

Power and Problems of Performance across Ethnic Lines

An Alternative Approach to Nontraditional Casting

William H. Sun

In discussions about nontraditional casting, especially in the articles published so far in *TDR* and in the February 2000 online discussion of the American Society for Theatre Research group (2000),¹ I often see a major discrepancy between theory and practice. A universalist theory—as articulated enthusiastically and polemically by Richard Schechner in his *TDR* Comment, “Race Free, Gender Free, Body-Type Free, Age Free Casting” (1989) and widely echoed in the ASTR discussion—promotes a humanist’s color-blind approach to theatre based on the belief that race and ethnicity, along with gender, are relative after all. Leslie Radford’s 8 February 2000 entry in the ASTR discussion gives strong support to this theory. Radford describes what she sees as life in Los Angeles:

I’m in Los Angeles, where, perhaps too often, life imitates art (and entertainment). Here, gender and ethnicity are becoming truly subjective, or perhaps just revealing that subjectivity: I routinely ask students about their cultural identity before I use that ethnicity in discussion. Parents, as often as not, do not resemble their offspring, and to assume they should (“Oh, who’s child is that?”) is in the worst possible taste. [...] I routinely have students who assiduously adopt some subculture that their appearance belies.

So life here is looking like the casting we thought dangerously experimental in grad school. In many theaters, to cast an apparently racially homogenous family is to distance the play, to reinforce the differences between the audience and the characters in time or place. The truth of staged life seems, to me, to be relative to the real life around it. (2000)

This picture certainly indicates that nontraditional casting, if it still needs to be described as such, should be anything goes, any direction is OK. In practice, however, nontraditional casting is always very specific in direction. In

two *TDR* articles elaborating the practical ramifications of nontraditional casting (Newman 1989; Schultz 1991), the focus was on “providing opportunity for minority actors” (Schultz 1991:7). Therefore, the issue was limited to non-white actors playing traditionally white roles. As Harry Newman reports, Actors’ Equity simply defines nontraditional casting “as the casting of ethnic and female performers in roles where race, ethnicity, or gender are not germane to the character’s or play’s development” (1989:24), brushing aside other types of nontraditional casting—ethnic roles played by actors of Caucasian or other ethnicities. Given that Actors’ Equity is a trade union, its focus on fair employment is understandable. Nonetheless, job opportunities for minority actors are only one of the many issues involved in performance across ethnic lines worth exploring.

As the universalist theory stands, nontraditional casting logically should translate into mixes of all kinds, just as Radford sees in her life around L.A. So why are its applications almost only one-way? Why do I hear so little about performance across ethnic lines *in both directions*? The aforementioned Schechner *TDR* Comment advocates a sweeping overhaul of traditional casting, which he sees as race specific, gender specific, body-type specific, and age specific. Schechner cites many bold possibilities, suggesting that his approach is more ambitious and comprehensive than that of most people debating non-traditional casting. What is conspicuously missing, however, is a specific mention of a very obvious possibility and a potentially explosive question eagerly awaiting candid discussion: Should, or can, non-white roles be played by actors of different ethnicities, especially whites?

Few people want to address this question because there is still a sometimes dangerous tension between ethnic groups. The picture Radford paints is heartening but I cannot help doubting its accuracy. I have also lived in L.A. and can see a lot of truth in her description. Yet we must not overlook the other side of the coin, which is equally, if not more, important. One doesn’t have to have lived in L.A. to know how severe the tension between ethnic groups can get there. The video clips of Rodney King, the 1992 riot (or uprising), and the O.J. Simpson trial are still fresh in our collective memory. Simpson could’ve been seen as devoid of color when he was a sports and acting star with a white wife. But what happened when he got in trouble, or caused trouble? Even in L.A. race is oftentimes the key to underlying problems, whether it is in legal practice, in politics, or in education. No one in theatre wants to mention the feasibility, or even possibility, of whites playing non-white roles. That great taboo might bring back the painful memories of blackface minstrelsy, a despicable example of racism in the history of American theatre.

