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Of Theatre, Stories and Experiences.

Interview with Dennis Yueh-Yeh Li

Emeline Jouve



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Of Theatre, Stories and Experiences.

Interview with Dennis Yueh-Yeh Li

Emeline Jouve

Websites

- 1 <https://www.dennisyuehyehli.com>
- 2 <https://www.livingtheatre.org>
- 3 <https://www.dramaleague.org>

Interview

Fig 1

**DENNIS YUEH-YEH LI**

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Emeline Jouve: Dennis, do you think that it is important to go to the theatre and perform plays in 2018? If so, why?

Dennis Yueh-Yeh Li: Before answering this question, I'd like to share you with a question that has been on my mind—What is theatre, and what is a play at this day and age? I've asked this question to myself and to my colleagues all the time. We have seen how TV and cinema have become the dominating performing art media, especially in America. So, what is theatre then? Theatre is a platform to share a story, to feel and experience life of the self and of others through this story. This is a classical definition. But this function has apparently been replaced by TV and cinema, but throughout the history, we witnessed the evolution of theatre, from Brecht/Piscator and then from Artaud and moving forward. It has evolved out from the urgency of the need of communicating a certain message in response to the reality. It goes beyond storytelling, and beyond audiovisual. It is now corporal, sensual, and visceral. This is the theatre I've witnessed nowadays. Based on this idea, I think it is more necessary than ever to go see theatre. From theatre, it is not just to hear a story, it is to experience something. It is to suspend the existing sentimentality to let oneself get provoked into something that one cannot predict. And only theatre can reach so because it forces the audience/participants to engage directly, *vis-à-vis*, *tête à tête*, with the performers, and it forces them to readjust themselves away from their daily behavior to fit into this specific time and space for a specific purpose. Relationships among one another are again and again deconstructed. So, going to theatre or performing a play is to really encourage everyone involved to picture something that is beyond reality itself. For human beings to continuously evolve, it is undoubtedly extremely important to do so.

But I do want to come back to why I have had the question about what theatre is at this day and age. It is definitely derived from where I have spent most of my time, that is, the United States. We can undoubtedly witness the evolution of theatre that I have just mentioned in Canada, in Latin America, in Europe, in Australia, and in Asia. Many of the countries that have long history of theatre have in a way challenged themselves to evolve this art form, not only to differentiate itself from TV and cinema, but also to really take in the influence of the groundbreaking masters of the late 19th/early 20th centuries to not only representing reality on stage, but re-envisioning reality on stage so as to invoke the change of reality. However, in American theatre, we have yet been willing to break the fourth wall. Even if so, it is by following the Pirandellonian formula. In American theatre in 2018, we are still only craving for stories. Stories that we as audience should only sit tight and be invoked with sympathy. At the end of the show, we would simply be amazed by our ignorance to the stories that we already heard in some variations but we choose to pretend otherwise, and we should also be amazed by how much sympathy can be invoked. Empathy is out of discussion, but sympathetic tears and laughter make us believe that things will eventually change without us imagining what such change could be. This is a theatre whose function has already been replaced by TV and cinema, which have evolved tremendously in terms of their art form and ways in which they tell stories. This is a theatre that rejects the evolution. This is a theatre whose audience is no longer young who refuse change. This is a theatre that is decaying. For theatre like this, it seems that there's no point of going. But because I've seen theatre otherwise, I have been experiencing a very strong conflict within me, hence, the question that I constantly raise to my colleagues.

EJ: You are a director, playwright and a performer. What came first? Writing, acting or directing?

Dennis Yueh-Yeh Li: Acting, and then directing, and then writing.

EJ: How did it all start? Could you come back on the origins of your vocation and on your vocational training?

Dennis Yueh-Yeh Li Acting came first, which took place when I was still a little child. I was selected to play a female role in a piece of the adapted Peiking Opera in Taiwan, by following the tradition of having only men playing all the roles in this art form. At the time when I was rehearsing, I wasn't aware of what theatre truly was. I was learning how to play only by being fed with texts and specific techniques. My only duty was to memorize everything given to me, nothing more nothing less, a very traditional way of learning Chinese theatre. Nevertheless, what I had in mind was only the sense of liberation. I was very aware that I was gay already back then, and by playing this female role, I could feel free to fall in love with the male role without worrying about how cruel the real life could be. After that, I thought I would pursue my future as an actor until when I became a huge fan of a theatre ensemble whose show has been live-streamed. The show took over the format of a TV series. The ensemble came in to discuss what to play each night based on what happened the day before or on the day, socially and politically. Then, they rehearsed, and they performed at 8pm to be live-streamed on TV. At that time, I learned that this is theatre. You get to address something in particular through the story and the way in which you tell the story. I was totally inspired, and I told myself that this is what I am

going to do, despite back then I still didn't know what exactly I'd like to address via theatre. But I knew, I wanted to say something. This is how everything got started.

