

*Infratheatre**What Theatre Is When It's Not Quite Theatre*

As anyone who has taught an 'Intro to Theatre Studies' course will know, definitions are a mug's game. Still, inquiring minds would like to know: what *is* theatre? Is *this* theatre? Why should we pay to watch a show when we can analyse your lecture? At this point, one invokes the professorial prerogative and re-phrases the question: *When* is theatre? What are the conditions under which theatre may be said to be taking place? Certainly, this is the way textbooks tend to go, since identifying the constitutive components of the theatrical event gets us onto more safely descriptive territory: '[I]n its most elemental form, an act of Theatre takes place when a performer finds a space and an audience gathers to observe some form of action' (Pickering and Woolgar 2009: 3).¹

Safe, yes, but not necessarily sound. Even setting aside the semantic quibbles that such formulations invite, deployment of a few select counter-examples can swiftly expose both their practical limitations and cultural biases. Meanwhile, dissenting voices mean that any descriptive definition of the theatrical event ought really to carry the self-cancelling rider: 'except when it's not'. What, for example, are pedagogues to do with Richard Foreman's renunciation of the audience on the basis that 'Art, conceived as a revelatory process, can indeed spin its web in the void?' (2008: 493).² For Foreman, theatre is what it is not – it is a vision of what is impossible, and the vision is made possible by theatre. Checkmate.

¹ See also: 'Reduced to the simplest common denominator, theatre, or more precisely a theatrical event, consists of a simultaneous and mutually conditioning act of playing and watching by performers and spectators gathered together in a common space' (Balme 2008: 12); '[A]t its most basic, theatre requires only a space, a performer, and an audience' (Downs, Wright and Ramsey 2013: 14).

² Foreman continues: 'Who knows who is really watching? When a huge audience seems to be watching, it may be only a mass collection of habitual responses planted in the seats of the theatre. When nobody seems to be watching, perhaps an invisible god has his eyes on the performance. This may be a different kind of theatre than any that has ever existed. So be it' (2008: 493).

Relativism is less intuitively satisfying, but ultimately more resilient. As I have argued in preceding chapters, a theatrical experience is as materially multiple as any other. Notwithstanding the tendency for diverse performance conventions to bundle heterogeneous components into a single, coherent occurrence we call 'theatre', many of those components are not best understood as essentially theatrical stuff. By this token there seems to be no limit to what is happening when something that is nominally theatre is taking place. Equally, circumstances may arise where the conventionally core theatrical components of performer, spectator and space are not conspicuously aligned, but where theatre is, nevertheless, in the room.

While there is any number of events that can uncontentiously be identified as theatre according to pre-existing criteria, therefore, when it comes to the question of what is underway there, answering 'theatre' must be a matter of degree. Drawing an ontological distinction is less important than discriminating a pattern. And while, on balance of probability, most events that *seem* to be theatre are usefully described as such, this approach does nevertheless allow for the possibility that such designations are neither exclusive nor all-encompassing. To call something theatre is already to generalize: it is to bring some of its most distinctive components into alignment with similar phenomena identified elsewhere, and it is to invite a characteristic set of attitudes and modes of engagement. But it is not to exhaust what is going on. Relative to the emerging situation or interpretation, the term 'theatre' most often over- (and sometimes under-) states the case.

Normally, we can let this go. Not to do so would be nit-picking or grandstanding. But if we are better to understand theatre as is – theatre as it comes to us, as we practise it, and as it sits within the larger societies of which we are a part – then these theatrical particulars bear further consideration. One way of doing so is suggested by the work of the French novelist Georges Perec, who coined the term 'infra-ordinary' to describe those qualities and quantities of daily life that conventionally go without saying: 'that which we generally don't notice, which doesn't call attention to itself, which is of no importance: what happens when nothing happens, what passes when nothing passes, except time, people, cars, and clouds' (cited in Adair 1993: 184).³ Perec reflected his preoccupation in the proliferation of mundane details in well-known works such as *Life: A User's Manual* (1978), as well as in a series of experiments in describing places and times as disinterestedly and comprehensively as possible, such as *An*

³ The quotation is from *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (1975).

Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris (1975). Paraphrasing Perec's project, Gilbert Adair writes: 'Too much, no doubt, has already been written about what the world (but equally literature, the cinema, etc.) is; and not enough about what it is also' (1993: 182).

