

Calls for Remembrance: At Work with Traditional Chants¹

CLÁUDIA TATINGE NASCIMENTO

This article discusses the dynamic relationship between ritualistic behaviours, traditional materials and performativity as it examines how work with traditional chants may affect the practitioner's mode of presence. It specifically draws from observations on the performances of Singaporean actor Ang Gey Pin in the Workcenter's One Breath Left and Polish theatre company Teatr ZAR's Gospels of Childhood. Each brings chants from very distinct cultural cradles – the Chinese diaspora and isolated Eastern European regions around the Black Sea, respectively. The study also traces a parallel between this vein of research and older artistic forms intended for the oral transmission of knowledge and traditions, such as Islamic philosopher Avicenna's recitals.

Since the late twentieth century, an increasing number of experimental artists have taken a particular interest in investigating traditional songs and chants. They do not simply look for folk tunes, but rather for the surviving fragments of 'endangered cultures' remembered only by few, often deriving from religious or other traditional rituals. Artists learn them through oral transmission – actually it is rare that these songs are documented in recordings. Although music is emotionally moving for singers and listeners alike, such appeal is not the rationale behind the incorporation of traditional chants in the performative work that I discuss here; even if these songs appear in public performances, these artists seek, through the performer's inner process, what lies beneath certain cultural traditions. Drawing from his own investigation on the subject, Grotowski has observed that

It is not a question of capturing the melody with its precision, even if without this nothing is possible. It is also necessary to find the tempo-rhythm with all of its fluctuations *inside* the melody. But above all it is a question of something that constitutes the proper sonority: vibratory qualities which are so tangible that in a certain way they become the meaning of the song.²

While the search for traditional sources may stem from a desire to connect with heritage, the artists I speak about explain that their interest comes from the possibilities that singing offers for work on oneself – the development of a finer level of consciousness and awareness. Work on oneself through singing supports an inner process analogous to that prompted by other disciplines using psychophysical engagement towards a higher quality of awareness and self-cultivation, such as yoga and active meditation, as well as some forms of martial art and religious text recitation. The singing of traditional chants

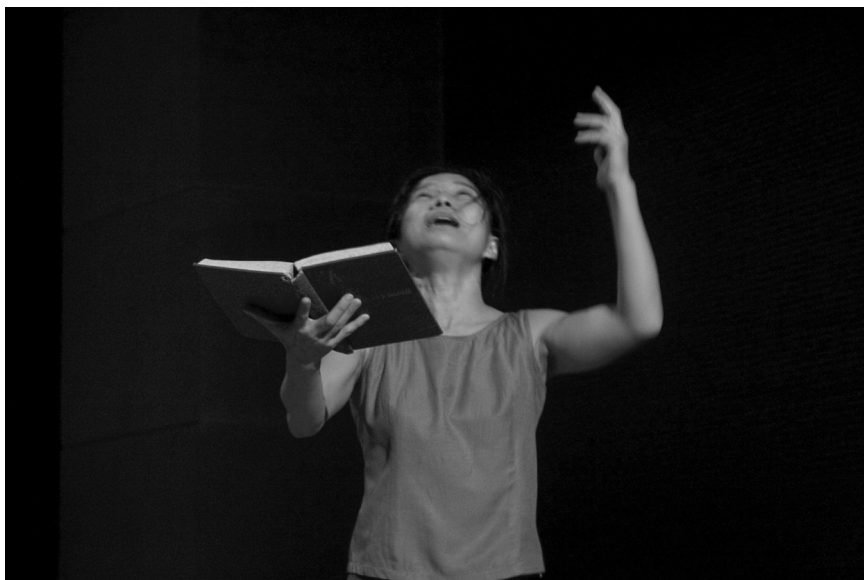


FIG 1 Ang Gey Pin in 2006, Wesleyan University. Photograph by Toby Shaw.

shares with these an acute attention to form and repetition; it is the use of a theatrical frame that differentiates the works I examine here from the aforementioned disciplines.³

In this article I focus on Singaporean actor Ang Gey Pin (formerly with the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards) (Fig. 1) and Polish company Teatr ZAR. They explore the vibratory potential of traditional songs from diaspora and displaced cultures – respectively Chinese Mandarin and Hokkien dialect communities in Singapore, and isolated Eastern European communities around the Black Sea. Directors Mario Biagini and Thomas Richards have described *One breath left*, the Workcenter piece in which Ang was lead actor, as a ‘performance/non-performance’.⁴ In contrast, Teatr ZAR places its first performance, *Gospels of Childhood*, clearly in the realm of theatre. In spite of these and other distinctions, in their work these artists create extra-daily spaces largely informed by a ritualistic mode of action. Supported by the retelling of mythical narratives, these two performative structures carry a sense that time is both ancient and present. They also share a motif commonly present in ancient narratives: a ‘hero’ in search of a fundamental answer in a moment of danger and uncertainty. Inserted in this frame, the singing of traditional chants puts the performative event at the crossroads of theatre and ritual.