However, I never received any formal vocational training, which means, I never received any theatre-related degrees. Similar to how I learned to play the female role in the adapted Peiking Opera, I learned how to make theatre by watching others do, from the way they discuss the script, to the way they invent all the gadgets on stage to play magic. Even when I was pursuing my masters at New York University, I was only taking workshop classes that are not necessarily focusing on the craftsmanship of theatre, instead, how to utilize the body within our daily life, and how to challenge the boundary between performance and real life. It is what performance studies are. Nevertheless, I do enjoy learning theatre through this way, which is to work around in order to constantly redefine what theatre is and what it can be like.

This is also very similar to the way I worked with Judith. She never really taught me how to direct or how to write a play. Instead, I learned from her by bringing her some of my ideas, and we spent time discussing those ideas.

EJ: You create theatrical works and performance works: in what ways are these two approaches different and in what ways are they complementary to you?

Dennis Yueh-Yeh Li: For me, theatrical works always come with a very strong political message first, and here by saying political, I mean the social relationship among all of us. In creating theatrical works, I always have something that I want to address first, and then I find or I write a play to address it. Oftentimes, these theatre projects would turn out to be conversational and/or confrontational.

Performance works, on the other hand, are more personal. It is less about the society but about who I am. It for me is always an experiment on reality and performativity, that is, what it is that I perform, and how my performance turns into reality. It is my reflection on the perception of myself in this real world. For instance, the way I use my pencil, I eat, I go on a date, or I engage with others. To what certain degrees that my behaviors are performative, and why so? That being said, in creating performance works, it is less from what I want to address than why I do certain things. It is from a concept that might simply provide a guideline to the behavior that I am doing despite if there is a specific time and space. In performance works, I'm usually the only one that has to be present. The idea of an audience does not really exist. But there is this idea of "others." For instance, when I was doing *Kiss Me so I am Queer*, which is an interactive piece on how the identity of queer is constructed based on Foucault's interview, *De l'amitié comme mode de vie*. But the people that came to see it is not a passive audience with an expectation of me carrying out a certain message or telling a certain story. They were there to help me accomplish an action. They were required to kiss me. It is part of the performance. They were performing with me. Without them, this action cannot be accomplished and my concept cannot be fulfilled. It is like, say, if I go out for a date, I will need the other person to be there with me in order to accomplish this action of "going out for a date." Performance work is only the way I see reality through a performative lens. It is, still a daily behavior.

I certainly enjoy doing both, although lately I have focused more on theatrical works. Doing both in a way really coerces me to constantly adjust myself to the world, and to envision what the future should be like both to me and to others. It is very much like a psychotherapy that I do to myself.

EJ: You are the Associate Artistic Director of the Living Theatre. Is the Living Theatre a performance company or a theatre company to you?

Dennis Yueh-Yeh Li: It is a theatre company for two major reasons. 1. It needs audience. It aims to awaken the people in order to invoke a revolutionary mentality. 2. Judith always uses the word “theatre” and the word “actor”. We are on stage or at a specific space to carry out a message to the audience. We know we are creating a work, whether it’s a street performance, a scene, or a play, to talk to the audience through a certain lens, from a certain perspective. We are shaped out of reality to then comment or take action on the reality where we are from while encouraging the audience, or Judith would call the participants, to be together with us. What has been done, and what we are doing currently still, is incorporating all the theatrical elements to accomplish such goal. Even if all the theatrical elements are stripped down like Grotowski’s poor theatre, what is always there is that we always heighten the reality to a certain level, to make it theatrical/dramatic, so that we are able to catch the attention of the audience, and guide them enter the reality from our perspective.

EJ: How did you come to work with them?

Dennis Yueh-Yeh Li: Early in the days when I was studying theatre myself in Taiwan, I already knew that it was this radical, experimental, avant-garde spirit that has summoned me to theatre, which was also the reason that brought me to the United States in the first place. So as soon as I graduated from NYU, I knew I wanted to dedicate myself to avant-garde theatre. I googled all the theatre companies in New York City, and I found this company called the Living Theatre. I decided to write to them, stating why I want to work with them and what my artistic viewpoint was. It was this email to the Living that had Brad invite me to the Living. We talked briefly, and he simply asked me to come back next week and would introduce me to Judith if I were ready to work with the company. So I did, and I met Judith, who at the time looked like a queen sitting in her bed, with other members asking her if she needed some food or anything. I started as an intern, helping the company sort out the data of all the donors. At that time, I had no idea that it was the “Living Theatre” that I studied back in Taiwan that inspired me (I studied it in Mandarin Chinese, so it took me a while to connect the translation of the company’s name to the English name). And it was later, when I finally started working with Judith on her archive, I finally realized, from all the published books, and many other archive materials that it is the “Living Theatre.” I was extremely excited at realizing this fact and it got me more committed to the company. One day, when I was working on the administrative work, Brad asked me to join the reading of a new play that evening. I was there, and so was everyone that was in the company at the time in 2012. We distributed the script, the lines. We read the play, and we discussed anarchism. The day after, I was told that I was counted in for the play. That’s how I really became a member of the company.

