

Gua Khee

Welcome to *Making a Scene*, an Esplanade podcast on how art gets made. I'm Chong Gua Khee, a theatre director and performance-maker, and today's conversation will focus on adaptations as reflected through the work of Zuni Icosahedron, a Hong Kong-based experimental theatre company that is presenting a stage adaptation of Hong Kong writer Chan Ho-Kei's novel *13.67* at the upcoming *Huayi* festival.

Very delighted to have Mathias Woo to speak about this with us today, Mathias is the Executive Director and Co-Artistic Director of Zuni, and also the Director and one of two people who worked on adapting the novel for the stage production. Thanks Mathias for calling in from Hong Kong for this conversation!

Mathias

Thank you. Hi, my pleasure.

Gua Khee

Lovely. So just to kick the conversation off, I want to read to you and our listeners some quotes that really struck me from a series of four articles titled 'How to understand Zuni', which Zuni commissioned for your 40 UNCOMING series, as a way (and I quote) "to review and reflect on what Zuni has been doing" over the past 40 years of your work as a company.

So 'Tradition' is actually the very first article in the series, and the writer, Dr. Rossella Ferrari – Professor of Chinese Studies at the University of Vienna, Austria, and also Regional Managing Editor for China at The Theatre Times – says the following about Zuni's work:

Zuni's artistic exploration follows four main directions: reinterpreting the classics, reinventing tradition, recreating theatre through media and technology, and reconnecting theatre with social movements.

[...]

[And] How does Zuni reinvent tradition? "Reinventing tradition" means to bring forms of art and culture that have been passed down through generations, over centuries, to the new generations of today. Forms of art and culture from the past are adapted to new ways of thinking and given new meanings that can be relevant to contemporary audiences.

Zuni have reinterpreted classic literary and dramatic texts as means to understand the past, illuminate its importance for the present, and think about the future.

So the article goes on a bit more to address the questions of why does this matter, right, why does tradition matter, why should we "reinvent" tradition, so I'm not going to recap those questions in this podcast, but what I *do* want to pick up from these quotes is – how do you choose which classics to reinterpret? There are so many great literary and dramatic texts out there, how does Zuni or how do you make a decision about which classic to revisit? And maybe you can refer to your thinking process with *13.67*, Zuni's upcoming production at *Huayi*, as an example?

Mathias

I think it's always related to the context. So we are living in the context of a society, in the context of time, in the context of our surroundings. Why we pick[ed] 13.67 is because it's about history. As we all know, what happened in Hong Kong for the last five years have been very dramatic, and it's an accumulation of history. I mean, a lot of historical event[s] is accumulation of different kinds of social events. And I think this novel – it's a very good way to talk about Hong Kong history, and not as a political way, but as a way to talk about [history]. [13.67] use[s] the story of a police, and I think one of the reason why entertainment always like to pick police as a kind of character for movies, for TV dramas, [is] because police is part of the society – no matter what, you will have police and police have to handle all sorts of thing[s]. Very mundane thing[s] or very you know, violent or very, I mean, a lot of varieties... And somehow I think the structure of this novel is already reinterpreting history. And when we talk about tradition, tradition is always about history, and history is about transformation of time and space.

Why it [is] called 13.67 [is because] it talks about the life of a police [officer] from 2013 to 1967. So 1967 is when he was young, and as a junior police officer. And then the structure is [that] each chapter is about every 10 years, or every decade of his transformation, from a junior police officer patrolling on the street, and in 2013, he's like entering his last stage of his life, but he's using the latest technology to communicate with his colleague to solve a crime, you know.

So the parallel text is a lot about the transformation of technology, the transformation of society, a lot of thing[s]. And I find this novel have a lot of creative frameworks that allows me to reinterpret it in a stage production that could talk about what Hong Kong history is about, or what history is about. When we talk about history, we always end up [talking about the] 'history of power'. When we study history at school, most of the time, we spend a lot of time studying [the] transformation of power, you know, who become kings, who become prime minister. But history is not just about power, it's also about what happen[s] surrounding the power, like technology. When telephone[s] [were] invented, that transform[ed] the way how human beings communicate. [And then] we have radio, and then later on, we have television, we have computer, we have internet, now we have the phone, you know, and I think the history of technology somehow I think is more important and more interesting than the history of politics you know, from my point of view.