In *The Roots of Theatre: Rethinking Ritual and Other Theories of Origin*, which compellingly argues against the notion that theatre originates in ritual, Eli Rozik distinguishes between the two fields: ‘Ritual is a mode of action and theatre a cultural medium’⁵. Rozik’s study helped me understand how these two performances effectively use the theatrical medium as a frame through which one can engage in the possibilities offered by a ritual mode of action. Drawing from the dynamic relationship between ritualistic behaviours, traditional materials and the performative context, such

sophisticated structures create a multilayered ‘world of the play’ in which acting is no longer the playing of characters, but an act of remembrance that arises from the confrontation between the performer’s personal memory and her execution of collective ancient musical or textual narratives. The experience of attending these works often makes the observer feel as if she were a witness to a ritual ceremony, even if these events are not acts of religious worship, but rather artistically based works directed at the performers’ inner investigation. Grotowski used the following analogy to explain the use of traditional songs for work on oneself in his final research:⁶

Art as vehicle is like a very primitive elevator: it’s some kind of basket pulled by a cord, with which the doer LIFTS himself toward a more subtle level of energy TO DESCEND *WITH THIS* TO THE INSTINCTUAL BODY. THIS IS THE *OBJECTIVITY* OF THE RITUAL . . . When I speak of the image of the primordial elevator, and therefore Art as vehicle, I refer to verticality. Verticality – we can see this phenomenon in categories of energy: heavy but organic energies (linked to the forces of life, to instincts, to sensuality) and other energies, more subtle. The question of energy is to pass from a so-called coarse level – in a certain sense, one could say an ‘everyday level’ – to a level of energy more subtle or even toward the *higher connection* . . . One can compare all this to Jacob’s ladder. . . . The ritual songs from the ancient tradition give a support in the construction of the rungs of that vertical ladder.⁷

Attention to a clear work ethic, to specificity of costume choices and to the treatment of the space, and the manner in which Ang and Teatr ZAR define themselves as artists, as well as the role or position of those invited to see their work, offer some initial indications about the work of each. For example, when I attended an early version of *One breath left* in 2000, Workcenter’s Mario Biagini primed the audience by telling them that they were considered to be a group of friends invited to see an experiment rather than the opening night of a performance. Attending *Gospels of Childhood* is also a special event. The audience travels for almost an hour between Wrocław and the forest base of Brzezinka. At the old farmhouse, spectators are first ushered into a dining room, where they share tea and bread before they are invited into the performance space.

As the performer’s experience is inherently private and subjective, it is difficult for the outsider to grasp or describe it fully. This may be the reason why, for the most part, scholarly writings about Grotowski’s incursion into vibratory chants are limited to roundabout descriptions. So here I offer an introduction to the nature of this vein of research by articulating some of the traits common to both performances and examining how the singing of traditional chants in certain contexts may affect the practitioner’s mode of presence.

Ang Gey Pin: a possible link between Art as presentation and Art as vehicle

A native of Singapore, Ang Gey Pin was a lead actor in the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards’s project *The Bridge: Developing Theatre Arts* from its inception until 2006. In the late 1980s a workshop with Taiwanese director Liu Ching-min first prompted Ang’s interest in traditional songs.⁸ When Liu asked what she could bring

from her tradition, Ang turned to songs in her family's dialect, Hokkien. Since the late 1970s dialects had been banned from Singapore's public media and therefore were almost unknown to Ang's generation.

In 1992, after graduating from the University of Hawaii-Manoa, Ang participated in the final Objective Drama summer session at the University of California, Irvine. In one of its projects, Massoud Saidpour's adaptation of Avicenna's *Recital of the Bird*, Ang continued to explore Hokkien songs. In 1994 Ang was selected to come to the Workcenter and work under Thomas Richards in Art as vehicle. During that year, Grotowski assigned her the task of creating an individual action based on Hokkien songs and early childhood memories – this study later served as a point of departure for the creation of *One breath left*, the performance I discuss here. Upon her return to Singapore in 1995, Ang founded Theatre OX. In 1998 Ang and three other women from that company came to a selection at the Workcenter. Contrary to what they expected – that either none, one, some, or all of them would be selected to join the Workcenter's team in Art as vehicle – all four were invited to stay as Theatre OX for a year-long residency.