Infratheatre provides us with a means of appreciating 'what theatre is also', though the question of where and how we identify such qualities is an open one. In so far as certain – allegedly defining – aspects of theatre present themselves particularly insistently, then registering the infratheatrical requires a distinct configuration of attention and disattention. On the one hand, it is a matter of identifying those features of a theatrical event that do not – or are yet to – amount to theatre conventionally conceived, and on the other is a matter of how these things register in and for the participants in the event.

I am thinking, for instance, of the opening of *Heroïne* (2004), a dance theatre performance choreographed by Arco Renz. When the performance begins, it is very dark; fractionally less so after a minute or two as it dawns on you that something has begun to be illuminated centre-stage. In a few minutes more, you will realize that it is a performer (Su Wen-Chi), windmilling her arms at a furious rate while rotating through her hips, but keeping her feet rooted firmly to the floor in a wide stance. Before you learn that this is what you are seeing, however, you first come to recognize *that* you are seeing. As the light intensifies by tiny increments, you strain to perceive. The flickering image moves in and out of focus, and my attempts to identify it are briefly overtaken by an awareness of my eyes struggling to accommodate their environment. The muscles around pupils and lenses contract and relax in a bid to pinpoint whatever it is that is happening. To the extent that I knew in advance that I would be watching a performance, I can presume there is a performer in front of me. But at this moment, distinctions between performer and spectator are moot, as is any meaningful sense of the space where we are located. Enveloped as we all are in near-darkness, the choreography of light and movement cannot meaningfully be said to be taking place 'out there', on the stage. My own perceptual apparatus is integrated into that same choreography to an uncommonly fine and active degree: my eyes are dancing. Of course, presuming no visual impairment, the circular and radial muscles of the iris that regulate pupil size, and the ciliary muscles that adjust lens shape, are constantly at work in the theatre, as anywhere, and generally contribute without fuss to whichever cognitive processes are underway at the time. In this particular instance, however, one may say that the constitutive components of the event are configured so as to briefly

render these tiny muscles coextensive with the powerful exertions of the flickering performer.

In and of itself, this brief experience represents one genre of infratheatre: a period of material emergence that would be over-determined by the designation 'theatre', but underserved by the designation 'nontheatre'. Rather, it is one in which theatre was immanent, superseded soon enough by the functional separation of parts – performance, audience and venue all more clearly distinguished – and by the choreographic and thematic preoccupations of the remainder of the work.

One could go on, proliferating such serendipitous encounters, fragments of time and microscopic occurrences to work up a vast catalogue of infratheatrical data and descriptions. However, since I have already committed myself to holding entire performances more or less in view, I am less concerned here with archiving ephemera. My overall goal is to use the subtleties of infratheatre to dial us in to an understanding of theatre practice that allows for a 'thicker' sense of what is underway than we may otherwise be inclined to say. To that end, I would like to examine a trilogy of monodrama performances that between them, I will argue, present several manifestations of, and perspectives on, infratheatre. If *Birdman*, as I suggested in Chapter 2, stands to teach us something about theatre because it presents a composite idea of theatre in filmic form, *Only You* (2011), by the Malaysia-born Taiwan film auteur Tsai Ming-liang, comprised a series of performances whose adherence to theatrical convention was, in my view, the least interesting thing about them. Various described in the publicity as 'lead[ing] the audience through Tsai's own intimate diary' (Esplanade Theatre 2012a: 4) and 'born out of the senses, experiences and memories of director Tsai Ming-liang and his performers' (Esplanade Theatre 2012b), each of the *Only You* monodramas featured one of the actors who have routinely appeared in Tsai's films. Based on interviews Tsai conducted with these actors about their private lives, the performances reprised common themes and images from his oeuvre and played on the familiarity many audience members will have had with the serially re-appearing on-screen personae of the performers.⁴ 'The Spider

⁴ Tsai's feature films are: *Rebels of the Neon God* (1992), *Vive L'Amour* (1994), *The River* (1997), *The Hole* (1998), *What Time is it There?* (2001), *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003), *The Wayward Cloud* (2005), *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (2006), *Face* (2009) and *Stray Dogs* (2013). Fuller details of those discussed in detail in this chapter are given in the bibliography. After *Stray Dogs*, Tsai announced his retirement from feature film making, though he has continued to produce shorts, including multiple iterations of the *Walker* series, referenced below. Of the performers appearing in *Only You*, Lee Kang-sheng appeared in all ten features, Lu Yi-ching in seven, and Yang Kuei-mei in five. There are just two other actors who appeared serially in Tsai's films: Miao Tien (1925–2005), and Chen Shiang-chyi.