Gua Khee

Mhm thanks for that. Yeah, I think as you were talking, it became clear that it wasn't just about the history of Hong Kong society that drew you to 13.67 or '1 3 6 7'. But also the other layers, that it felt possible for Zuni to shade in. I think as a reader of the novel, I was quite conscious of the kind of like societal angle, but not so much the technology angle. But you're absolutely right. I think the way the novel traces the story of the detective, you absolutely can see that kind of more advanced technology [in the last story] compared to the very first story, the beginning, right, for this detective. Is technology something that is very important for you when you're thinking about how you're adapting a piece?

Mathias

I think theatre is about technology. If there is no technology, there's no theatre. I think theatre is the product of technology. And it keeps transforming. I think the reason why theatre still makes sense today is because theatre is about real time, real space. The audience go to a theatre because they want to have a real experience, rather than have it on the phone, or watching it online or at home. It's different, because at home, it's more like a personal experience. But the issue is the concept of theatre we are having now is still a 100-year-old concept. We are still

stuck with this 100 years ago format of theatres. And so all the audience have to be seat[ed], and then have to be like watching in the same direction, you know, that sort of thing.

So the pandemic is interesting, we actually magnify the impact of the online content. So a lot of people are get[ting] used to watching online content now. The online content is so convenient, as most of the time it's free of charge, you know, and so this is much more competitive for the mass consumption markets. So then why we need to go to theatre for – I mean, for Zuni, for us, I think theatre is more like an intellectual soul searching, that you go to theatre to understand more about the world, understand more about yourself or to be more dialectic, rather than [to be] manipulate[d] by the social media, you know. Because you have to be committed, you have to buy a ticket, you have to go inside the theatre, you have to be concentrated, you have to be totally committed when you go to a theatre. Since Zuni is more experimental theatre, we always like to explore the relationship between the audience and the work, you know, how the work can make sense to the community.

So I think one interesting thing about 13.67 is [that] it's very popular among schools. So when we open up this special performance for schools, high schools, [the shows are] very popular always. And I'm also thinking, 'is it possible that theatre could be a learning process rather than just entertainment?' So when the kids come [to] see the show, it can trigger them to think, rather than manipulate them to be manipulated, you know. I think the intellectual exercise is how can we make theatre inspiring, so that people know they are being manipulated. Because the most terrible thing about manipulation is, you don't know you are being manipulated, you know. [laughs] Why social media is so scary [is] because they can manipulate you, and you really don't know that you are being manipulated. And somehow I think why theatre makes sense, why theatre make[s] us more intelligent, make[s] us more rational, is because [of] the dialectic element of theatre. Because it's a commitment. And maybe what Zuni believe[s] is [that] theatre space is a place for dialogue, it's a place for awakening, rather than for you to be manipulated or [for it to be] sensational, because theatre can also be very sensational and manipulative.

Gua Khee

Wow, there are so many threads from that that are really exciting for me, I really love this idea of theatre as an intellectual soul searching. And yet at the same time playing with the accessibility of it right, so it doesn't feel scary to come to the theatre. Because, as you said, it *is* a very big commitment. And I'm so appreciative that with 13.67, that it was opened up to the schools. And even though maybe the schools and students are coming here because it's a popular story, but through coming to the theatre, you're also then able to expose them to a different kind of experience.

Mathias

Yes, this new German immersive audio technology – it's a new way of sound engineering. So traditionally, you have the two channels left and right and then later on, you have the 5.1, 7.1, the cinema-type audio. But for immersive audio, it's not just about sound effect, it makes the sound source invisible. So you just feel the sound. But then in the condition that you have to have a very good sound engineer to tune it right. You can't do it by AI, you need to have a sound engineer or audio practitioner that understand[s] the technology and then [can] facilitate[s] that. And the audio technology I think is a very important part of this 13.67 piece is [because] during the pandemic, all the performer[s] have to wear masks, okay? But when you wear masks, and then you want to talk on the stage, audio-wise this doesn't work at all.