Directed by Workcenter's Mario Biagini, with Richards, Ang and her Singaporean colleagues focused on creating a performative structure that would later become *One breath left*. It incorporated songs in each actor's family dialect and in Mandarin, memory-based psychophysical actions,⁹ and texts by Taoist masters Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi. Though the initial intention was not that of creating a theatre piece, in 1998 the Workcenter presented this structure publicly. Between 1998 and 2002 the six different versions of *One breath left* told the following story:

A woman lies in her agony bed, only one more breath left; the family gathers around (and who else is there: the dead ones? The not yet born?). In a flash, images from her memories and unfulfilled wishes reawaken, visions reappear: her childhood dreams and fears, her remembrances of people, her search for knowledge and her nightmares . . . Is it just the leftovers of gone-by life, emerging again for a second, or an unexplored chance – too late, an instant of recognition, too lately glimpsed? Is it all a dream? If so, who is the dreamer?¹⁰

Since until then the Workcenter had focused solely on the semi-secluded Art as vehicle field of research, the company explained that in this new project

a bridge is being sculpted in the material of performing arts, which stretches from the world of the theatre to the investigations on 'art as vehicle' . . . In Project *The Bridge* we are searching for efficacious ways of dialogue in two seemingly opposite directions . . . We are penetrating a territory of active exploration on the relation between 'art as vehicle' and performative event – deepening the research on the creative possibilities of the human being in action.¹¹

Thus *One breath left* served some of the premises of Art as vehicle and the needs of a theatrical event created with the spectator in mind. Nonetheless, 'In some passages during *One breath left* this technique, this attempt to direct the spectator's attention and his associative flux, is abandoned'.¹² In short, *One breath left* invited performers to enter

a mode of action that was ‘neither theatre in the strict sense, nor art as a vehicle. Rather, [through their work] a performance/non-performance is emerging’.¹³

To me, Ang’s singing at the beginning of the performance was particularly striking. I remember that the four actors entered from the right of the audience at a fast pace, almost running.¹⁴ After a short pause, Ang began singing and the others joined her. The group arranged itself in a procession formation, and when they appeared at the far end of the room Ang was at the centre while the three other actors held a white sheet above her, as if it were a makeshift canopy. While singing the song, the procession moved through the space. Ang’s eyes were almost closed, her fingers trembling. Suddenly, Ang was lying on the floor, the canopy turned into a bed sheet covering her body. On her deathbed, Ang breathed heavily. The man next to her, holding prayer beads in his hand, asked, ‘Is the heaven always moving? Is the earth always still?’ Next she was a baby in a crib, playing with her toys, and then she became a young child. These transitions were very crisp: in the story of this woman’s last breath, as she remembers her life in a split second, she constantly reminds us that ‘things change’. Ang explained that her work with this song in the earlier versions was

a kind of journey, slowly appearing as I travelled in the space. I recalled the song, I heard it, I gradually remembered, the song slowly appeared, I sang in relationship to my colleagues, who at that moment were travelling with me. I sang looking for the life of the song as it changed and resonated in the space, as it changed and resonated inside me.¹⁵

Though it is true that the song must contain a certain quality to serve as a conduit for this research, a key element is the performer’s approach and sensibility while singing – her ability to establish a relationship with the song and the act of singing that goes beyond an emotional connection. Some of the songs Ang incorporated in her work do come from religious sources, but not that first one. My conclusion is that the process of transforming a traditional song into a tool to activate inner stimuli or work on oneself does not necessarily depend on it coming from a ritual source. Ang described her multilayered process of working with this song:

The way I work on songs many times embraces my scores of actions as an actor, my associations, memories, the contact with my colleagues, the circumstances related to the change of the story’s montage in the different versions of the piece. With all these changing factors, the song changed its tempo-rhythm accordingly. The song has the same melody; but what you hear, and also what I hear, is a different song each time I sing. The song has a relationship with me that is alive, like an old friend who, through the years, we know that we and the other are not the same, we are always looking for how to renew our relationship.¹⁶

Teatr ZAR: performance and expeditions

Directed by Jarosław Fret, Teatr ZAR is hosted by the Grotowski Institute in Wrocław, Poland. Beginning in 1999, the group went on expeditions to eastern European countries surrounding the Black Sea in search of music from the early Christian Byzantine tradition.



FIG 2 Przemysław Błaszczyk in *Gospels of Childhood*. Photograph by Tom Dombrowski.