To redress that type of derogatory stereotyping, many playwrights, of color as well as white, have done remarkable work in reverse cross-casting. Their approaches are often not simply color-blind but rather color specific—but in very nontraditional ways. Suzan-Lori Parks’ *The America Play* (1994) calls for an African American actor to play a black grave digger who is nicknamed the Foundling Father, looks like Abraham Lincoln, and plays Lincoln in order to be shot, repeatedly, by theme park visitors for fun and/or for revenge. This is not really so much acting across ethnic lines as playwriting which mocks ethnic lines. Jean Genet’s *The Blacks* (1959) deliberately requires black actors to play whites in whiteface, with a ring of black skin left showing. In the stage version of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior* (1994) by the Berkeley Repertory Theater, Mark Taper Forum, and Huntington Theatre, Asian and Asian American actors wore white masks to portray white characters.

Cross-ethnic casting has been a one-way street in this direction for decades with few, if any, exceptions. To have Jonathan Pryce play the lead in *Miss Saigon*, producer Cameron Mackintosh and his writers had to make the char-

acter, “Engineer,” a Eurasian, blurring the ethnic line. They still encountered tremendous objection from Asian American actors. And all the subsequent Engineers on Broadway have been Asians since Pryce left the show. Clearly, white people are not supposed to play non-white characters.

Schechner and Radford’s color-blind views definitely support nontraditional casting of minority actors. But so far their most articulate opponents have been ethnic minorities, not white supremacists, whose voices are seldom represented in the mainstream media, still less in academic journals. This absence, of course, does not mean those voices do not exist. This “silent” segment of the population, whose size I have no way of knowing, has its own circles, not necessarily just the KKK. I have some newspaper clippings and hate mail I received after my name and photo appeared in the *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* as a columnist. The clippings are from newspapers I had never heard of. They report, so they claim, on various crimes committed by non-white and Jewish people against non-Jewish whites, and propagate race-based beliefs such as: “People are either a preservationist [*sic*] or a destructionist. [...] A preservationist is a person who believes in preserving the human races created by God. [...] Other people believe in destroying the human races created by God” (Stock 1997). E.M. Stock, a self-declared “Nordic white race man” who sent me such mail twice, complained about the 12 percent rate of interracial marriages involving African Americans and called them “the destruction of the human races created by God, racial genocide, today’s Holocaust” (1997). What a contrast between this view of life and Radford’s perception of life in L.A.! What is most ironic is that this blatant white supremacist view of strictly preserving ethnic lines is echoed by a well-known African American voice.

In 1997 August Wilson, in his highly publicized debate with Robert Brustein, stated his opposition to casting across ethnic lines in all directions, including the type of nontraditional casting that had benefited many black and other ethnic minority actors in terms of employment opportunities. Not only did he refuse to let white actors and directors tamper with his plays, but he objected to having African Americans act in plays like *The Cherry Orchard*. Wilson seemed to share the white supremacist view, believing in definitive ethnic lines, despite the fact that he himself is the son of an African American mother and a Caucasian father. The fact is, however, on the issue of race and casting, Wilson is not really as rigid as he appeared in this public forum. It is not well known that in 1996 Wilson gave rights to a white woman, Margaret Booker, to direct *Fences* in Beijing with an all-Chinese cast who spoke no English and knew no African Americans personally. One is compelled to ask: Does Wilson have more than one position on the issue of ethnically related casting? What can this much less publicized action of Wilson’s tell us about nontraditional casting?

Needless to say, the consensus of American theatre people against casting whites in colored roles in the past few decades is a political position. This is necessary in a country which, far from being color-blind, is extremely sensitive about issues of race and ethnicity. However, my question is this: Is the conclusion on nontraditional casting really so simple that there is no need for discussion? If whites in America must forget about playing blacks for good, what about Chinese? Mexicans? Egyptians? Or any other non-blacks? If professional theatres should never cast whites in non-white roles, can teachers assign children roles in their multicultural education theatre programs? What about those community theatres that are interested in plays involving minority characters but that have limited actor pools?

To answer these questions, acting across (or adhering to) ethnic lines should be examined from at least three different perspectives: an anthropological perspective as it relates to education; aesthetics in relation to professional theatre; and a political perspective in relation to unemployment. These three perspec-

tives may overlap. A professional production that casts across ethnic lines may have a political dimension that is also meant to educate its performers as well as its audiences. But these perspectives can also be analyzed separately if we want to examine the complexity of the issues. While the political perspective often leads to more strict rules preventing whites from playing non-white roles, on the educational level I wonder if we need to be more flexible, more universalist, with the freedom to cast whites and actors of any color in both white and non-white roles.