And then I have this idea of using this immersive technology, because the immersive audio technology can do sound positioning, which means the sound will come from the musician or the actor onstage. It's not coming from the speaker, the sound is coming from the person you see or saw onstage. So we pre-recorded the whole dialogue, we pre-recorded the script, so like a radio play, okay? And then we use the soundscape technology so that we can position, so the audience will feel that it's real-life talking. It's not. They're [the performers] acting like they're talking, but then the audio is from the audio file and it works quite nice.

Another thing about immersive audio is if you tune it right, all the audience will have good sound quality. But traditional theatre does – the audience sitting on the outer right or outer left side, the audio quality won't be that good. But then for the immersive audio, because the idea is to distribute the frequency of sound, so more than 80% of the audience will listen to good quality sound, if you tune it right. The sound quality is more democratic.

Gua Khee

This makes me think about what we were talking about at the beginning about adaptations, right, that the choice of what work to respond to is also a product of the context – the context of modern society [and the constraints of pandemic times], the context of the technology that we have [access to] to work with. I'm also really enjoying hearing you talk about the politics of the technology. I love that you talk about the immersive sound system not just as being about immersion itself, but also the democratisation of the sound. By being able to work with new sound systems, and even thinking about different parts of the visual, playing with multimedia, playing with different screens, those are also ways of thinking about technology as a way of democratising the audience experience in the theatre space itself.

Mathias

And then what kind of democracy you're talking about. So when I am adapting this novel, one thing [that is] also very interesting, [is that] I get some criticism from the fans of this book saying that I have been too simplify. But yes, I'm simplifying because the length of this book – if I'm adapting [it] into [a] TV drama, there's no problem. I can make it into like a 40-episode drama, it will be perfect, that it will truly telling you all the details from the novel, because of the form. The TV drama form allows this kind of adaptation, but I'm adapting it for theatres. When I'm adapting for theatre, there are certain time constraints. People can't sit there eight hours, you know, nonstop, you know. [laughs] So there are certain limitations, especially nowadays people can't stay in a theatre for too long you know, especially [when] the seating are so badly designed. [laughs]

It just remind[s] me is that a theatre is about space. One of the reason[s] why Berlin Philharmonic is such a great philharmonic is not just the [quality of the] Philharmonic itself, but they have a fantastic musical hall. The space is very comfortable, every seat is like a business class seat – *every* seat. You can sit there very comfortably to enjoy the space and [the] audio quality are so good. That's one of the reasons why Berlin Philharmonic sounds different when they are in Hong Kong, where the design is not so- as good as it is [back in Berlin]. Because [for] the western philharmonic concept, you need to work with a hall too, with the space too.

When I'm adapting this novel, one very clear concept is to talk about Hong Kong history from 1967 to 2013, you know, which is a very important period for Hong Kong, as a lot of transformations [took place in this period] – of politics, of economy, of a lot of things, you know. So I want audience to grab this feeling, to understand this kind of transformation of Hong Kong from '67 when we have the riot, one of the biggest riot in Hong Kong and that riot really

transformed Hong Kong, because it changed a lot of policy of the British colonial government, you know, and they pay more attention to certain things. And then it do [lead to] more capacity building to be a more modernised city, like we have the MTR [Mass Transit Railway; a major public transport network in Hong Kong], all the advanced mass transit railway system in the 80s, you know, a lot of new technology come up because that's part of the package when you want to develop the economy. You can't develop the economy without technology. I mean, same with democracy too, you can't have democracy without technology.

So that's why technology is very important for this work, and also how we talk about it and related to all the six stories. I'm not adapting the story line by line, but I'm adapting the concept of each story, and start from the character, and also the different genre of drama and theatre, because that is related to that particular period of time. There's a lot of unique character of different periods, and then how we create a genre [for each period], and oh maybe that's one of the reasons why teachers like to bring school kids [to] come, because I think it [the show] is more like a summary of Hong Kong history. It's like a TED talk, but in a dramatic form, to tell you something about Hong Kong.

