



THE
INTERCULTURAL
PERFORMANCE
HANDBOOK

JOHN MARTIN

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The Intercultural Performance Handbook

What can performers in the West learn from the technical performance traditions of Africa and Asia?

The Intercultural Performance Handbook opens up a new world of technique for performers. The first ever full-length, fully illustrated manual for practitioners, it provides:

- A guide to the physical, vocal and improvisational dynamics drawn from world performance styles
- A new vocabulary with which to interpret plays from around the globe
- Games to use for exploring rhythm, movement, balance, tension and gesture, breathwork, stylisation, and the use of the voice
- A practical, hands-on approach to creating vibrant theatrical work.

Studies on intercultural performance are usually written by scholars and researchers. John Martin explains the definition and development of intercultural performance from the perspective of an experienced practitioner. He provides exercises, practical advice and a clear training process for the inquiring performer or director.

This book is a process of discovery, carefully written so as to develop understanding and move towards empowerment for the adventurous theatre-maker.

John Martin is a theatre director and teacher. He is Director of the Pan Centre for Intercultural Arts, a London-based performance research unit.

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To all those from whom I have learned
And to all those who may learn from me

For Shanti

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About the author

John Martin is a theatre director, researcher and teacher.

His training and subsequent work in theatre have been in many countries and have absorbed many influences.

He has directed over 50 productions in Britain, France, Sweden, Germany, India and South Africa and his work has toured world-wide.

Parallel to directing he has been consistently engaged in running creative training workshops for actors and students in drama schools in many countries. For ten years he was Artistic Director of the International Theatre Workshop, Scheersberg, Germany; he founded the Commonwealth Theatre Laboratory in Bhopal, India, the Vidya slum actors project in Ahmedabad, and he is the artistic director of the Pan Centre for Intercultural Arts in London, specialising in exploring new possibilities for the arts in multicultural environments. His work has concentrated on developing new standards of richness through intercultural work, whether this is in professional performances or community events.

About the illustrator

Dwaraki created these illustrations during a period as Artist in Residence for the Rangayana Theatre Company in Mysore, India. He is a much respected fine artist who has had numerous exhibitions throughout the country.

Acknowledgements

I gladly acknowledge the many sources from which my working methods have evolved. These include many teachers and colleagues whose work has inspired me. In particular I recognise the great influence of my first 'gurus': Jacques Lecoq, Veronica Sherbourne and Monica Pagneux. I have also gained enormously from the many colleagues at the International Theatre Workshop in Scheersberg, Germany and the master-teachers at Pan's Intercultural Summer Schools in the Performing Arts. Most of all this work is due to the collaboration of the many members of the Pan-Centre for Intercultural Arts with whom these ideas, exercises and games have been evolved and tested.

Finally my thanks to the British Council who have supported me during my theatre work throughout the world and made possible the meetings which led to this book.

Author's note

For many years I resisted writing this book. Many actors and workshop participants have asked me for notes on how I have worked with them. They would always ask me why I did not document and publish my 'method'.

The major reason was that although they saw it as a 'method', I did not. It was always changing, growing, questioning itself, developing new ideas. As it was not fixed how could I write it? Or was I afraid that writing it would fix it unalterably?

Well it is still changing and will go on changing, but what I have written is where the work stands now.

I was also aware that committing to print a process which I normally teach by urging participants to experience for themselves would be very difficult. I would have to pre-judge what they were likely to experience; otherwise the next step would not be possible.

This was the most difficult aspect and I hope I have left sufficient space for the all-important personal experience and discovery.

My final fear was that the book would be picked up by someone unfamiliar with my work and that it would be totally misunderstood and misrepresented. So be it. Some of the greatest personal discoveries have resulted from misinterpretations!

So, with all these problems, why did I change my mind?

I am grateful to Ziki Kofoworola of the Centre for Nigerian Cultural Studies at Ahmadu Bello University, Nigeria. After conducting a workshop there he pointed out to me that my hesitation to document my work was denying it to others, and was very selfish.

The realisation that he was right goaded me to undertake the job.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

B. V. Karanth's offer to work with his new company-in-training in Mysore, India, gave me the ideal opportunity, and the process of committing these methods to paper began there. It has been revised and added to as a result of many workshops and rehearsal periods inside the Pan Centre for Intercultural Arts and elsewhere.

I offer this manual as a step by step path of creative training for modern performers, to prepare their 'instrument' for theatre work which reflects the new cultural complexity of our exciting, changing world.

I hope all who read it will use it freely as a catalyst for their own creative work.

This intercultural world

AN ONGOING MODEL

The last hundred years have seen our cultural awareness and cultural realities change more radically than ever before. We now live in a world where people of different cultures and ethnicities meet and mix freely, creating a dynamic space for re-assessment of our identities, and opportunities for our performing arts to be enriched and to reflect the societies in which we live.

Not only have travel and transport allowed the more privileged and adventurous to witness and, to some degree, experience many of the world's cultures, they have also brought performance forms from these cultures to wider audiences around the globe. Seeing European theatre in Delhi or Chinese dance in London is no longer a rare treat but part of a regular programme of festivals, tours and cultural exchanges.

Exposure to these forms provides a meeting point of cultures and at meeting points there is always some sort of exchange. In the performing arts such meetings have a history of being enormously enriching. At the individual level an artist sees something inspiring in another way of working and something of that experience is transferred into his or her work. This new work, this new hybrid, is the starting point of interculturalism.

At the broader level of groups, clans, tribes or nations such interactions have permeated the history of peoples as they have met, whether in peace or in oppression, and have forged endless new forms of expression. This phenomenon has accelerated enormously in the last century with mass migrations of peoples on an unprecedented scale.

This exchange is not multiculturalism, the simultaneous existence of several cultures side by side, nor cross-culturalism where people from one cultural background learn a form from another culture and practise it. Interculturalism is an area of interaction where new forms are created.

Interculturalism is of course not only a 'western' phenomenon. The great theatrical forms of Japan are the result of dramatic dances and rituals which moved eastwards from Korea meeting the culture of the native Japanese. The music of north India is the result of the influence of Persian instrumentation brought with the Muslim rulers, and many of the stories of the Chinese 'operas' are derived from Buddhism as it spread from India. Contemporary European and American dance and music have many of their roots deep in African culture and the African diaspora, and Indonesian performance styles have absorbed stories and styles from incoming Indian Hinduism and the later spread of Islam.

EUROPEAN MODERN THEATRE – THE OTHER SOURCES

In European theatre the inspiration from non-European performance styles is so substantial that it can certainly be argued that the cutting edge of twentieth and twenty-first century theatre would not have existed without it. So many of the seminal theatre-makers of the last century were deeply influenced by theatre from beyond their immediate cultures that contemporary European theatre is deeply touched by a strand of interculturalism.

From Artaud's revelations on seeing Balinese theatre, through Copeau's work with Japanese performers in the Vieux Colombier company, and Brecht's deep and lasting impressions on seeing Mei Lan Fang of the Beijing Opera, we have a history of influences which have revolutionised European theatre.

Grotowski searched for greater understanding of the actor's art by studying exercises from Kathakali and beyond, Peter Brook tried to uncover a force beyond the culturally specific in his multicultural companies and Eugenio Barba began to analyse dynamics in world theatre which, through understanding, can enrich us. Robert Lepage has drawn from Bunraku, Berkoff from Kabuki, and Ariane Mnouchkine from styles, pictures, rhythms and colours of many