EJ: Is there a recurrent theme that you explore in your work?

Dennis Yueh-Yeh Li: I have sensed a very strong numbness from the world that there are so little people willing to make a change to their daily life in order to improve this society. From that sense, I feel the urgency, the urgency that if we don’t do anything here and now, it might be too late. Too late for everything. Therefore, the recurring theme for me is to always bring about this sense of urgency in the existing plays, also in my new written plays.

EJ: How do you measure the success of a creative work? What are your objectives when you create a piece?

Dennis Yueh-Yeh Li: To me, there are two definitions of success when it comes to creative works. One is internal, which is if I am happy with the final presentation, meaning if all the artistic aspects meet what I have envisioned. The other one is external, which is if a creative work actually helps either provoke or reshape an audience member. And for this perspective, just one person is enough. This is like what Judith has told us about her story of encountering someone while holding up a protest sign on the street. She was asked once whether it is worth it to spend so much time standing in the crowd with a sign held up high, especially when she was no longer young. She responded, as long as her action can change one person, just one, then it's worth it.

My objective is always exactly based on this idea. The piece should always provoke something out of an audience, intellectually, physically, or viscerally. It needs to make an impact, always.

EJ: Is there a piece you created which gave you the greatest satisfaction? This is a difficult question.

Dennis Yueh-Yeh Li: *The (New) Trial* which I adapted from Peter Weiss' same title work, if we are talking about a theatre piece here. It was my very first time trying various ways to engage with physical movement, specific soundscape, and one's vulnerability. In working on this piece, I spent a lot of time questioning and challenging the actors' capabilities in acting, and how they could violate that very fine line in their profession that differentiates the moments when they are on stage and off stage. This was particularly important to me in this project, because it talks about how one becomes aware of the power structure and how he rejects it, and I wanted the actors to fully respond to this not just on stage, but also in their real life. To make a project impactful, actors need to be impacted first. I was very happy that my actors as and designers were very open with me on all types of exploration, and the outcome was exactly how I envisioned the project to be. It is definitely the greatest artistic satisfaction of my own, and based on the audience's response, it was also a piece that's extremely thought provoking to them.

EJ: Conversely—and that is another difficult question—, were you dissatisfied with a production of yours? In other words, what is your biggest artistic frustration?

Dennis Yueh-Yeh Li: It was a piece written by myself based on the real incident in Taiwan, *Exile 5.42*. Six prisoners took hostage of the entire prison in order to make an announcement/to catch the attention to the injustice that prevails in the prison. After that, they committed suicide without hurting anyone. This piece was done in New York City, and the languages used are only Taiwanese and Mandarin Chinese. I envisioned the piece to be highly visceral, but with the limit of the budget to accomplish my vision for the space, and with the limit on the actors' capability, I was not able to fully bring my vision forth. Many of the actors in this production worked with me for the first time, and they were extremely unfamiliar with the theatrical vocabulary that I am accustomed to, mainly because they didn't come from a background where they were supported with experimental theatre knowledge. So, the process was a bit more like teaching the actors to learn the vocabulary that helps me reach my vision. So the final result was not really there yet, as some of the visceral effect blended with awkwardness.

EJ: How is it to be an artist in New York City in Trump's USA? Is it different now than before the election of the Republican candidate?

Dennis Yueh-Yeh Li: Nowadays, I have so many theatre artist friends/colleagues who create works to direct the anger to him specifically, and call their work "political theatre." This actually frustrates me tremendously, as I know that it is important to be angry, but dwelling in this specific sentiment is not helpful, and it is also not useful to simply point fingers to a specific politician, since the issue, whether it is now or throughout the history, is bigger than a politician or the "resistance" sign, and is more complicated than a simple dissatisfaction. But because by doing so, it gets easy to gather a crowd to your work, understanding your voice, and by doing so, it is easy to get the attention for those who are in power, here I mean the fiscal power. I could be biased here, but I believe I see those who create works to express their anger and frustration continue to do the same, but the intention might have gone from self-expression to sustaining their career. It is now beyond simply political resistance to the government, but instead, people are trapped and unconsciously duplicate this political mechanism within this theatre industry. Therefore, for me as a theatre maker, I detest playing within this game. I somewhat become an outsider, and a lot of times, I had to create works to address not to those who take the opposite stance on the politics, but rather those who consider themselves "progressive" and "liberal." I have constantly engaged in conversations where I have to say "no, the problems are way bigger and complicated than your resistance sign!"