Gua Khee

I think what you were saying about context becomes very, very salient now that you're bringing the show from Hong Kong to Singapore, right? What does it mean to bring it [the show] over to Singapore, which has a maybe different perspective on Hong Kong than Hong Kongers themselves might have on this novel?

Mathias

The Hong Kong [and] Singapore always...it's like a twin. I mean, a tale of two cities. Somehow, we have this kind of cultural tie, cultural connection. I mean the language, we're also bilingual, we can switch language, Chinese, English, and then we are very flexible and open, you know. There are a lot of similarity and somehow, I think it's good to bring that [13.67] to Singapore- Maybe it's also a way to reflect – Because some subject matter is similar, the context... I think bringing this work here, it's also good to see how the audience responds to this kind of work. You don't need to think too much, you just enjoy the audio experience, enjoy the acting, enjoy the plot. But then there are certain contexts – I develop some ideas in between each scene. I try to connect each scene with a very important transformation of Hong Kong.

So for example, one particular scene, I talk about the history of Cantopop songs. All the Cantonese identity start[ed] in the 60s. Before that, Hong Kong is still a kind of mix and match, with people from Shanghai, from Mandarin and we don't have what we call a Cantonese identity. But in the 60s, the Cantonese style songs become more and more popular, it become Cantopop, and Cantopop become so popular in Asia. And then it become a unique pop song format. So there's one part I connect the 60s and certain period of time [in the novel]. There's a lot of connecting scenes between each scene, that there's certain subject matters [that are highlighted]. So I'm really looking forward to see how the Singapore audience responds to this work.

Gua Khee

What I'm hearing from you is that your desire for this adaptation to also address [the] context of Hong Kong society is embedded within the way you have created the work itself, right, that it's not just a straight adaptation of the novel, but there are these connecting scenes that then help to give context, regardless of whether you are someone from Hong Kong or from Singapore,

that there may not necessarily need to be as much pre-reading or scaffolding material, that what is important to you about the work is embedded within the work itself.

I just want to go back to another thread that you had said earlier, where you were sharing that there were some readers of the novel who were actually quite upset with you and maybe feeling like it [the adaptation] was a simplification of the novel. I'm curious about your experience talking with or checking in with Chan Ho-Kei, the writer of the novel – was there a lot of consultation or you had free rein to do whatever with the material?

Mathias

I never talked to him. I don't even know him, you know. The story is like this, so I like this novel and then one day I talked to a graphic designer who [has] worked with me a long time and I told him – talking ah I find this novel very nice, and then he say 'I know people who knows him', then I said, okay, let's explore [an] adaptation of that.

And then he [the graphic designer] just talked to him [Chan Ho-Kei] and then he say good and then ask us to talk to the publisher, it's 皇冠, Crown Publishing, who also publish a lot of Eileen Chang's novels so we already know them, so we just say okay, let's do it. And actually, I think it should be like that. I don't think we need to – I don't want to talk to the author, you know. [laughs]. Because that's make it [the adaptation process] more interesting. I think different novelist[s] or writer[s] have different way[s] to handling adaptations, some just let it be, let it go, you know, but I never talked to him, and I didn't even know whether he watched it or not, you know. [laughs] I don't even know – probably he came, you know. Unless he say okay, let's collaborate, then that is a different matters, it's a different issue.

But I think one of his style is [that] he did a lot of research, so when we read his novel, it's a lot of details about a lot of things. One scene [that] I like very much, it's about pager, you know, pager? So it's a small box, only display some simple text and numbers. So you need to call back to the station and then they will tell you the message, you know, and then it's like Morse code, you will see the code, and he used this to talk about a crime scene. It's very interesting. You can really visualise some of the thing [scenes]. He [Chan Ho-Kei] is more like a very research(-driven) and hardworking writer. It's good. No, actually, there's no good or bad, but it's his whole style. And I enjoy reading this kind of thing, [it's] very interesting [to me]. So that's why I always like adapting academic work to [the] theatre world rather than the so-called novel, you know. Because I think that academic work somehow can create more space for imagination than a novel, in a way.