Demon of Yang Kuei-mei', 'The Intravenous Drip of Lu Yi-ching', and 'The Fish of Lee Kang-sheng' lasted two hours each, and were set, with variations, in an environment where domestic trappings – bed, chair, toilet, dresser, fish tank – were embedded in a landscape of brown earth. The eponymous anti-heroes combined mundane activities – sitting on the toilet, listening to the radio, eating, drinking, sleeping, and introducing a new fish into the tank – with more expressly theatrical actions – sweeping up the earth, dancing, speaking to the audience and ritualistically laying out dead fish. Together, they showed the characters striving to maintain normalcy in apparently transfigured circumstances.

By all the standard criteria, then, *Only You* was inarguably theatre. Paying audience members took their seats at the appointed time in an auditorium, where performers staged a pre-planned series of actions that looked more or less like experimental drama as we often find it in post-industrial societies. But it is both because and in spite of this, I will argue, that *Only You* complicated what we might understand a theatre experience to entail. Somewhat uneven in their success *as* theatre, the trilogy might be more productively seen as variously falling foul of and harnessing the power of infratheatre, and explaining the ways in which this happened structures the discussion to follow. I begin with the least theatrically successful feature, which derived from shortcomings in the theatrical event, relative to Tsai's film work. I have called this incidental infratheatre, signalling that the performances were ghosted by a more compelling but also more subtle relation to their filmic intertexts. For readers unfamiliar with Tsai's oeuvre, this section will also provide an opportunity to introduce some of its most distinctive characteristics. The second infratheatrical dimension follows my discussion of *Heroïne*, above, by materializing in a brief, complex, but ultimately anomalous moment of performance: a puff on a cigarette. I seek to elaborate the functioning and effects of this moment with reference to Gilles Deleuze's concept of the fold, which dissolves conventional distinctions between interiority and exteriority – and in this case, highlights a physical and subjective porosity between performer and audience (well, this audience member, at least). The third instance of infratheatre I identify in *Only You* makes good on the lightness of touch the concept suggests. As the title hints, 'The Intravenous Drip of Lu Yi-ching' presented the most sustained and the least insistent performance of the trilogy, both producing and requiring a correspondingly understated mode of spectatorship that I call (at the prompting of a scene from one of Tsai's films), bystander affect.

Incidental Infratheatre

Tsai studied theatre at college in the late seventies, and set up a theatre company after graduating. But although the *Only You* collaterals trumpeted the project as his return to theatre after almost three decades, this was not necessarily something to be celebrated. Not to put too fine a point in it, the aesthetic was dated. 'The Spider Demon of Yang Kuei-mei' featured a news report on a landslide, and the project as a whole seemed to turn on the conceit of staging everyday life in a literal and metaphorical disaster zone. As Yang Kuei-mei pulls objects out of her handbag, sweeps some of the earth into a small mound and lies down on top of it, we appear to be observing a proto-Winnie. Soon enough, one can surmise, the light will blaze, she'll be up to her waist in it, and we'll find ourselves in Beckett's *Happy Days*. Neither the language nor setting of *Only You* are as distilled however, partly because Tsai has plundered the experimental theatre back-catalogue rather more liberally than a strict Beckettian would advise. Diallying through radio channels, slow walking, video projections, urban anomie, 'real-time' activities, declamatory speeches, flourishes of kitsch and knowing camp: I was beginning to see in *Only You* many of the tropes of my theatre life parading rather lugubriously ('flashing' would be an inappropriate acceleration of pace) before my eyes.

On their own, these elements would consign *Only You* in totality to that unhappy mean of sub-par performances that is the bread and dripping of much theatre participation. By this token, it was infratheatrical because it was derivative: we were presented with a generic idea of theatre where theatre in its specificity should have been – the difference between the two being small, but significant. What makes these shortcomings so striking, however, is that in their very unremarkableness they fall intriguingly and revealingly short of the theatrical qualities that are such a compelling feature of Tsai's film-making by being all too apropos – a problem that begins with the title. Named after a song by the China-born Japanese singer and film actress Li Xiang-lan (1920–2014), *Only You* brings to the fore Tsai's long-standing preoccupation with Chinese film songs of the fifties and sixties. Combining popular Chinese melodies, western cabaret influences, and lyrical, nature-themed meditations on love and longing, these songs have featured in most of Tsai's films since *The Hole* (1998), either diegetically or as lip-synced song and dance routines. Both modes feature in *Only You*: several songs play during each of the monodramas, and in 'Spider Demon' and 'Intravenous Drip', they are accompanied by dance sequences. However, whereas in Tsai's films, the songs serve variously to

disrupt, counterpoint and comment upon the action, in *Only You*, they are too much of a piece with the stage picture. What is pleausurably incongruous on screen is predictably at home on stage, and therefore provides little interest beyond the fact of its execution.