After that, Teatr ZAR began working on its first performance, *Gospels of Childhood: Fragments on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, which premiered in Brzezinka in October 2003 and has since toured in Europe and the United States.¹⁷ *Gospels of Childhood* tells the story of Lazarus through the experiences of his sisters Maria and Marta, using ancient polyphonic chants and text fragments from the apocryphal gospels of Mary Magdalene, Phillip, and Thomas. The link throughout *Gospels of Childhood*'s performative material is not a common ethnic root but, rather, a shared early Christian Gnostic tradition. As pieces of music created around performative rituals – the Christian Mass and funeral processions – these chants shape *Gospels of Childhood* as some newly created liturgy:

Especially important was the work of the Svaneti people, living in the highest part of the Caucasus mountains. In their tradition they kept funeral songs, which have their roots in the beginning of our era and are the oldest form of polyphony in Georgia, probably also the oldest in the world. The second musical plot consists of liturgical songs from the Orthodox Republic of Monks – Athos. These songs, connected with the Pascha period, build the end part of the performance.¹⁸

Teatr ZAR explains that ‘the performance is an attempt to tell the “late story of the flesh” – after love, after humiliation, after death; an impossible story of resurrection’.¹⁹ Inside the long rectangular performance space, hundreds of candles burn on the tables and windowsills (Fig. 2). Marta puts out the candles, Maria is busy cleaning small glass bottles, blowing out tiny oil lamps and moving water buckets around. The action of

cleaning up suggests that spectators have arrived at the end of a community's gathering. A fire burns in a closed hearth at the centre of the long wall opposite the seating area. On each side of the hearth, two pairs of solid wooden doors lead to the outside of the building. The polyphonic chants fill the space; the men wear black trousers and white dress shirts, except for Fret and the Young Man in Linen (Dominik Kościelak),²⁰ who are all in white. The women playing Marta (Ditte Berkeley) and Maria (Kamila Klamut) have red dresses and white undergarments. The Third Woman (Aleksandra Kotecka) wears black; Fret later explains to me that she at times mirrors the inner actions of either Maria or Marta.

As Maria blows out the last candle, the Young Man in Linen recites a fragment from Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*: 'It looks as though I'm already on the right track.' When the lights come up again, Maria holds the Young Man in her arms, a visual echo of Michelangelo's *Pietà*.²¹ Later, at the end of what appears to be a wedding celebration, the actors open the doors by the hearth. A man plays the accordion, another one a trumpet, and a third smokes a cigarette. They leave, and the room is silent again. The Young Man in Linen enters, a representation of the Soul made flesh. Maria seeks him and, at a turning point, the Young Man rapes Maria.²² After he leaves, Marta comes to care for her sister, carries her around the space and finally leaves her by a wall. Dimly lit, Maria recites fragments of the Gnostic text 'The Thunder, the Perfect Mind'. Performing Maria's inner action, The Third spins in front of the hearth and falls on the ground at the moment Maria finishes speaking. Shortly after that, Maria is stoned; but it is only after she collapses that we hear the sound of stones dropping to the ground, falling from the men's hands. Marta then closes the hearth's doors and the actors sing the Polish funeral chant 'Przybądźcie z nieba' in the darkness. We hear the sound of hammering: is it a crucifixion or the sound of nails being hammered into a coffin? Are we inside a tomb?

In another moment of darkness, the group chants 'zar' as they heard it in a funeral procession in Georgia, recalling the moment when, grieving for Lazarus' death, the Saviour wept so loudly as to bring the women's brother back. The company reconstructed the original melodic structure, as well as the soundscape of the Svaneti women's mourning and the noise of dirt thrown onto the coffin. The spectator's imagination is activated, and we are placed as if at the edge of a grave, swinging back and forth between the worlds of the dead and the living. While some may remember an actual burial, others may feel as if lying inside the coffin. The chant carries a powerful play between consonant and dissonant chords.

Close to the end, in a sequence titled 'Consolamentum: a letter', the montage combines the Easter chant 'Megistis Pascha' (from the Orthodox Greek monks in Athos), the women's cry the group heard in Bulgaria, and a fragment of the apocryphal text 'Hymn of the Pearl'. The light slowly returns to the room, first from a candle held by Fret. Marta and Maria begin to light all the other candles in the room, including those placed on four iron wheels now transformed into chandeliers hung so low that the audience feels as if they have been lifted close to the room's ceiling. We hear another chant from Athos, 'Christis anesti', along with the Third's playing of long metal pipes, which transforms the space into the heart of a bell chamber. The singing becomes a call for resurrection.²³ As light returns to the room, spectators see the objects used in the

piece scattered around: a book, the linen sheet, stones, dirt. The women open the doors, while the windows open as if moved by a gust of wind. There is absolute silence: we are back at the beginning.