I don't know if Wilson knew anything about the history of Chinese theatre before he gave rights to the Chinese for their production of *Fences*. Maybe he had some instinct that the Chinese stage had a special affinity with African American people. China's very first production of modern drama (*huaju*, meaning spoken drama) was a blackfaced *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by a Chinese student amateur drama club in Tokyo in 1907. A few months later in Shanghai, another group of Chinese did a second version of the same story. Both used some blackface makeup, but neither was derogatory as the blackfaced minstrel was in the U.S. around the same time. No doubt, the international popularity of the novel's melodramatic plot can partly account for the Chinese interest in the Uncle Tom theme. But the more profound reason lies in the Chinese people's ability to identify with African Americans in their struggle against their powerful oppressors. At the same time they accepted the ironic reality that some crucial aspects of the Western colonial power, in this case Christianity, might also become a help in the causes of the oppressed. That a white woman wrote the novel did not matter to the Chinese adapters and actors at all. Through their acting they identified with their characters to the greatest extent possible according to the standard of the time. In fact, these two productions of African American life represented the first attempt in Chinese acting to break away from the stylized acting of the traditional sung drama and to strive to be realistic both inside and out. It was with this same spirit that a few years later other Chinese students addressed the issue of women's emancipation, playing white characters, in white makeup, in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.

Judging from the few extant pictures of those productions, by today's standard we might say those Chinese in blackface makeup or blond wigs look like caricatures. But the fact is, the actors took the characters extremely seriously. They were taken seriously by their audiences and had a great impact on modern China's social reforms. These Chinese examples suggest that acting across ethnic lines is often inevitable when a subject is chosen from outside of the familiar environment and deemed very important for the enlightenment and education of the people.

The Chinese case is of course quite different from the situation in America, a nation of great ethnic diversity. Here it seems you can always find the authentic actors to play characters of any race and culture, if only you have the will. This is certainly true in most professional theatre. Yet in an educational environment, you may not always find or be able to afford to hire people of the exact ethnicities called for in certain plays. Even as we recognize that multicultural education is an indispensable part of all educational institutions, should we require educational institutions to do plays with characters that mirror exactly the ethnic makeup of the student body? In other words, should we say that students of any given ethnicity can learn about other ethnicities' experiences only through reading, listening, and watching, but never through acting, arguably one of the most effective ways of learning?

This seemingly politically correct approach does not always help promote multiculturalism on campus because it in effect prevents many college and high school theatres from doing plays about ethnic minorities. It also contradicts a new trend in anthropology, a field that has become more important

because of the need for multicultural education, and which has begun to shed its long association with the imperialist attitude of treating people of other cultures as an object of research. Participatory anthropologists advocate active learning through experience to supplement so-called “objective” learning. The late Victor Turner wrote:

While it may be possible for a gifted researcher to demonstrate the coherence among the “parts” of a culture, the model he presents remains cognitive. Cognizing the connections, we fail to form a satisfactory impression of how another culture’s members “experience” one another. For feeling and will, as well as thought, constitute the structure of culture-cultural experience, regarded both as the experience of individuals and as the collective experience of its members embodied in myths, rituals, symbols, and celebrations. (1986:140)

Turner’s innovation was “performing ethnography”: having students of other cultures enact and experience—not only observe and analyze—their subject culture’s social dramas.

This idea is in line with Aristotle’s belief that imitation derives from the human desire to learn. It also parallels the Chinese students’ dramatic practices at the beginning of this century. Those Chinese intellectuals were searching for ways to emulate the West in order to build a new China to fight against Western threats. While they found reading and translating Western literature important, experiencing their characters in the theatre gave them a more direct feel for the Western way. According to Turner, students need to play people of the cultures they are studying precisely because they are culturally, often ethnically, different from their subjects. Of course, it is imperative that there are native advisors from the subject culture for this kind of acting. From a purely educational point of view, there are in fact greater needs for whites to experience other cultures by playing non-white roles than for people of color to experience the dominant culture by playing whites, since the society is still overwhelmingly influenced by white culture and still lacks an understanding of non-Western cultures.

