anti-extradition bill protests, “even nukes won’t do us part” is among this new terminology. This expression is unique in a Cantonese way, filled with a wry brand of Hong Kong humor: “To cut a sitting mat (割席)” originates from a story written more than 1,500 years ago, compiled in “A New Account of the Tales of the World (世說新語),” and recently is widely used to refer to “keeping a distance from someone/something.” The sitting mat that two friends used to share when studying splits abruptly in half. Doesn’t it sound comedic? But when the Apocalypse is coming close, why do we go back to an ancient topos? Such self-mocking expression is always a characteristic of the Hong Kong (sub)culture.

Social movement isn’t a game, but the people of Hong Kong tirelessly use Cantonese to make fun in daily life. I study writing and keep playwriting in such a vibrant atmosphere of language use. Hong Kong slang terms have kidnapped many a Hong Kong playwright (including me) to such an extent that we keep a certain distance from pure literature at the very beginning. The characteristics of Cantonese infiltrate our process of conceptualization and creation too. Witty dialogue is not only the basis of portraying characters, but also the key to unlocking the storyline such that dialogue is sometimes overused to twist the plot.

I believe the structure of language is the structure of desire. It is desire’s mode of interaction; the way that it generates meaning from daily scenarios; how it triggers actions; or how we look for alternative narrative approaches through movements, objects, images, sound or space...even when it fails to generate meaning or actions. If we mix these ingredients well, it will become a theatre piece. This is the desire of a playwright. In this desire, language vanishes. But language never really disappears. In silence and/or in lights, in a series of actions performed by some protesters out of rage, we still see the presence of language. As a playwright who uses Cantonese to write but cautiously refuses to be dominated by Cantonese at the same time, I try hard to determine what language I am

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going to use at every new piece I start working on. When should language appear? When should it be gone? How should I play this game?

The process of integrating language and non-language elements in a theatre piece casts the influence of colonialism in the Hong Kong context. Hong Kong culture is famous for its hybrid nature, and in the process of modernizing theatre work, such hybridity reflects on the inseparable knot of genre and aesthetic. At the time of specializing theatre, Theatre of Absurd and Theatre of Realism were introduced to Hong Kong altogether. Mimicry of experiments in Performance Art and Post-Dramatic Theatre appeared much earlier than Epic Theatre. The chaos of the historical sequence deepens the hybridity in form, resulting in inconsistency in the use of language among playwrights. Two types of playwrights have always been teased in modern theatre: one writes too much, the other writes too little. The first type writes so abundantly in every scene that they want to use only words to construct all the dramatics and to manipulate the stage; the latter type gives up words too early to give way to other theatrical elements. And it all ends up getting lost in the kaleidoscope of the semiotic system.

To me, the biggest difference between playwriting and other forms of writing is, first, how its end product is going to be shaped and interpreted; second, its creation process. Playwrights nowadays must accept the reality that the final result of a theatre piece is not determined by the playwright. Even the finest text will inevitably be transformed in the process of turning it into a theatre work. This should be treated, however, as the secret weapon that a playwright can use in the process of textual transformation. When words are being edited or cut, the devilish details or hidden intricacy imposed by the playwright will surface and make the transformation fun and challenging.

Many famous playwrights point out satirically that the mission of contemporary playwrights is to be killed. I am a rather lucky one because I am a director as well as a playwright. Most of the time I write and direct my own piece. The playwright-me is killed by the director-me. It's less painful. When I am repeatedly killed by myself, I gradually come to terms with the partnership between text-based creation and theatre production. Playwrights don't care about the final presentation of a piece but focus on fine-tuning language until it becomes sharp as razors. They are more carefree than directors and begin their exploration of many possibilities of contemporary theatre much earlier, on paper. Indeed, the collaborative relationship between playwrights and theatre start not at the time of rehearsal, but when they conceptualize the work, they have started laying the bricks of all sort of assumptions and judgements.

Playwrights don't belong to the rehearsal room. Language is gone too. But in fact, both are never absent.

