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Author

Shanks, Gwyneth J.

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Seeing the Ghost

CHENG-CHIEH YU'S *THE GOOD PERSON*
AND *DANCING MOTHER COURAGE*

THE FINAL PERFORMANCE of the *Global Flashpoints: Transnational Performance and Politics*, an international conference held from October 6th to 12th, 2011, and organized by the UCLA Center for Performance Studies and Center for the Study of Women, featured the work of Cheng-Chieh Yu, dancer, choreographer, and Associate Professor of the Department of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA. The two pieces she presented were the video work *The Good Person* and the live dance piece *Dancing Mother Courage* with an accompanying video projection. Both pieces, as is clear from their titles, engage with Bertolt Brecht's work. *The Good Person* questions the

orientalism in Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan*; *Dancing Mother Courage* seeks to meld the iconic title character of *Mother Courage and Her Children* with dance.¹

The Good Person opens with a soft blue screen, and then a white piece of paper gently floats across the frame, as though blown in the wind. The paper twists and the viewer sees that it is a wanted poster: a photograph of Yu's face fills the page. Above her photo is the word "WANTED," and below is "THE GOOD PERSON." One has barely had time to absorb the content of the paper before it has turned, obscuring its message. During this opening moment, the wanted poster float-

ing across the screen, the single screen divides into a split screen, a thick black line running between the top and bottom sections. For the rest of the video this division remains in place, the center of the screen a black strip of void. The slow, contemplative pace of the opening is soon replaced with a frantic tempo as vignettes cut between each other and the two screen spaces show differing images.

As the opening shot of the wanted poster dissolves, a series of cuts between different parts of Yu's body begins. Neon yellow paint crisscrosses her body or oozes out of her orifices. The paint is absurdly violent; the color is so obviously unnatural, yet it drips from her nose and ears like

1. Brecht, Bertolt. "The Good Person of Szechwan." Trans. John Willett. In *Collected Plays*. New York: Vintage Books, 1971.

blood. Brecht's orientalism seems to have literally bloodied her nose, burst her eardrums. The paint seems to highlight the crude stereotype of the "yellow-skinned" Asian Other. Yet this clear assertion of the insidiousness of orientalist stereotypes is complicated. The paint allowed the viewer to see the thoroughly constructed "yellow" Other of Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan*, yet her body, her skin pushed against the artifice of the paint, forcefully questioning and confronting the viewer with the fact of her embodiment, forcing the viewer into a particular identificatory relationship with her filmed body. While the yellow paint Yu adds to her body allows the viewer an aesthetic entry point to passively ruminate on Brecht's orientalism, her ever-present yet filmed body forces viewers to contemplate their own current culpability within the uneven power relationship of the viewer and the viewed, in relation to a still active economy of orientalism. While the yellow objects Yu adds to her body allows the viewer an aesthetic entry point to passively ruminate on Brecht's orientalism, her ever-present yet filmed body forces viewers to contemplate their own current culpability within the uneven power relationship of the viewer and the viewed, in relation to a still-active economy of orientalism.

Contrasting this yellow-toned section is an action-based thread that shows Yu dressed in a blue button-up shirt and skirt on the streets of a Chinese city. Not only are her clothes blue, but the entire thread has a blue wash. The streets she

finds herself walking down, the back alleyways in which she searches through rows and rows of rusting blue trash cans, are all shot through with a washed-out blue quality. A motif of cardboard boxes runs through this section. Toward the end of the video, a large cardboard box dominates the screen. It stands on its side, the flaps at either end extended out; her legs extend out from the bottom of the box, the rest of her body hidden. Her legs begin to move, pulling the cardboard flaps of the box closed. The camera shifts, and the viewer stares at the soles of Yu's feet, at her articulated toes; it is a sort of retreat, a pulling back into a cardboard world. It is a double move. The viewer has only her feet, with their slow articulation, to watch, and so stares entranced. But the viewer is also watching the retreat of her body, the closing off of the viewer's ability to gaze at Yu.