The early Christian music guides the telling of Lazarus' resurrection, but it is his sisters who go through a process of plea, interrogation and suffering that suggests an alternative *Via Crucis* in which the Saviour is too late to save their brother. Maria's and Marta's actions also echo other biblical passages, such as the stoning of Mary Magdalene and the Annunciation (see Fig. 3). They embody the journeys of multiple biblical personages: bandages wrap Maria's legs as if she were her ailing brother; in another moment, Marta washes Maria's feet, an allusion both to the biblical passage now replicated as ritual by Catholic popes and to a moment in Grotowski's never-premiered performance *The Gospels*, of which only the film documentation of the same scene between Rena Mirecka and Maja Komorowska remains.²⁴ In short, the performance does not follow the narrative of any single story, but rather grows out of a non-linear and creative flow of associations between different biblical passages, polyphonic chants, and Gnostic and other textual fragments.

Ritual, liturgies, recitals, theatre: the ways of traditional chants

An analysis of each performance suggests that work with traditional chants may stand between *transcultural* and *ultracultural* performative experiences. While Peter Brook sees the former as an event that 'transcends limited nationalism in an attempt to reach the human essence', Pavis defines the latter as 'an often mythic quest for the origins and the supposed lost purity of theatre'.²⁵ Located somewhere in between, Ang and ZAR seem to approach the act of singing as the re-creation of a mythical dimension that uses culturally specific elements to reach beyond the boundaries of any single cultural context.

Furthermore, this vein of research appears analogous to older artistic forms deeply invested in the transmission of knowledge and traditions. In that, I see a strong parallel with Islamic philosopher Avicenna's recitals, for example. Inserted in select narrative frames, such as apocryphal (*Gospels of Childhood*) and Taoist texts (*One breath left*), these chants become a retelling of myths and cultural stories enmeshed with theatrical craft in which the performer undergoes a process of active questioning and develops an extra-daily presence. I would say that the performances share similar narrative motifs: the characters' journeys towards an answer or awakening. These are formulated simultaneously through the fictional narrative and the actual singing, a cross between theatrical and ritualistic behaviours that gives the performers a heightened mode of presence. Nonetheless, it seems that in both cases this journey does not lead forwards, but rather represents a return to a mythical origin: in these performances the use of traditional songs as tools to find again long-lost knowledge is always present.

The journeys pursued in these works also relate to Mircea Eliade's description of space and time in religious ceremonies. The performers' mode of action transforms the space into the 'only *real* and *real-ly* existing space'.²⁶ Their 'world of the play' can only exist in such a space, and it is a place they must create since, '*If the world is to be lived in, it must be founded* – no world can come to birth in the chaos of homogeneity and



FIG 3 *Gospels of Childhood*, the stoning of Maria (Kamila Klamut). Photograph by Tom Dombrowski.

relativity of the profane space.²⁷ Thus the emphasis is on creating a strong separation between the outside world and the performative space, be that in unavoidable travel from an urban centre to a forest or in the warning that what the spectator is about to see is not exactly a theatre performance. Even when previously unfamiliar with this kind of artistic endeavour, outsiders keep a decorum that demonstrates an unspoken understanding of the space's 'sacredness'. For example, no one chats or carelessly crosses the playing area on their way to their seats, and there is seldom applause at the end.

This relationship with the space and the action also brews a non-linear sense of time and that is, by definition, extraordinary: 'It follows that *every construction or fabrication has the cosmogony as a paradigmatic model*. The creation of the world becomes the archetype of every creative human gesture, whatever its plane of reference may be'.²⁸ Engagement with traditional songs stemming from mythical narratives and founded in ancient traditions, in a space constructed by the artists as the original home of these events, transforms time into a 'primordial mythical time made present'.²⁹ The re-enactment of the mythical narrative reactualizes the event and 'a return *in illo tempore*, to a past that is mythical, completely unhistorical'.³⁰ These works bring forth a sense of time that exists in the continuum between the original and the present moments.

The idea of an original time permeates the narratives in both the chants and the sacred texts explored by these artists. In the case of Ang's role in *One breath left* and in the narrative of Marta and Maria in *Gospels of Childhood*, one can see how both performances put forth a 'hero' at a turning point, confronting a moment pregnant with both danger and revelation. In *One breath left* the woman played by Ang wavers between life and death, and is aware that this moment of passage from one world to another may hold the key to understanding the meaning of her life. The non-linear structure of the piece makes the beginning and the end of life different and yet the same. The directors' montage, and Ang's relationship with the material and singing, create for the lead character a frame that is analogous to Avicenna's recitals, forging her journey's narrative through the weaving of ancient texts, traditional songs, and Ang's personal memory. Her performance in the Workcenter's *One breath left* effectively answers Grotowski's question in 'From the Theatre Company to Art as Vehicle':

Can one work on two registers in the same performative structure? On Art as presentation (the making of the public performance) and, at the same time, on Art as vehicle?