Gua Khee

I'm curious if you could share more about what your general process is for adapting or re-interpreting or reimagining a work, right? How does it normally start? Do you normally work by yourself or with someone else?

Mathias

It depends, different work[s] have different contexts. So I adapt[ed] another history book, [a] very important history book called '1587, a Year of Not Significant' [*1587, a Year of No Significance*; written by Ray Huang]. It's a very important book in China, modern China, because it's the book that inspires a lot of Chinese historian[s] to write history in a different way.

Because usually, the traditional way of writing Chinese history is more like a lot of mundane political terminology. But this work, it's based on the character, rather than based off a timeline

or historical incident. It talk[s] about an emperor, it talk[s] about a philosopher, it talks about a general, it talks about the people who are living in the era of 1587, which is the Ming Dynasty.

And the major thesis of this book is about why Chinese [China], or why Chinese civilisation [is] losing the capacity building power, and then cannot compete with the West. So it's more like a due diligence of the political and social system of the Ming Dynasty. But it's based on the character[s], so it's more like a novel. When it talks about the emperor, this Wanli Emperor, he's one of the longest serving emperor[s] of Chinese history. But also he take the longest leave [laughs] of an emperor, among the Chinese history, on record, you know, he just let the institution [run on] autopilot for many many years. And then this is the trigger point of the downfall of the Ming Dynasty. And the reason why he did that is very romantic. It's because he fell in love with one of his concubine[s], and then he wants to certify her as queen, but then there's a lot of resistance from the bureaucracy, you know, and then to fight this bureaucracy, then he don't show up to meetings. [laughs] That's more the spicy side of the story, but [the book also contains] a lot of details about how the institution work[s], and [the book] talk[s] about also the technology and [the] social context.

So I find this history book very interesting. And also it's a very unique way to talk about Chinese history. Because when I study Chinese history in high school, we need to remember a lot of facts. And it doesn't tell you why, you know, we just remember a lot of numbers – which year something happened, which year something happened. And then it's like a formula. I think one interesting thing about history is not formula, is how you formulate the history, it's more interesting. So when I adapt[ed] that, I work[ed] with a script writer, a TV script writer in Beijing, and he wrote a script. And I work[ed] with him and then adapted it to the stage.

10 years ago, I performed [Zuni presented] at Esplanade *18 Springs*, it's [an] adapt[ation of] a novel by Eileen Chang, 张爱玲. And [I] do it more like [in a] more respecting [way]. I tried to not write new things, I use all the text from the novel. Because I think the texts are very beautiful. I don't want to destroy the beauty, so when I adapt it, I try to keep all the lines. Actually 100% keep all the lines. So I think [for] different adaptations, I use different methodology that fit the context of the novel, rather than I have one formula, and then I use the formula for all the adaptation, no I never do that. And I won't do that. I think to adapt a work, you need to respect the work. And then if you want to respect the work, you need to create the context for the work, so that you can create a new connection between the work and the audience.

Gua Khee

I love that – the process really needs to be tailored to each specific work based on what the work itself is trying to do, what the work talks about, the way it's structured, and also where the context is in the modern society, right? The context of technology, the context of, you know, if it's pandemic [times], then there needs to be changes made to the staging format as well.

And at the same time, I think something that strikes me is this intellectual interest in really digging into each of these books, that it's not just about, oh I want to adapt this, but what are the new perspectives that this work can give us on how and where we are in today's world?

On this note, I wanted to then ask what is a context that you would love to see moving forward in the world – for theatre, for adaptations, for Zuni's work for the coming year and the years beyond.

Mathias

I think four areas that is important – one area is how we can adapt to new technology and create a new kind of theatrical experience that make[s] sense for people to go to theatres. Because now we are immersed by the consumption society, you know, that theatre as a space for public dialogue or for intellectual dialogue no longer exists.

