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Running with the Devil
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"I think we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not. Otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammering on the mind's door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends." -Joan Didion, Slouching Towards Bethlehem

Representation continues to be one of the most fraught questions facing the theatre and performing arts today: what is the responsibility of artists and the industry to represent minoritised and racialised bodies? How is that representation entangled with oppressive normative narratives surrounding those communities? What is the implication of this representation or lack thereof on the wider discipline and industry, which in the UK context, is still largely white and Eurocentric? Hence, the multiplicity of selves navigated by an artist living in a racialised body is a contested site that goes beyond the individual. My practice-research seeks to investigate how theatre practices can be reconstructed to privilege marginalised bodies in discovering what Foucault calls practices of freedom—acts of resistance that discover alternative practices of authoring 'self'. As an artist of color, I am particularly interested in the potency of grotesque-realism, a principle exegesised by Mikhail Bakhtin as resisting the notion of the individual body by reshaping it into a boundless, ever-transforming site for a democratisation and renewal of ideas and viewpoints. My personal essay, 'Running with the Devil' uses the above Joan Didion quote as a starting point and explores the grotesque-realist motifs of demons, food and orifices of the body through a positivist and postcolonial lens, drawing from inspiration offered by writers of color including Alexander Chee and Trinh Thi Minh Ha.

Running with the Devil

Elisabeth Gunawan

> "I think we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not. Otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammering on the mind's door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends."[1]
>
> —Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*

The last time I met the devil was in a dream that came to me before my 29th birthday. I was in a balmy and decrepit cabaret theatre, in technical rehearsals for a theatre show, when we realised a shapeshifting presence was trying to sabotage us. The details are blurry (as they often are in dreams), but I remember the devil masquerading as one of my friends—a sharp-edged blonde actress. I remember him pursuing me through the tube cars in the London underground. In the climax of this harrowing dream, I falsely awakened into yet another dream. This time, I was on my bed in the dark frantically trying to turn on the lights. It didn't work. And in that terror, a voice inside me (that sounded strangely like my dance teacher) said – "you need to get help. you need to get help." And so in the dark, I ran to the next room where my parents were getting ready for bed. I saw my mother curled up on the right side (her side of the bed for twenty years), and my father arranging his pillows, unsurprised to see me with tears in my eyes. "Were you scared?" my father grinned, and I leapt right into the space between them.

And *then* I truly woke up. And for a brief moment at 4 a.m. in the morning (as prophesied in that quote), on the hottest midsummer's night in London, I was not myself but a sliver of the person I used to be. As if the past 22 years and all those decisions had been erased, and I was again the little girl with the swollen eyes and sparrow's voice crying for the parents who slept 20,000 miles away in Jakarta. And just as our dreams effervesce and evaporate in those first waking seconds, that girl disappeared too.

* * *

In 2020, a few months before I graduated from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, into a life of trying to become a 'serious' 'actress', I began thinking carefully about

[1] Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (Fourth Estate, 2017).

my name. Names are strange things: for me, it summons an image of a suitcase made of rough human leather, covered by airport stickers and stretch marks—worn and faithful in its task of carrying within it an entire human being and their stories.

I was born 'Elisabeth'. As was the fashion with most Chinese Indonesian people in the 1990s, I was given a Western name, unaccompanied by a last name. Luckily, my sisters and I were never granted one of the fashionable double-barrel first names that some of my friends had (for instance, Natasha Stephanie, or Gabriella Nathania or Anastasia Tiffany, and so on). I was simple, steadfast, headstrong and consecrated to God – 'Elisabeth'. Ironically, when I started college at NYU (in my first real taste of a world where individuality was the religion and where girls matched the colour of their bras to their outfits instead of hiding them) I was in the same graduating class as 3 other Elizabeth/Elisabeths—who went by Beth, Liz and Lizzy respectively—and so I went by Betty.

The story has become a myth to me over time—a sort of auto-response when people would inevitably ask about this uncommon nickname—as if I had benevolently accepted something I had no choice in. But frankly, I loved the name 'Betty': I loved its anachronism, its strangeness and exquisiteness, and that it was worlds away from where I was born. It was my first self-imposed exile.

Betty went on to trod down the path less taken: odd jobs in the theatre industry (assistant to the assistant to the costume designer of 'Hedwig and the Angry Inch'), unfortunate boyfriends and visa troubles. Eventually, for that heartbroken, unemployed, broke, lost 20-year old self, salvation came in 2015 in the form of an entry-level job at Google in Singapore, which therefore translated to some semblance of respectability from my family and their little universe. I was the last of a wave of young people who was hired into the organisation with very little (1 year) totally irrelevant work experience (at various theatres in New York) and very specific relevant skills (they needed someone who spoke Indonesian). This was the incident that crystalised a belief I held on for many years: 1) that my life consisted of a series of closing doors that I managed to slip through in time, and 2) that identities and our senses of self are wretched false things: the only difference between the shameful mess that I was and the emblem of millennial capitalistic success that I became was a job title.