This is the question that I ask myself. Theoretically I see that it should be possible; in my practice I have done these two things in different periods of my life: Art as presentation and Art as vehicle. But are they both possible within the same performative structure?³¹

Ultimately, to work simultaneously on the two registers suggested by Grotowski – public presentation and inner work – performer and character must undergo a process of interpenetration in which the singing of a traditional song while following the narrative's thread becomes a way to access and embody knowledge.



FIG 4 *Gospels of Childhood*, Lazarus' sisters Maria (Kamila Klamut) and Marta (Ditte Berkeley).
"Photographer: Jarotaw Fret"

In *Gospels of Childhood* the central character is already dead at the start of the performance and thus physically absent. The grief inflicted by the loss of Lazarus allows his two sisters, Marta and Maria, to experience and confront faith, compassion, divine love and fallibility (Fig. 4). The sisters function as the 'heroes' of the narrative, those with whom the audience empathizes. As two opposite poles in this questioning process – Maria is subdued by grief but nonetheless hopeful, while Marta's reaction is of anger and confrontation – they seem to construct different facets of the same person, a parallel also visible in the way they embody the experiences of other biblical characters: Lazarus, the Christ, the Holy Mother and many others. By being at the same time one and many, Lazarus' sisters catalyse the embodiment of questions capital to early Christian Gnostic thought.

In the case of Avicenna's trilogy of recitals, Corbin explains that 'the spontaneous flowering of symbols should appear to us as corresponding to a fundamental psychic structure, and *eo ipso* as revealing to us not arbitrary and "fanciful" forms Their spontaneity is so far from being arbitrary that it exhibits striking recurrences in cultures far apart in time and space . . .'.³² As such, 'by substituting a dramaturgy for cosmology, the recitals guarantee the genuineness of this universe,' and thus transform their enactment into the experiential knowledge of such texts.³³ The journeys contained in Avicenna's trilogy create 'the initiation that re-cites—that is to say, 'again puts into the present'—teaches the fundamental *orientation* The possibility of this orientation once given,

it likewise becomes possible to answer the question ‘where?’ by indicating a *meaning*, a *direction*, that situates human existence’.³⁴ Also in the two performances I examine here, the narrative puts the central characters at the beginning of a journey toward finding this ‘fundamental orientation’, and the use of traditional chants plays a key role in this process. In the two performances, the experience of singing receives the support of the texts by Taoist masters and apocryphal gospels, respectively. Singing traditional chants becomes a ‘re-citing’ that ‘again puts into present’.

Rozik further explains that myth ‘commands total belief . . . or, rather, involvement. It would appear that in modern society myth has lost its “numinous” meaning, but we still witness the deep involvement of audiences whenever it serves as a clear component of a fictional world’.³⁵ If it is true that the strength of the mythical frame within a religious context is perhaps lost for us, throughout *The Sacred and the Profane* Eliade sustains that its awareness, even if faintly, is ever-present – and may be one of the reasons why this kind of work effectively attracts the spectator and the non-initiated. Perhaps the exploration of traditional chants does re-create, through committed embodiment, a mythical experience within the performative realm. Thus, more than or rather than fabricating new rituals or a theatrical genre, works that draw from such mythical sources encourage a way of performing, a mode of action and presence that relies on elements from both fields. In presenting their heroes’ journey, performers engaged mode of action is no longer *acting*, but the actual *doing* of the characters’ journey as a means to gain insight.

The texts in *One breath left* and *Gospels of Childhood* also address questions that surpass their specific cultural sources. For the artists, the reciting of sacred texts and the singing of ancient chants appear to hold the key to this sought-after transformative path. One can say that their characters function as epic heroes on a journey leading towards ‘knowledge’ – even if its definition or understanding varies from one artist to another. It may be located in a reconnection to one’s ethnic roots, family ancestors, spiritual cradle; a mythical place or remembrance of oneself in childhood; or to a point in time so far back that it defies history’s chronology. But, in all, the search is pursued in the act of performing, reciting, and singing, driving a process towards self-remembrance and inner work. Singing activates the performer’s memory – be that cultural, mythical or psychological – and here to remember is to engage in a creative act.

