

## The Interdisciplinary Theatre of Ping Chong: Exploring Curiosity and Otherness

*The Interdisciplinary Theatre of Ping Chong: Exploring Curiosity and Otherness.* Yuko Kurahashi. Jefferson, NC: McFarland Books, 2020; Pp. 240.

Yuko Kurahashi's *The Interdisciplinary Theatre of Ping Chong: Exploring Curiosity and Otherness* presents the first comprehensive analysis of Ping Chong's five-decade long theatre career in which, according to Kurahashi, Chong "has created the largest and most complex body of work of any Asian American artist" (5). Kurahashi defines Chong as an "avant-garde artist who is also Asian American" instead of an "Asian American avant-garde artist" in order to highlight that his work extends beyond issues of Asian American identity and focuses on broader global concerns of displaced communities, marginalization, and racial and economic injustice (5). Kurahashi's study traces the evolution of Chong's performances from his early abstract productions to his multi-media performances, historical projects, and community-based oral histories, while also detailing the manner in which "the trajectory of his life and experiences underpin" his art (173).

In Chapter 1, "Transpacific Journey of Two Opera Artists," Kurahashi introduces the broader cultural and political landscape that Chong was born into in 1946 in Toronto, noting seminal moments that led to the massive influx of Chinese immigrants to North America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the discriminatory laws enacted by America and Canada to stem this flow. Chong's parents were both Cantonese Opera artists (his father was a director and his mother was a performer) who first made their way from Guangzhou, China, to San Francisco in the 1930s with a traveling Cantonese Opera company, before moving to Canada and finally settling in New York in 1947. Kurahashi emphasizes the impact that being raised in an immigrant household had on Chong, with issues of "isolation, loneliness, and the struggle of self-identity" recurring in his work as he grapples with being a "culturally hyphenated man" in America (11).

Chapter 2 details Chong's formative collaborative relationship with Meredith Monk that began after he completed his undergraduate degree in film at the School of Visual Arts in New York. He joined the Meredith Monk Dance Company in 1972, and later that year, Chong and Monk collaborated on the dance *Paris*. This collaboration provided the foundation for Chong's early performances that emphasized abstraction, non-linear or non-existent narratives, tableau, music, dance, voice-overs, "framing" by constructing faux proscenium arches, projections, "bricolage" (a technique inspired by Joseph Cornell's artwork in which Chong juxtaposed unassociated objects onstage to create new meaning), incorporation of movement styles inspired by Japanese Noh and other Asian performance traditions, and use of language as a "medium" instead of an "instrument of communication" (35-41). Kurahashi reads these early experiments as Chong's attempt to "integrate a multiplicity of stage elements to provoke the audience to look at the work and their world anew" (42).

Chapters 3-10 introduce Chong's major performances from 1975-2017. Kurahashi presents his works chronologically, while also dividing the performances into thematic "categories" including fear of the unknown (Chapter 3), myths (Chapter 4), modern dystopia (Chapter 5), revisionary history of East-West relations (Chapter 6), staging voices in the community (Chapter 7), memories and stories of local communities (Chapter 8), puppet theatre (Chapter 9), and collaborating with educational institutions

(Chapter 10). In each chapter, Kurahashi presents “mini-reviews” of 2-5 performances in which she briefly describes the design (set, costumes, props, music, etc.) and images from the works, while also providing her interpretation of the performances’ meaning. Kurahashi’s brief analysis often relies on piecing together published reviews, resulting in a fragmented description that is difficult to visualize. Black and white rehearsal and production photographs are important additions to the book, providing readers with a clearer understanding of the performance aesthetics.

Kurahashi’s analysis is most insightful in Chapters 6, 7, and 8. In Chapter 6, she critiques Chong’s “departure from the abstract and allegorical works he completed in the 1970s and 1980s” as he shifts to “historical works which focus on cultural collisions and encounters” in *The East/West Quartet* (82). Kurahashi describes this series as an attempt to “bring to light history which would otherwise disappear” (86). Each of the four performances addresses specific cultural and political junctures of contestation: *Deshima* (1990) portrays Japanese and Western colonialism from the sixteenth through twentieth century (82), *Chinoiserie* (1995) illustrates the manner in which Western powers attempted to assert financial and political control over China (84), *After Sorrow* (1997) depicts Chinese and Vietnamese culture through a poetic combination of music, dance, text, and projections (85), and *Pojagi* (1999) demonstrates the impact colonizers had on Korea which culminated in the division of the country during the Korean War (85).

Chapters 7 and 8 are dedicated to Chong’s ongoing collaborative, community-based oral history series, *Undesirable Elements* (1992–present). Chong initially designed the series as a creative space for displaced people to share their personal narratives before expanding the emphasis to encompass people who he describes as having experienced “otherness beyond the boundaries of the transit” (101). For the series, Chong and his creative team visit a host community, interview local residents, select the participants for the production, conduct more in-depth interviews, refine the “scripts,” then rehearse what Chong describes as a “seated opera for the spoken word” (99). Foregoing the elaborate theatrical design of his earlier works, the *Undesirable Elements* series requires minimal scenery, with performers seated in a semi-circle facing the audience and reading from their scripts (100). These performances provide a public space for marginalized people to share their memories of the past and dreams for the future (110). Chong has developed over forty productions with diverse communities in cities including Berlin, Tokyo, Rotterdam, Seattle, and New York.

In the book’s final chapter, “Future: *ALAXSXA/ALASKA* and Beyond—Quest for Identity, Otherness, and Humanity,” Kurahashi describes one of Chong’s most recent works, *ALAXSXA/ALASKA*, which addresses environmental and political concerns of Alaska’s Indigenous people before addressing trends in Chong’s ongoing work. In this closing analysis and throughout the book, I found myself longing for more interviews with Chong and his collaborators, more details about his creative process (how does Chong structure his interview process and textual revisions?), and clearer descriptions of Chong’s performances instead of lengthy interpretations of their meaning. Nevertheless, *The Interdisciplinary Theatre of Ping Chong: Exploring Curiosity and Otherness* will serve as a useful introductory resource for scholars and classrooms, helping to deepen critical understanding about one of the most important and, unfortunately, overlooked theatre artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

**Craig Quintero**  
Grinnell College

