

Singapore Arts Festival Resource Pack

COOL



Cool 酷

Beijing Paper Tiger Theater Studio (China)

北京□老虎□□工作室

Cool, a performance piece that includes installations, bodywork and strong visual elements, is considered to be “a representative of the contemporary cruel theatre”. Its aesthetics of crudity and paradox reflect the contemporary urban landscape the rapidly developing China and its power of the parvenus.

Named after Mao Zedong’s famous statement regarding Imperialism, “all the reactionaries are merely paper tigers!”, Beijing Paper Tiger Theater Studio is going to put the cruel political games and violence onto the stage with their unique language.

It’s time to witness their ability to make you shiver without the bloodshed.

PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES:

THE ART OF CRUELTY

Paper Tiger Studio's founder, Tian Gebing's work is heavily influenced by Antonin Artaud's surrealistic style, 'Theatre of Cruelty.' Artaud's theory is that the stage voices the inner turbulence of man. What we see are powerful images, gestures, noise and lighting all taken to extreme effect to trigger an emotional response in the audience. This form of theatre aims to disturb the subconscious of the audience and kindle their imaginations. The images and sounds you will see are often shocking, but as Artaud explains in his book 'Theatre of Cruelty,' "We are not free, and the sky can still fall on our heads; and the theatre exists to remind us of this fact." Artaud's work also had concepts of surrealism, and ritual preceded 'Theatre of the Absurd.'

In the performance, you will see elements of surrealism and rituals. Surrealism first manifested in visual art in the 1920s and 30s. Anton Breton and Salvador Dali are two famous names in surrealism. Surrealists consciously abandon order, clarity, and rational thought for the spontaneity, originality, and radical humor resulting in disjointed, dreamlike and sometimes nightmarish results. The elements of ritualism found in 'Cool' come from the repetition of everyday tasks.

DISCOVER MAO NOW

Paper Tiger's founder, Tian Gebing got the company's name from one of Mao Zedong's well remembered phrases "all the reactionaries are merely paper tigers!" Mao used this phrase to describe imperialist nations – paper tiger describes one that is seemingly dangerous and powerful but in fact is timid and weak.

Phrases coined by Mao Zedong during his era were compiled in the 'Little Red Book.' These pocket sized books were brandished by the masses and phrases were often learnt by heart.

Assignment 1:

- Do a quick search on some of these phrases
- Decide whether these inspirational ideologies still fit into China's social context and economy?

Some of these phrases are metaphorical – eg "Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend..." was an slogan used to encourage a variety of views and solutions to national policy issues.

Assignment 2:

- Identify other metaphorical phrases from Mao.
- Explain whether any of these be used as a theme or metaphor in a performance?

LINGO BINGO

The name of the performance, 'Cool' is a play on the Chinese word 酷, which juxtaposes brutality (kùxíng) and being cool (kù).

Assignment 3:

- Identify other single character Chinese words or phrases which can mean the total opposite in English.

POST SHOW ACTIVITIES

ARTAUD vs. PETER BROOK

When Artaud first presented his concept of ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ to audiences in the 1930s, they were shocked. However, in 1964, English director Peter Brooke, experimented with techniques set out by Artaud to open up new ideas of expression. He used a series of exercises as well as improvisations with an ensemble of actors over a long period of time. His aim - to minimize realism and to draw out the greatest emotional reaction from the audience. This could mean making the audience feel uncomfortable. One of the greatest challenge is for the actor to avoid using dialogue or text.

Here are some exercises Peter Brook, used with his actors. They are taken from http://www.experimentaltheatre.org/peter_brook_rehearsal_exercises.htm

Similes Exercise: “An actor played an ordinary improvised scene realistically—a man arrived home, found a note, and read some shattering news. At this pressure point the directors redirected the actor to another style, making him express the shattered reaction through pure sound or abstract gesture.”

Essentials Exercise: The actors played a scene and then labeled each beat with a single sentence describing the vital content. They then repeated the scene playing only these sentences in sequence. Sentences were progressively reduced to key words which were also played as a scene. Finally each key word was reduced to its most prominent sound. At this point, the original scene would be divested of its realism, leaving a short, essentialized, and quite non-mimetic core.” (‘non-mimetic’ language avoids any narrative elements such as any namable objects or symbols)

Total Fitness Exercise: The directors forced the actors to speak while performing difficult physical exertions, so that the voice of the straining body overcame the actor’s ordinary vocal habits or tricks....”Get thee to a nunnery,” if spoken by a man swinging upside down above a woman, might meant something new, or (given the prevailing artistic crisis) it might mean anything at all.”

Did you see any of these used in ‘Cool’?

Activity 1:

Let student experience with some of the exercises above in small groups.

RITUAL AND REPETITION

In the later half of 'Cool' each actor performed what seemed to be an everyday ritual, eg, washing clothes.

Activity 2:

Let students experiment with a few repeated rituals to get a message/emotion across without dialogue. Ask them to use ritual and repetition to accent a naturalistic play and analyse why they would use that accent and to what effect?