Turner’s untimely death prevented him from bringing this experiential way of learning into more schools. While his ethnographic drama was specifically for college-level anthropology students, its philosophy is applicable to multicultural education in other programs and on other levels. As Turner argues, “By posing the functionally familiar against the culturally exotic in the dynamics of social drama, we can make our students vividly aware both of innate commonalities and cultural differences in relation to a wide range of human societies” (1986:152). There are crucial differences between this kind of acting across cultural/ethnic lines and the blackface minstrel. Firstly, the former comes out of a sincere wish to learn from the enacted roles whereas the latter is condescending and mocking. Secondly, the latter is a profit-oriented show for the paying public and the former is a not-for-profit learning process, sometimes for participants only. When there is an audience, it would most likely be a sympathetic one, often an alternate cast.

But can acting across ethnic lines be practiced at a professional level for the general public? This is a more difficult question to answer, for there are many aesthetic and political implications. The disadvantages are easy to see. A discrepancy between the ethnicity of the character and the actor may disrupt the spectator’s willing suspension of disbelief, at least initially, and provoke questions unintended by the playwright. Some playwrights and directors ingeniously take advantage of this kind of distancing effect and preemptively incorporate questions raised into the theme and structure of the play. The

aforementioned plays—*The Blacks*, *The America Play*, and *Woman Warrior*—are examples in point. Schechner's *TDR* Comment especially advocates for this kind of theatre. Being a playwright heavily influenced by Brecht, I am also biased toward such overt theatricality myself. I have to admit, however, that most plays are not constructed that way, and spectators in most theatres would see a character as a person, not "a summation of the role's own historical eruption, placement, and continued development," as the director Lee Breuer argues (in Schechner 1989:7). Here I strongly agree with Wilson in that so-called color-blind casting cannot really make the audience, or even the actors, color-blind, unless it is *The Lion King* or *Star Wars*. Classical plays have less of a problem because their plots are already so familiar that audiences do not have to decipher the character's ethnicity through the actor's physical features. But for most plays with an unfamiliar plot, the ethnicity of a stage image will always register in spectators' minds until they are told otherwise by a conflicting and stronger impression. I suspect that few living playwrights would freely allow color-blind casting unless the director makes reasonable adjustments to minimize the hurdles such casting may throw in the path of the spectator's flow of empathic experience. Pioneers and visionaries of nontraditional casting such as Genet and Parks designate their actors' ethnicity even more specifically than naturalists, because they are playwrights who cannot help envisioning the characters/images they write, especially their colors.

But this problem does not necessarily mean that a professional theatre company—especially a Chinese or European theatre, or some American community theatres with a fixed group of actors—must not do a play if it does not have the ethnic actors required. In fact, professional theatres can cast actors across ethnic lines much better than schools. Even though realistic theatre does not have a conventional code of type-specific representation such as those in *kabuki* and *jingju*, Stanislavsky's system of acting gives actors a whole spectrum of tools to enter into the character's mind and body, no matter how different they are from the actor's. When a third Chinese version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was presented at a modern national theatre of huaju in Beijing in the early 1960s, as a part of the communist government's effort to denounce U.S. imperialism and support the African American cause, the actors spent long rehearsals mastering the Stanislavskian psycho-realistic skills to identify with the characters from the inside out. Around the same time, other Chinese theatres produced original plays with black characters, such as *Drums on the Equator* (1962), about Patrice Lumumba's independence movement in the Congo. While all these plays were primarily meant to mobilize the masses, many actors who had undergone an unusually thorough transformation reported experiencing strong emotions as they played struggling Africans using the Stanislavsky process. Furthermore, professional theatre's advanced costume and makeup teams can also make a big difference in presenting lifelike stage images. In all the African plays, Chinese actors were not only in blackface but they also wore black body makeup, portraying their characters in the most realistic way possible. Many African visitors praised the actors enthusiastically for passing for real Africans.

Ironically, it was a white American, none other than the renowned liberal Arthur Miller, who challenged the Chinese way of identifying with non-Chinese characters and effectively changed it. When Miller went to Beijing to direct his *Death of a Salesman* in 1983, he had no praise, but only criticism, for modern Chinese theatre's decades-long tradition of realistic ethnic makeup. The Chinese actors and makeup artists' proud accomplishments in portraying black as well as white characters did not impress Miller, probably reminding him of the shameful blackface minstrel in American history—of which the Chinese had no knowledge at the time. Miller got rid of the blond and brown wigs and padded noses for the Chinese actors playing his characters. The Chi-

nese accepted his instruction partly because it was the “authentic” direction of a famed American playwright directing his own play, and partly because it spared them a lot of money and trouble. Since the *Salesman* production, many Beijing and Shanghai productions of Western plays have opted out of the meticulous and tedious “foreign makeup” for a plain Chinese face. Whenever the staff or audience grumbled about the actors’ not looking like the characters as they used to, the response was always that the foreigners liked it that way.