This in turn points to a defining paradox of Tsai's cinematic work that threw the performances of *Only You* into relief: what is filmically distinctive about Tsai's oeuvre is its theatrical naturalism. Eschewing close-ups for wide, static shots and slow pans, Tsai presents viewers with people and objects co-habiting often narrowly circumscribed urban environments. Into these circumstances, his narratives introduce extreme ecological conditions (flooding, drought, smog), mysterious pathologies (spasms, comas, spirit possession) and existential crises (loneliness, fear, grief) that propel his characters into highly performative behaviours and adaptations. These are presented to viewers in long, dispassionate takes that pointedly refuse to approximate an individual consciousness or subjective experience. Instead, they observe people improvising with each other or whatever else is at hand in order to accommodate often inchoate needs and insatiable desires. With many shots outstaying their short narrative welcome, viewers must instead settle in to a more contemplative observational mode, during which motivations may or may not be disclosed, problems may or may not be solved, proximity may or may not yield to intimacy. Dialogue is sparing. While Tsai's films are not instantly recognizable 'as' theatre, the kinds of spectatorial positioning and forbearance they demand, as well as the affective payoffs they can yield, are arguably more familiar to the regular theatre participant than to the mainstream filmgoer.

Few of these qualities remain in *Only You*. What is disconcerting and compelling on film is neutralized on stage by its appropriateness. While a central appeal of the films lies in their staging of adaptive and emergent relations between the various human and nonhuman actors that otherwise quite indifferently populate the frame, in the theatre, each is isolated, and takes on an unnecessary significance, if not symbolism. While Tsai's filmgoers invariably find his characters *in medias res*, puzzling over the task at hand or zoning out, and cutting to a new scene just as motivations pull into focus, *Only You* was hamstrung by the co-presence of audience and performers. We were all there together at the beginnings and ends of things, and even if we did not have a clear understanding of what was happening, it was, by and large, much more tempting to ascribe cause and effect, completeness and coherence, motivation and interiority to the scenes and their protagonists.

A good example can be found in ‘The Fish of Lee Kang-sheng’, when, head bowed, Lee walks downstage left with painstaking slowness, then round to the back of a metal table. The fifteen minutes that elapse affords audience members plenty of time to contemplate the action and its possible meanings. However, Lee’s arrival at the table, where he empties out a large bag of flour, has the reductive effect of casting the walk as a simple, if slow, journey between point of departure (a chair) and terminus. Retroactively, it becomes a task to have been completed by Lee, duly and dutifully performed for reasons that may be unknown, but are not, in principle, unknowable. It would take a related film project by Tsai – *Walker* (2012) – for the walk to find its properly indeterminate place. Over twenty-four minutes, a series of long shots depict Lee, dressed as a Buddhist monk, moving glacially through the bustle and neon of Hong Kong. He carries a bun in one hand and a bag with a cup of coffee in it in the other. And although there is a point of departure (an incongruously rustic-looking stairway opening onto the street) and an ending of sorts (a Cantopop song about wealth plays while Lee bites slowly into the bun), the suggestion is that ‘Lee’ was walking before the film began, and will keep eating after it ends. Meanwhile, each of the twenty intervening shots finds him already on the move (with the exception of one, in which he does not appear), and cuts before he clears the frame.⁵

The idea that Lee’s slow walk in ‘Fish’ reaches its destination in *Walker* is indicative of both the besetting sin and saving grace of *Only You’s* infratheatre. In its very conventionality as theatre, *Only You’s* reliance on the medium of film was exposed. Over-determined by this absent presence, the work as a whole was left underpowered, its artists going through the theatrical motions.⁶ It *looked* like theatre, but the interest lay elsewhere, an interest actively invited by the creators of *Only You*, who clearly presumed some familiarity with Tsai’s oeuvre on the part of its audience through its intertextual references and the foregrounding of his ‘stars’. And yet, the specific, affecting qualities of that interest cannot be denied, holding the shortcomings of *Only You* in abeyance by placing the trilogy in Tsai’s larger

⁵ *Walker* can be viewed online at <https://vimeo.com/49339358>. The film inaugurated what has come to be known as the ‘Walker series’: seven films at the time of writing, which feature Lee walking slowly in a variety of busy urban environments.