The same is true in ‘the mental operation’ provoked by Avicenna’s recitals: ‘Ta’wīl [this mental operation] is, etymologically and inversely, to *cause to return*, to lead back, to restore to one’s origin and to the place where one comes home, consequently to return to the true and original meaning of a text’. Quoting from Ivanow’s *Kalāmi Pīr*, Corbin explains that *ta’wīl* means ‘to bring something to its origin . . . Thus he who practices the ta’wīl is the one who turns his speech from the external (exoteric) form toward the inner reality’.³⁶ And, if the character’s story is one of awakening and self-transformation, its execution lies in the performer’s process of contact with her inner stimuli as she seeks to embody traditional wisdom. In both kinds of narrative, those stemming from the traditional chants as well as Avicenna’s recitals, the observer sees that this ‘mode of presence is usually concealed beneath the tissue of didactic demonstrations and impersonal developments’.³⁷



FIG 5 Ang Gey Pin in *Recital of the Bird*. Photograph by Jennifer Lavy.

The process of learning oral traditions demands *precision in the performance* of the cultural material, the *repetition* of the narrative's execution, and the doer's *active search* for the vibratory potential of these traditional chants. Thus this work on songs and traditional texts is based on great precision and detail, reliving the definition and function of art in older traditions. The *doing* of an ancient art form that brings forth a mythical reality lies in the quality of a practitioner's embodied experience.

In different histories of diaspora or exile, the practice of song has long acted as a tool of connection to a bygone land and time, the origin, a desire to re-cite a memory so strongly that it is as if such past existence could become re-actualized. This process is clear in the execution of African diaspora dances and music within religious contexts today. As noted by Yvonne Daniel in *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé*, 'For ritual community members, the dance/music performances suggest myths and retell cultural stories, but most important, they charter and encourage social behavior in present everyday lives'.³⁸ The search for an 'origin' or for an original 'home' is present in both works: the apocryphal stories and polyphonic chants in *Gospels of Childhood* and *One breath left's* Hokkien songs and Taoist texts. This longing for an origin permeates time, space and the self and, as such, reveals itself in the performers' *doing* of the mythical narrative contained in such traditional chants and texts. Just as in Avicenna's *Recital of the Bird*, the performer is the 'hero' singing her way back (Fig. 5).

If the processes elicited by singing are inherently private, they are at the same time compelling to those at the periphery of these events. Listeners are driven to engage in

the mythical reality these performers create in their work and become recipients of these traditional songs' transmission. But why do such musical narratives, told in languages unintelligible to us and in musical patterns we may not recognize, come across as so important? As ancient cultural traditions passed down for generations, the chants seem to channel multiple voices that speak through one single body – that of the performer – appearing as the repository of multiple experiences that carry a most fundamental lesson about human experience.

Though the reasons for our engagement may vary, the one that interests me most is what Grotowski called the process of induction. In speaking of Art as vehicle, Thomas Richards describes the process of induction as analogous to the transmission of an electrical current: 'because there is current in this first wire, there can also appear in the second wire close to it the traces of an electrical current'.³⁹ The phenomenon may take place 'when someone is witnessing the performing structure in which the doers are going toward this "inner action," this transformation of energy. Inside themselves, as they are watching, witnesses might begin to perceive something of what is happening to the doers'.⁴⁰ In these circumstances, listening is not passive but an active moment of contact.

This phenomenon also happens in the process of learning sacred chants, when the apprentice can become a new carrier of the tradition. The process of learning these songs – as much as dance and ritual behaviour – is a kinaesthetic experience, one that dispenses with and defies the authority of written transmission. Artists learn by imitation rather than through detailed deconstruction. The contact between inner stimuli and traditional elements demands from the student this very special kind of 'receptive attention'. In receiving the transmission of an oral tradition, the combination of one's emotional attention, intellect and intuitive way of approaching the new information is paramount in transforming teaching into embodied knowledge. In this context, artistic practice becomes more than extra-daily, more than virtuosity, and carries the potential to activate one's inner life and creativity through the contact with such refined cultural tools.

About her apprenticeship with African diaspora dances, Daniel explains that the 'super-attentive process of imitation, intuition, repetitive practice, and finally intensification and improvisation (a kinesthetic learning process) enlivened all my senses'.⁴¹ This enlivening of senses ultimately leads to the practitioner's awakening to a higher level of awareness that bypasses narrative or intellectual learning to privilege oral transmission. This process directly informs the performer's mode of action, which Rozik qualifies as an integral part of ritual practices.

Traditional chants contain root and transformation, as performative elements of diasporic, displaced and endangered cultures cultivated in contemporary settings. The act of singing becomes the road back 'home' – a place that is simultaneously far away in time and space, and nearby, as it lives in the body. Even if, as Corbin speculates about Avicenna's work, 'It may prove that the *letter* of his cosmological system is closed to the immediate consciousness of our time',⁴² continued attraction towards contact with the knowledge transmitted by ancient traditions reveals an intuitive drive towards a meeting with one's origin.