On the first day on the job, I met my manager: a middle-aged Chinese Indonesian woman with a sensible cropped haircut (traditional) and a visible tattoo on her wrist (revisionist). I told her my name: Elisabeth, but they call me Betty. Huh? She responded. What kind of name is Betty? I will call you Eli. So 'Eli' was the name that was plastered over my muddled choices and confused selves.

'Eli' and the job lasted about six years, before I tore through the comfort of my respectable middle-class existence (my Reputation Era) to inevitably return to tending to the life-long wound that is being an artist.

Each disparate name, each worn leather suitcase, marks for me the journeys I have travelled so far in my life. From the grey streets of Jakarta with its smell of the sea and calls to prayer hanging in the air, to the anonymous streets behind Port Authority, where drunk homeless men impale donuts and slices of $1 pizza on the branches of a shriveled tree; to crowded neon-lit alleyways in Singapore; to the musty hallways of RADA, with austere portraits of age-old actors surveilling your every move. Each new corner peels open and bursts with its own smells, screams and strange languages. Each world with its harsh laws and arbitrary consensus realities, each dangerous to some small self in its own way. Each an irreplaceable piece to this fragmented self.

* * *

Another time in my dreams, I was running with the devil. His form kept shifting, but I remember distinctly a man in a band T-shirt, dirty overalls and a baseball cap two sizes too small, running with me through the park until we reached a junkyard. He sat me down across from him. And from his pocket, he took out the tiniest bird, so delicate and weak it was more a lump of feathers than an animal.

> "This is what I want to do," he said. And he took a pillow with his other hand and tried to smother the bird.
>
> No, I said. And the feathers suddenly twitched, and quickly flew away from the palm of his hand.
>
> The devil took another bird from inside his pocket: a beautiful sleeping green parrot.
>
> "This is what I want to do," he said. And he began to piss on the bird.
>
> No, stop. How would you feel if someone did that to you?
>
> "People do it all the time."
>
> Oh. I'm sorry.

* * *

I used to have nightmares as a child.

They were bad enough that they would keep me awake for hours at night, staring at the branches of our banyan tree swaying outside the window, and pretending to be asleep

whenever my mother would peek in like clockwork around eleven. In my 6-year-old logic, the wisest thing to do when she did her night visits was to pretend to be asleep, like she was yet another monster to fool. I don't know why I never asked her to stay.

The next morning, she would find me with my eyes swollen from crying and lack of sleep. My mother, the ever steadfast Protestant wife, taught me to pray before bed to make the nightmares go away. It worked. So every night I would pray and succumb into a sleep of muddled dreams, but at least the devil was nowhere to be found. Looking back, there is certainly something to be said about the power of intentions. It was my first taste of self-determination: to drive away the devil with the utterance of a prayer.

As a child I was anxious and sensitive: everything scared me or made me edgy and nervous. I was soft-spoken in class, always being told to repeat the things I said. I resented being caught off-guard by any deviation out of my control in my already out-of-control life. Whenever there was a strike, or a flood, or one of those common disasters in Jakarta that would prevent us from being able to go to school, my mother would just not wake me up (with the good intention of allowing me to sleep longer). I would then wake up at 8am in terror, feeling like Jesus' second coming had gone and I was left behind. To this day, that feeling of waking up late and being the last one left makes me cringe.

At the same time, I was also gifted a strange brand of courage. I remember one day in gym class, when a teacher had screamed at a girl who was too afraid to do a forward roll. He was one of those tyrannical sorts of men, dismissed years later for harassing a student. That day, he asked each girl to affirm her loyalty to him, one by one, and he made his way through the sea of quiet murmurred yes-es. I was the last. No, I said, with the confidence of the devil.

In subsequent years, I learned that it takes courage to choose your own name. To say no to a lot that was given to you at birth by your parents. To risk saying 'no, thank you' to your birthright and embark on a journey to unknown territories in search of new lots. Names, when they are first uttered—breathed into existence—are like prayers to exorcise the devil from a nightmare, to raze a ground and leave behind empty space for new seeds to grow.

* * *

"You never talk about your past." a fellow actor once remarked. We were in Brzezinka, in an old farm-house in the dark woods of Western Poland on a grueling two-week rehearsal for a show, when on one of the easier evenings we sat around the table after dinner. Everyone was talking about their parents, and I was shifty and avoidant, prompting jokes that I was afterall a Communist spy.

I rarely felt the need or even the ability to talk about the past. It seemed so far away, and to belong to a different world and a different reality, with different languages and smells and gods and monsters. It didn't seem possible to retrieve that story from that dangerous world, nor was there any use for the past to come knocking now to try to amuse my friends.