Margaret Booker, the director of *Fences* in Beijing in 1997, says the same thing of her actors: “I did not want black-faced caricatures of these very real people, but wanted the actors to think of their characters as themselves” (1997:52). She quotes a *Newsweek* journalist, Mike Laris, as saying that he saw in the Chinese-faced Troy Maxson “an endearing combination of 1950s Pittsburgh and 1990s Beijing” (52). But for most Chinese audience members, this stage persona was neither African American, because the popular comic star Liang Guanhua’s familiar Chinese look openly contradicted his realistic costume and mannerism, nor was it Chinese, because the story, the character’s behavior, and the set were obviously foreign. The play, which received considerable publicity—especially Western media coverage, which was exceptional for a Chinese production—was an embarrassing flop for China’s premier theatre, Beijing People’s Art Theatre, the host of Miller’s *Salesman* 14 years earlier. This theatre’s productions usually run from 20 to 200 performances at near full capacity in a 1000-plus-seat theatre in downtown Beijing. But *Fences* ran for only 12 nights, and for the last few the theatre was two-thirds empty (Ren 1997).

This disappointing record, which contradicts the highly favorable impression one might get from the English press, partly resulted from the confusing stage images concerning the characters’ cultural and ethnic identity. Compared to the Chinese-faced Lomans in the 1983 *Salesman*, Chinese-faced blacks are visually more incongruous. They may have been conceived as “showing the distanced as familiar” (per Brecht), but without localizing the story and characters, they were in effect doubly distanced—a foreign story for the Chinese audience and a bunch of foreign faces for the American milieu onstage. This case may seem to validate Wilson’s public argument against cross-racial casting. But that misses the point. *Fences*’ recent disappointment in Beijing does not mean a universal failure of all Chinese efforts in portraying African or African American characters. Instead, it was a failure of a universalist approach that is hypothetically based on a color-blind mind-set, which does not yet exist either in the actors or in audiences. Booker knew the actors’ concern, but she cavalierly calls it “concern [...] about *pretending* to be African Americans” (1997:52) as if baring a Chinese face could better help them *be* African Americans. The director’s universalist approach went directly against the playwright’s signature realism where everything depends on meticulous specificity—the year, the city, the neighborhood, the class, the job, the fashion, the music, the ambience, a million details that she could call pre-tense onstage. Oddly, she followed Wilson’s directions in most of those aspects but just not in race, a factor Wilson deems “the largest, most identifiable and most important part of our personality” (*Theatre* 1997:3).

Wilson gave production rights to the Chinese because he believes that, “All of us lives, whether you’re Chinese or Eskimo, ultimately connect to and share those great questions, those great ideas of man: God and the Devil, and love, honor, duty, betrayal” (in Booker 1997:52). This is also a universalist belief, but quite different from Radford’s. It is based on a traditional world where racial and ethnic differences are more real than relative. That is why Wilson explored those universal issues in *Fences*, as in his other plays, with a very specific set of fictional characters in a very specific setting. For Wilson,

specificity does not necessarily deny universality. What he cannot accept is the notion that racial and ethnic differences are so subjective and relative that they shouldn't be taken as real. This is in fact an old theoretical question Gregory Bateson answered over 50 years ago. In his 1947 essay "Moral and National Character," Bateson enumerates five arguments against the notion of any group character:

- (1) The critic may point to the occurrence of subcultural differentiation [...]. (2) He may point to the extreme heterogeneity and confusion and cultural norms which can be observed in "melting-pot" communities. (3) He may point to the accidental deviant [...]. (4) He may point to the phenomena of cultural change [...]. (5) Lastly, he may point to the arbitrary nature of national boundaries. ([1947] 1972:90)

After addressing each of these five arguments, Bateson states:

In sum, to those who argue that human communities show too great internal differentiation or contain too great a random element for any notion of common character to apply, our reply would be that we expect such an approach to be useful (a) provided we describe common character in terms of the themes of relationship *between* groups and individuals within the community, and (b) provided that we allow sufficient time to elapse for the community to reach some degree of equilibrium or to accept either change or heterogeneity as a characteristic of their human environment. (94)

If national character and racial or ethnic character are dated terms today, Bateson's basic approach to the issue is still valid. To get along—using Rodney King's very down-to-earth words—with people of other ethnic backgrounds, is not to ignore ethnic and cultural differences but to explore the relationship between different racial and ethnic groups with patience. Whereas Radford's perception of life in which all ethnic lines are blurred may represent the future of ethnic makeup, especially in some regions in the U.S., it will take a very long time for most places in the world to see that really happen. Until then, many plays, if not most, will still contain characters of identifiable, even if mixed and flexibly delineated, ethnicities.

Even when some places do enter a color-blind era, the blurring of ethnic differences would still be a very interesting dramatic motif worthy of exploration onstage. We cannot simply deny that the differences ever existed. In order to enter an ideal era where colors don't matter, we now have to face the fact that they do matter everywhere, whether it's in the relatively homogenous China or in the very mixed L.A. And learning the differences of other peoples is often a necessary step towards finding what we have in common with them. Most Chinese actors playing non-Chinese characters never presumed they were the same as those foreign roles. They took great pains to learn and embody their characters' different worldviews and features, which they deemed interconnected. In so doing, they found the commonalities—the common causes and common values, not only intellectually but also intuitively. The stories of Uncle Tom and Lumumba and their fellow black people won tens of thousands of Chinese theatregoers' hearts because they were presented as specific individuals: black, oppressed, religious or not religious, engaged in a desperate struggle for their freedom and dignity. They were not shown as universal humans like Gogo and Didi who were waiting for something mysterious, even though those stories were not as realistic as those narrated in *Fences*.

Director Booker seems to believe that a Chinese actor, or any non-black actor, can only become a caricature if s/he puts on black makeup. Does she have no faith in the actor's skill, more importantly, no faith in actors' and audience's compassion and camaraderie? If so, that's probably because she had little knowledge, or understanding, of Chinese actors' desire and success in portraying serious, uplifting non-Chinese characters, black as well as white, for decades. Maybe she knew all that. Maybe she did not want a blackfaced *Fences* simply because she knew far more about politics in the U.S., and because the English press was a greater concern than the Chinese. It would have been too dangerous for a white director to do anything that might remind people of the blackface minstrel, even though it was what the Chinese brothers and sisters needed. Here political, aesthetic, and educational concerns are in conflict.

I do not blame Booker for not creating the thoroughly realistic production the script deserved because I understand that politically, in the United States, there are and should be some rules in the area of acting across ethnic lines. But in cases where aesthetics and education weigh more heavily than politics, acting across ethnic lines not only should be done but can be done successfully with ethnic makeup in realistic plays. I wish August Wilson, like Arthur Miller, had directed his own *Fences* in Beijing. Judging from his insistence on his characters' realism and consistency, I suppose he would have had his Chinese actors put on meticulously lifelike black makeup—a lot more authentic than the Chinese could ever have done without him, thus presenting a far more gripping picture of African American life. Being the playwright himself, and more importantly, a prominent African American voice, he would have had far less political risk in making this decision than Booker. With Wilson's direction, a more thorough transformation of the actors into African American characters of 1950s Pittsburgh could have been for the Chinese actors and audiences a rare opportunity for multicultural education. And it would have meant more to world theatre and the humanities. If the Chinese can do justice to African American plays and characters while enriching themselves culturally, I certainly hope that people all over the world who can identify with and feel for other peoples will be able to do so as well—and they will, as long as they do it the right way. It is time to explore other types of nontraditional casting now.

Note

1. The ASTR group's discussion is titled "Gender/Race Blind Casting, 'Facts,' and 'Truth.'" My focus in this essay, however, is on race and ethnicity. Casting and gender will be the theme of another paper.

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William H. Sun, a Contributing Editor of *TDR*, is Professor of Drama at the Shanghai Theatre Academy. His current projects include building a new interdisciplinary field, *Social Performance Studies*, sponsored by the Department of Art Studies at Zhejiang University in Hangzhou.