NOTES

- 1 At Wesleyan University, I would like to thank the Center for Faculty Career Development and the Center for the Humanities for supporting this research. I am also indebted to Jean Graham-Jones, Tatiana Motta Lima, Eli Rozik, Jeremy Zwelling and Alden Ferro for their invaluable input in earlier drafts of this article.
- 2 Jerzy Grotowski, 'From the Theatre Company to Art as Vehicle,' in Thomas Richards, *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 113–35, here p. 126. (Emphasis in original C.T.N.)
- 3 With regard to theatre, Stanislavsky searched for an approach that would invite work on oneself – which in part explains Grotowski's interest in the Russian director.
- 4 The Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards, ed., *Tracing Roads Across* (Vienna: Rema Print, 2003), p. 10. Mario Biagini was *One Breath Left*'s principal director, though Thomas Richards also contributed as an adviser to the piece.
- 5 Eli Rozik, *The Roots of Theatre: Rethinking Ritual and Other Theories of Origin* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), p. ix.
- 6 The written form of Art as vehicle has varied since English director Peter Brook coined the term. For this reason, both 'Art as vehicle' and 'art as vehicle' appear in this article. In my own writings I choose to use the former, employed by Grotowski himself.
- 7 Grotowski, 'From the Theatre Company to Art as Vehicle,' pp. 124–6.
- 8 Liu participated in Grotowski's Objective Drama research. In 1998 she founded U-Theatre, which explores traditional Asian percussion, chanting, martial arts and Buddhist meditation techniques. In October 2003 the company presented the piece *The Sound of Ocean* at the Next Wave Festival of the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM).
- 9 I apply the term psychophysical action as explained in Stanislavsky's late writings.
- 10 *One Breath Left*, programme notes, 2000.
- 11 *Tracing Roads Across*, p. 10
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Here I refer to the first version I saw, in 2000.
- 15 E-mail correspondence with the author, 26 January 2006.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 In late 2007 Teatr ZAR performed *Gospels of Childhood* at the UCLA Live, University of California, Los Angeles.
- 18 Teatr ZAR, information materials.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Presently Przemysław Błaszczak plays the role.
- 21 In the performance, Berkeley speaks English while the other actors speak Polish.
- 22 The Gospel of Mark (Mark 14:51–2) is this sequence's point of departure. In it, a group of soldiers arrests Jesus, and when a young man passes by the soldiers cannot touch him. For Rudolf Steiner, the young man represents Jesus' soul. In *Gospels of Childhood*'s montage, there is a juxtaposition of meanings that combines this narrative, the rape after the wedding party and the imagination of Maria seeking for Lazarus' soul. For mew, the moment creates a kind of violent version of the Immaculate Conception.
- 23 For Fret, the flames symbolize the presence of all spirits who have been resurrected.
- 24 Later, in *Apocalypsis cum figuris*, Zygmunt Molik played a part similar to Komorowska's in her scene with Mirecka. See Jennifer Kumiega, *The Theatre of Grotowski* (London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 87–105.
- 25 Patrice Pavis, *The Intercultural Performance Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 6.
- 26 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959), p. 20.
- 27 Ibid., p. 21. (emphasis in original C.T.N.)
- 28 Ibid., p. 45. (emphasis in original C.T.N.)
- 29 Ibid., p. 68. (emphasis in original C.T.N.)

- 30 Ibid., p. 90.
- 31 Grotowski, 'From the Theatre Company to Art as Vehicle,' p. 132.
- 32 Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960), p. 259.
- 33 Ibid., p. 4.
- 34 Ibid., p. 16. (emphasis in original C.T.N.)
- 35 Rozik, *The Roots of Theatre*, p. 295; citations omitted.
- 36 Quoted in Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, p. 29.
- 37 Ibid., p. 4.
- 38 Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press), p. 1.
- 39 Thomas Richards, 'The Edge Point of Performance (Fragments), Interviewer: Lisa Wolford', in Richard Schechner and Lisa Wolford, eds., *The Grotowski Sourcebook* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 432–59, here p. 441.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom*, p. 16.
- 42 Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, p. 10. (emphasis in original, C.T.N.)

CLÁUDIA TATINGE NASCIMENTO, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Theater at Wesleyan University. Also an actor and director, Tatinge Nascimento specializes in creating original performances from materials such as short stories and traditional songs. She has performed and published internationally. With the New World Performance Laboratory (NWPL), Tatinge Nascimento participated in the final session of Jerzy Grotowski's *Objective Drama* at UC-Irvine. In 2007 she directed *Pornographic Angel*, a stage adaptation of short stories by Brazilian playwright Nelson Rodrigues, at the Ohio Theater, NYC. Her first book, *Crossing Cultural Borders through the Actor's Work: Foreign Bodies of Knowledge*, is forthcoming with Routledge Research in 2008.