So for the last few years, I like to start from kids. Because nowadays all the kids are controlled by phones, by iPhones, or – you go and observe – most of the parents will give the kids a phone and then the kids [are] quiet and then keep fiddling the phone. So it's like a cult, you know, and I'm really scary of that. And if you talk to [a] teenager, if you take away their phone, it's like take away their soul. [Laughs] Okay? So how can we deal with it? I think one thing is, can we create a theatre experience that can let them be more dialectic and understand how they relate to technology?

I've been doing this research with Japanese theatre consultant and some architects in Hong Kong to develop a new kind of theatre space for kids. And we have do[ne] some tests and quite interesting, you know, and doing the study, I find the- all the art education is the foundation of why human being is human being, because when we talk about art education, we talk about the five senses, we talk about reality. The five senses is about reality. But the phone is not about reality, the phone is about manipulation of reality. And people cannot focus. Because they have to keep looking at the phone. And when teenager[s] have this habit, then I really don't know what – maybe I'm too old fashioned. But I think one thing is – we need to rethink about what theatre is. I think less and less people will go to theatre, that's a fact. You cannot avoid it. Even in Europe. So how we are going to deal with it, we need to think of a way, especially since we [Zuni] are more experimental in nature, we could experiment [with] different forms or way[s]. So one thing is the space.

The other thing is the subject matter. I think social media is so dramatic, you know, so melodramatic. Every moment, there should be a story about tragedy, and then we consume tragedy. But then we forget. So like when you eat a lot of hot food, then you don't feel it's hot enough, you know? So how can we create a different [content] that are more related to real people? [Laughs] So how can we make theatre become a space for meditation? Not in a religious way, but to feel your breath, to know what- how you related to your breath, or what is reality. I mean, maybe that's also one possibility? And also learn something? You learn something from the theatre rather than [only] being entertained, because we have too many entertainment already. [Laughs]

The third issue is the education of artists. The education of creative people. We need to rethink [that]. I mean, like 100 years ago, Bauhaus develop[ed] a new curriculum based on the industrial revolution. I think [with] the new digital game, we need to think about that. I think that AI can replace most of the architect and designer work. And even journalists, writers, you know. I'm playing around with the AI for the last two years, I see how it's transforming. I mean, they [AI] make very good music now. But then, then what can we teach at our school? [Laughs] If technology is doing everything? We need to think about this. [Laughs]

The fourth part is policy. I think policy is important. We need to understand how policy affect creativity. So I'm talking the four elements, the space, the definition of art, [and the] education of artists, and then the fourth is policy. I don't think we need art policy, we need all the policy have art elements, then arts can have a way to develop in a very different and a new way to develop art, rather than if we confine it to art policy. The technological transformation is so drastic, and

so quick, [so] how we can deal with it. We need to find a new way to rethink what policy [is] and what art policy is. That will affect creativity.

Gua Khee

Yeah, the largest takeaway from this conversation for me is actually how do we play with the notion of adaptations on a much broader level right? How are we as artists and practitioners really adapting to the changing role of the arts in society? How do we refine and re-invent and keep in a way insisting for our relevance through both adjusting to the current context, working with the technology as it changes, and actually also really thinking about adapting ourselves for this context and creating the context as is needed right, not just going along passively, but quite actively creating the architectural [infrastructures], soft architectures as well as hard architecture, that's needed to support the thriving of arts in this society, because it is deeply important to counter the ways in which technology or the way society currently functions [that] supports that kind of like numbing effect where you just want more, more, more. Thank you very much, Matthias, for this incredible conversation.

Mathias

Thank you.

Gua Khee

Making a Scene is produced by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore's national performing arts centre. This episode of Making A Scene is commissioned by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay in conjunction with *Huayi – Chinese Festival of Arts*. Our theme music is from *Angels* by Hauste. Look for more episodes of *Making a Scene* at esplanade.com/offstage and on Spotify, Apple podcasts and Captivate.fm. Thanks for listening and stay tuned for more inspiring conversations with art makers.