It is a move repeated differently at another moment in the video. Yu, a yellow Chinese opera mask affixed to the back of her head, stands with her naked back facing the camera. Her back sways from side to side, her spine imitating a slow moving snake. Her arms are extended to either side of her body; they move with a jerking rhythm, her joints—at the elbow, the wrist—creating sharp breaks in the movement. The sequence is an offering of movement and dance—it is one of the few moments of extended movement in the video—and of withholding. The viewer cannot see her face. Rather only the

mask was visible and the uncanny image of her moving back meant to replicate the movement of the front of her body.

As I sat in the darkened theatre, watching *The Good Person*, I felt a sense of distance and removal from Cheng Chieh Yu's onscreen character. The format and logic of the work constantly push against the creation of an identificatory relationship with the viewer. Yu's body enters the screen: the viewer watches as she crosses a busy street, only to have the viewer's relationship to her, to her body, shattered, fragmented, her pedestrian body replaced by the isolated image of a leg, yellow paint dripping across the shin. And then another quick cut: the viewer watches as wanted posters blow across the screen. There was a bombardment of images: bodies, landscapes rapidly fragmenting. The stability of a continuing image sequence was displaced in the video for the distancing effect of rapid montage.

The format of the piece—a video—ensures that Yu's (live) body is always already absent from the relationship created between the viewer and the work. The labor of her dancing body—her sweat, her breath—is gone, replaced with mediatized images of her body in the video space. Like Brecht's play, Yu's video work ensures that a Chinese body is never present, always already gone, displaced into the re-playable and thus completed format of the video, mirroring the orientalist fantasy of the always already completed, simplified, and thus "understood" Asian Other. Thus a straightfor-



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The piece ends as it began: a wanted poster fills the screen, and then the image of the poster expands to one image stretching across the two halves of the screen. What is wanted? There is an urgency, a craving inherent to the *want* of the wanted poster. Who, what *is* the good person? A signifier of a particular outmoded orientalism? A signifier of a relationship constantly produced and (re)created within the viewer/viewed relationship, within the ever-repeatable replay of a video? The viewer—aware of the orientalism at play in Brecht's work—is made culpable in the desiring relationship symbolized by the WANTED poster of her video work, a desire to (re)create the framed, finished Asian body.

Yu performed the second piece of the evening, *Dancing Mother Courage*, live while a video was projected on the scrim at the back of the stage. As the dim stage lights came up, two shadowy set pieces were revealed. The two identical pieces each comprised a large tire lying on its side, with small wheels affixed to each tire's bottom. A thin, tall metal pole emerged from the middle of each tire, a naked light bulb sitting atop each pole. The pieces were an odd mix of scrapyard junk. They diagonally split the dance space; a pair of work boots sat near one of them. A small square of video appeared in the bottom-right corner of the scrim. The video, in black and white, was of Yu dancing. In the video, Yu's arms were fluid, seeming to push the air around her. From the downstage left corner of the stage, Yu herself emerged. Dressed in black pants and shirt, she rolled a large tire on its edge in front of her. In a deep *plie*,

she moved slowly across the stage, her torso facing the audience, her hands poised above the tire. It was impossible to tell how the tire was moving; she appeared not to be touching it. Her focused progress was transfixing, not least because her ability to move with the tire seemed dependent on an intrinsically magnetic quality of her body.

Reaching the far side of the stage, Yu's slow pace broke. Moving to center stage, she began an extended and virtuosic dance phrase. Her movement, based upon martial traditions, cemented the vocabulary of the piece. Her arms, held out from her body, seemed to create currents of energy in the air around her. Largely in a deep *plie*, she swept across the space—and then one leg extended up behind her as she balanced on one foot, her body almost perpendicular to the stage. Her movements carried her across the stage space and also around herself, a constant turning marking her movements. Throughout, the work moved between periods of virtuosic movement, largely executed in the center of the stage with minimal and fleeting use of or contact with the set pieces, to phrases that utilized the tires, boots, or other props, and seemed almost task-oriented: Yu pushed a tire across the stage, or applied makeup to her face.