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容許我借用一句香港人的示威口號進入今天的討論——「核爆都唔割席」。在香港反修例的社會抗爭中出現了很多新語彙，「核爆都唔割席」是其中一句，意思是就算核爆發生我們也不分離。這句話的含意很深邃，但在表達上，不僅充滿強烈廣東話特色，還滿溢著港式怪異幽默。割席，把座墊硬生生割開，極具喜劇意象，原是古語，但世界都快末日了，怎麼又倒流回到古時的意象去？這種自嘲式表達是香港文化的一大特色。

社會抗爭不是遊戲，但港式的廣東話卻總嘗試把生活變成遊戲，把字詞組合當作可以隨時快速置換的圖像，拒絕被中文書面語固定下來，總是以跳脫俚俗的方式，從生活現場中創造新的表達。我就是這樣的語言環境裏學習寫作，並持續著寫劇本。港式口頭語把大部份包括我在內的香港劇作家誘拐，令我們從一開始便遠離了文學的紙頁世界。

廣東話的特質也一直滲進我們的構思和創作過程。喜感十足的的小人物，針鋒相對的冤家，總是常常出現在香港舞台、電視以至電影裏。機巧的對話不僅常是角色的基調，很多時還是情節推展或者強行推展的鑰匙。這種過於向口頭語傾斜的狀況，一定程度與普羅觀眾的接收慣性有關。所以，在香港的小眾劇場裏，也逐漸發展出各種背道而馳的實驗。

如果說語言的結構，是一種欲望的結構，那麼它的互動模式，它如何在生活場景中產生意義和引發行動，又或者當無法產生意義和行動失效的時候，我們如何尋找替代物或延伸，諸如動作、實物、影象、聲音、空間，等等各種各樣的敘事手段，讓這些東西融合起來，就成為了劇場創作，也正是劇作家的欲望所在。這個欲望，還包括讓語言消失。但其實語言不會真正消失，在沉默中，在光影裏，在一群年輕人怒目咆哮的動作中，我們都可以覺察到語言的在場。作為一個用廣東話書寫但同時抗拒被廣東話主宰的劇作者，在每個創作的起點我都試圖反覆去思索我要採用怎樣的語言，語言在甚麼時候出現，在甚麼時候消失，我要玩怎樣的一種遊戲。

語言和非語言元素在劇場創作過程的融合，在香港還涉及殖民主義所產生的影響。香港文化以混雜性聞名，在劇場現代化的過程中，混雜性反映在戲劇類型和美學的糾纏不清。荒誕劇和寫實主義戲劇不分先後在戲劇專業化的時代被引介到香港，行為藝術和後戲劇劇場的實驗可以比史詩劇場更早出現模仿者。脈絡上的混亂加深了形式上的混雜性，令很多劇作家的語言定位變得飄忽。現代劇場有兩類劇作家常被取笑，一類因為寫得太多，另一類因為寫得太

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少。前者往往把情景寫得很滿，總是希望用文字打造所有的戲劇性，企圖掌控舞台；後者則太早放棄文字，退位給其他舞台元素，反而進退失據，迷失在符號系統的萬花筒裏。

關於戲劇和其他文體最大的差異，我覺得首先是在最後成果的掌控和想像上，其次才是創作的過程。今天，劇作家必須接受這樣的現實，劇場的最後成果並非由劇作家決定，再優秀的文本也注定要在劇場的製作過程中變形，可這正是劇作家的獨門秘技，容許自己創作出來的文字被轉化，被刪減，被消失，而且暗中埋下各種誘餌，以及障礙物，令轉化的過程充滿趣味性和挑戰。

劇作家是劇場的先鋒部隊，他們選擇在開拓想像的同時，把自己的工作與最後的成果分離。不少知名劇作家還笑言，當代劇作家的任務，就是被殺掉。我自己比較幸運的是，既是劇作者，也是導演，而且很多時都是自編自導，劇作的我被導演的我殺掉，算是沒那麼痛苦，而且也因為一次又一次死在自己手上，慢慢體會到文本創作和劇場製作之間的協同關係。劇作家不去管劇場的最後呈現，專注地把語言磨練成箭一般的銳利，同時可以比導演更無後顧之憂，在紙頁上更早地對現代劇場的各種可能性進行深刻的想像。事實上，劇作家與劇場的合作關係不是在排練時才開始，而是從劇作的構思和進行美學選擇時，已先行一步，進行各種預判。

劇作家不在排練場出現，語言消失，但其實兩者從來沒有退場。

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