I think sometimes that the little girl had died in that country I left behind, that her skeleton had shriveled up under the overgrown banyan tree in the back garden. But perhaps she fooled me, and is residing inside me in some hidden corner of my body, manufacturing nightmares to unleash onto my life unannounced at 4am on a summer night.

* * *

In another dream, I was in my house in London. In this dream, I have a daughter. It was midnight, and I was preparing dinner alone when the doorbell rang. When I furtively opened the door, it was my mother and my two sisters. They marched in and helped me clean the house and pack up. What follows is another hazy flurry, we are whisked off into an airplane, and emerge into a waiting room of women also with their traveling bags. And then it suddenly hits me:

> Where is my daughter?
>
> The room falls silent, and they all look at me apologetically.
>
> "I'm so sorry, love." One of the older women whispered. "Your girl was born without roots, she was never meant to stay."
>
> Oh, I say, I just thought she would say goodbye.
>
> And I woke up.

Commentary

In *Europhilia, Europhobia,* Julia Kristeva problematises the multiplicitous conception of freedom by offering two possible theoretical understandings: on one hand is a foundational definition of freedom which goes beyond an "absence of constraints" towards a possibility of "self-beginning";[2] and on the other hand is an adapted definition

[2] Julia Kristeva, 'Europhilia, Europhobia', *Constellations*, 5.3 (1998), p. 327.

of this freedom within our era of late capitalism[3], which equates freedom with 'liberalism' or the agency of individuals to profit from the means of production in the market. My interest as a scholar-artist living in a body that is visibly female and East Asian lies with the former, which Kristeva emphatically describes as 'the Being of Speech in the Making Present of the Self to the Other'[4]—the subject speaks in an act of self-revelation that is simultaneously personal and political.

For diasporic Asian identities that have historically been defined as the Other to occidental Europe, we face a paradox where the means of production within the theatre and performance industry structurally motivates us to benefit from narrative structures that negate our ability to establish our subjectivity. Many actors have defended the place of *Madame Butterfly, The King and I,* and *Miss Saigon* within our culture in providing ethnically Asian actors opportunities to take part in the means of production. Consider *Miss Saigon,* which was revived in the Sheffield Crucible in 2023, prompting protests from the British East Asian community.[5] The musical, which itself draws from harmful tropes previously in *Madame Butterfly*, continue to Otherise East Asian bodies and deny the existence of multifaceted subjectivities beyond white European constructs. The author Viet Thanh Nguyen commented how this musical 'fits perfectly into the way that Americans, and Europeans, have imagined the Vietnam War as a racial and sexual fantasy that negates the war's political significance and Vietnamese subjectivity and agency.'[6]

As an actor and theatremaker, I am less interested in being in the next *Miss Saigon*, and more interested in struggling with these questions: How can bodies of colour disentangle ourselves from the labor of serving the stories that Europe likes to tell about itself, and instead aim towards the labor of 'self-beginning' and constructing our own stories? How can artistic practices serve as potent political actions against racist mysogyny, by constructing the freedom of bodies that have been historically marginalised to 'birth the Self' and to make itself present beyond the all-too-familiar Otherness? Kristeva herself concedes that the main custodian of this freedom is 'the poet.'[7] She contends that poetry is a site of semiotic formation, which reconnects us to

[3] David Aviles Espinoza, 'We Live in a Time of "Late Capitalism". But What Does That Mean? And What's so Late about It?', *The Conversation*, 2022 <http://theconversation.com/we-live-in-a-time-of-late-capitalism-but-what-does-that-mean-and-whats-so-late-about-it-191422> [accessed 30 January 2024].

[4] Julia Kristeva, 'Europhilia, Europhobia', *Constellations*, 5.3 (1998), p. 328.

[5] Matt Barton, 'Miss Saigon — Sheffield Crucible Revives a Problematic Musical', 2023 <https://www.ft.com/content/e7961637-330c-4068-b8b1-765708b5e7e1> [accessed 3 January 2024].

[6] Diep Tran, 'I Am Miss Saigon, and I Hate It', *AMERICAN THEATRE*, 2017 <https://www.americantheatre.org/2017/04/13/i-am-miss-saigon-and-i-hate-it/> [accessed 21 December 2023].

[7] Kristeva, p. 328.

the speaking subject prior to the interference and disruption of narratives of power.[8] I am curious to explore this realm of the child in a strange and fearful world, traversing through mirrored archways through the sites of the feminine, masculine and its hybrid worlds. In this personal essay, I attempt to interweave autoethnography with poetic language and imagery to offer a portrait of subjectivity from a body of colour, a portrait that resists tropes and presents a fragmented and idiosyncratic act of 'self-beginning.'

[8] Kristeva, J., 1982. Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art. Columbia University Press, New York, p. 24.

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