I was working under Obama's presidency for only a few years, but back then, I found it a bit easier to engage people in a discussion on a larger issue, or an issue that is beyond politics. At least, this is what I have sensed.

EJ: You are the 2018-2019 New York Directing Fellow of Drama League. Could you explain what the Drama League is and what your mission consists in?

Dennis Yueh-Yeh Li: Drama League is the only nonprofit organization that helps promote the value of a director, and provides assistance to emerging/early career directors in the industry, by offering fellowships, and residencies. It also curates a series of workshops for directors to learn a variety of skills that can be applied to their directing approaches. The New York Directing Fellowship is one of Drama League's programs. It helps the fellow directors to advance their career. It entails assistantships, stipends, retreats for professional development, and most importantly, it curates a showcase for the directors and invite the theatre professionals to attend. As probably one of the only few directors who are in this program of this year who came from a completely different background, which means no theatre-relevant degrees and no huge interest/influence in/from conventional and commercial theatre—Broadway, the very strong reason for me to be selected, according to the executive director, is that each director who has a strong vision and who has talent should deserve an equal chance. My personal mission with this fellowship is then to continue developing my experimental spirit and to bring it to this stale industry (here I mean American theatre in general), hopefully to encourage more people to take on a similar approach to theatre.

EJ: What are your future projects?

Dennis Yueh-Yeh Li: Since I am still under the fellowship program of the Drama League, I will be directing a play for the Directors' Fest in January 2019 as the showcase to the theatre professionals and the general public. The play that I will be

directing is Jean Genet's *Deathwatch (Haute Surveillance)*. I chose this play mainly because I have admired Genet's works very much, and in fact, *The Balcony (Le Balcon)* is my dream play to put on stage. *Deathwatch* has forced me to look into the idea of masculinity and how it perpetrates the society and refrains a certain social class, in this case the prisoners, from making any possible change to their status. This has also correlated to the theme of the novels I have recently read, *L'histoire de la violence, En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* and *Qui a tué mon père* by Édouard Louis. This is how I decided to work on Genet's for the Directors' Fest.

Aside from this project, I also have others brewing now. The first one is a new play that I recently finished writing, *Niphalepsia: A Portrait of Two Regular Men*. This is a satirical drama about two characters who conduct experiments to climb up to the top of the social class, and throughout the process, their driving forces are gradually unveiled which leads to an irreversible absurdist action in the end. The second project is more of a devised piece in which visions and messages come first with no specific text/script. It is after my personal experiences in getting to use the post-HIV exposure medication, PEP. The project with its structure and content is inspired by several novels in Mandarin Chinese and in French, but the major inspiration is from Hervé Guibert with his autobiographical novels including *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*. I am interested in exploring how HIV has completely changed one person's view of life, even if nowadays we have already advanced the HIV treatment and invented the prevention medication. This is definitely coming from the time when I was on that post-exposure medication, and the way I see life has completely changed. It's like the whole world has slowed down for me but also has distanced itself from me. Or it actually has fasted forward for me and forced me to detach from the world. Although it cannot be compared to those who actually get infected by HIV or those who suffer from AIDS, I in a way believe that the way they see life is completely different compared to their pre-HIV life. That is why I have this project brewing. It will not be a piece to fight for the patients' right or for de-stigmatizing the disease. It is simply to show how a sickness can change a person completely. It is to find the universality in our humanity in dealing with the fate, and in this case, with HIV/AIDS. The third project will be an adaptation of Camus's *Caligula*. For all these years working with the Living, I started to develop this idea that a total change or a revolution can happen only if when we abandon all the existing structure and mechanism. We have to build a new world from the ruins or from the scratch. It is quite a nihilist idea but I want to give a perspective that a complete destruction doesn't always have a negative meaning, but in fact it allows us to see clearer what a future can be like. There's a Chinese saying that goes "eradicate and foster with the utmost vigor." In my culture, we are obsessed with this idea of a total destruction in order for something completely new. And this play is a great vessel to carry this message. I plan to work with some of the Living Theatre colleagues on exploring the corporal language that manifests such destructive yet futuristic sensation.

ABSTRACTS

Interview with Dennis Yueh-Yeh Li, actor, director and writer. Dennis is the Associate Artistic Director of the Living Theatre and the New York Directing Fellow of the Drama League. The interview was conducted by emails between 5 September and 7 September 2018.

Entretien avec Dennis Yueh-Yeh Li, acteur, metteur en scène et auteur. Dennis travaille avec le Living Theatre en tant que directeur artistique associé et occupe la position de *Directing Fellow* auprès de la Drama League. L'entretien fut conduit par courriel entre le 4 et le 15 septembre 2018.

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AUTHOR

EMELINE JOUVE

Maître de Conférences

INU Champollion/Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès

Emeline.jouve@univ-jfc.fr