Yu returned to the tire poles throughout the piece. During one movement phrase she pushed one of the tires downstage. Standing atop the tire, she turned on the light bulb. The rest of the stage

dark, the naked bulb threw her face into stark and eerie relief. On the scrim behind her, her face appeared, one-fourth of it painted with dramatic red and black Chinese opera makeup. Then she suddenly turned off the light, there was a moment of blackness, and then the lights onstage and in the audience came up. The sudden blaze of light was jarring, the familiar darkness of the theater gone. Staring out at us, she began to clap. Her loud applause echoed throughout the space. Hesitantly, a few audience members followed suit, but quickly subsided. Yu did not. The moment stretched, uneasy and awkward.

The clapping ended as abruptly as it started and she made her way to the downstage left corner. A stagehand entered carrying a stool, a hand mirror, and several tins. Sitting on the stool, holding the mirror with one hand, she quickly applied red and black makeup from the tins to half of her face. The task completed, she returned to her set pieces. Low to the ground, her feet digging into the stage floor, she pushed one of the tire poles across the stage. Her labored movements implied a struggle with friction. At times her pushing brought her body almost parallel with the floor, only her grip on the metal pole keeping her from falling flat on her face. As she struggled, images flashed across the scrim—ripples of water that dissolved into what could have been the shadows of wheels and spokes.

The video image shifted, retreating to a small square in the bottom-right corner, and her danc-

ing video form reappeared. Moving to center stage, the real-life Yu left the tire pole behind, her movements resolving into those of her onscreen avatar. The movement phrase was low; her body rarely straightened. The broad sweeping gestures of her arms brought her body around itself. Her focus was down and inwards, yet she managed to follow her dancing avatar almost exactly.

The strength of her movements, her intense focus, and her aggressive gaze as she stared out at the audience bespoke a desire to translate the defining characteristics of Brecht's famous character into dance. She presented the audience with her dancing body, addressed the viewer with a particular type of embodied, kinesthetic identity-building. I found myself, sitting in the audience, adopting her intense focus, giving her own gaze back to her. Sitting in my seat, I could not attempt to replicate her virtuosic dance, but her gaze—that I could adopt.

Numerous ghosts positioned themselves around the piece, seeming to demand a particular type of identification from me as an audience member. Most obviously, Brecht and his famous character Mother Courage ghosted the piece, seeming indeed to be offered up as ghostly presences by the work. Yet Brecht and his archetypal creation were not the only ghosts onstage with her. The optic and critical remains of *The Good Person* also ghosted her solo. Her clapping ruptured the formal structure of the piece,

piercing the spatial divide between performer and audience. Her clapping was a séance of sorts, conjuring the ghosts of Brecht and Mother Courage, her applause referencing Brecht's theatrical tactic of direct address. Yet Yu did not address the audience as a performer; rather, she adopted the unique purview of the "proper" theater audience—clapping—usurping one of our only tasks. And made obvious within the witnessing of her usurpation of our role as audience members was her embodied usurpation of Brecht. While his *The Good Person of Szechwan* removed a historical, nuanced understanding of China, Yu asserted and inserted herself as an artist invested in issues of Asian and diaspora identity into Brecht's canon, inserted herself as a dancing, transnational, postmodern Mother Courage for the twenty-first century.²

Gwyneth Shanks is a PhD student in the department of Theatre and Performance Studies. Her research interests include dance, movement, choreographies of resistance, memory theory, and issues of historiography. A dancer and choreographer, she recently performed in the MOCA gala curated by Marina Abramovic.

Note: All photos courtesy of Cheng-Chieh Yu

2. Rouse, John. "Brecht's Orientalism." *Global Flashpoints* [conference]. Los Angeles. 8 Oct. 2011. My characterization of Yu's work is based upon her biography on her website (<http://www.yudancetheatre.com/Site/About.html>) as well as introductory comments made before the presentation of her work at the *Global Flashpoints* conference on October 8th, 2011 at the UCLA campus.