⁶ It is, perhaps, an instructive irony that some of the most notable developments in experimental theatre in recent years have included elements that are present in Tsai’s films, but not in his plays. One thinks, for instance, of the resistance to psychologism in the plays of Richard Maxwell, or the compulsive choreographies animating the work of Toshiki Okada’s company *chelfitsch*.

oeuvre, and ghosting it with the stark, confronting, but ultimately seductive theatricality of his screen worlds.

In this, 'infratheatre' provides a way of getting at the ways in which *Only You* was both more and less than the theatrical product it presented. *Only You* was 'less' than the theatre it styled itself by being leached of particularity in favour of generality. It offered 'more' by revealing how and where its proper theatricality was to be found: 'out of place' in Tsai's cinematic environments. Of course, the meanings and effects of live performances are always informed by their contextualizing circumstances and inter-textual reference points. But here, the situation was acute, as if what was external to the production held most, if not all, of the cards: the theatrical equivalent of an out-of-body experience, where it was the theatre, rather than simply the spectator, that was out of its body. Two further features of the production redeemed in particularity what was threatened by this incidental infratheatre of the whole, and in the first instance, a resolutely 'in-body' experience lay at its centre.

The Infratheatrical Moment

I have before me an orange A5 booklet called *The Supporter's Guide*. It is not the handbook of the Tsai Ming-liang fanclub. Beneath a cover photograph featuring three generations of a smiling ethnic Chinese family, it reads: 'You went through everything together. Now, help your friends and loved ones through a quit smoking journey, too' (Health Promotion Board 2011). Presented to every audience member when collecting their tickets, giving this instruction due consideration was indeed part of the price to be paid for watching *Only You* in Singapore, where I saw it. Originally slated for a festival of Chinese arts at the Esplanade theatre in February 2012, Tsai cancelled the performances after being informed that his performers would not be permitted to smoke on stage. The story – featuring some caustic comments from Tsai – was reported in the press, and several months later, it was announced that the decision had been reversed. According to a statement from the National Environment Agency, a one-time exemption was granted because 'the play does not promote smoking and the scenes where cigarettes would be lit up would be kept to a minimum' (in Chia 2012b: 10). However, although Tsai quipped that the decision would 'promote a healthier art scene' in Singapore (in Chia 2012b: 10), it also fanned the flames of dissatisfaction. For Singapore theatre-makers, the decision fed into a larger narrative about double standards, where censorship and other regulations are perceived to be applied more stringently

to local practitioners than international artists. Just two weeks before the exemption was granted, Loo Zihan, an artist 'reperforming' a controversial 1993 work by Josef Ng entitled *Brother Cane*, had been required by the law to lead his entire audience outside the theatre for a segment where he lit a cigarette and stubbed it out on his arm. Describing this as 'ludicrous and faintly comical', Singapore's *Straits Times* reviewer felt it showed 'the compromise that Loo has had to make with the authorities in order for the show to go on', and suggested that, contrary to a perception that the authoritarian city-state has been liberalizing, 'post-1993, Singapore artists have to work with more restrictions and red tape, not less' (Chia 2012a: C12). Evidently chafing at these constraints, numerous Singapore theatre-makers aired their irritation in a follow-up story to the *Only You* decision in the newspaper (Tan 2012), and the issue was ultimately raised in parliament by Janice Koh, an actor and independent MP with special responsibility for the arts. In a written reply to her questions regarding the reasons for and scope of the exemption for Tsai, the Minister for the Environment and Water Resources stated that this was the first time such an exemption had been requested, that similar requests would require the support of numerous government agencies, and that the aim remained 'a future where Singaporeans consider smoking not only detrimental to health, but also socially unacceptable' (Parliament of Singapore 2012).⁷

And so it was that after a two-month delay in the staging of the production, all the press coverage, *The Supporter's Guide*, and the general hoo-ha over the matter, audience members finally got to sit in a theatre and watch Yang Kuei-mei light up. Was it an anti-climax? Like hell it was! It was absolutely bloody momentous. By comparison with the languid pace at which the bulk of the six hours of *Only You* progressed, the five seconds or so it took Yang to inhale and exhale were super-charged: overloaded with signification and affect in ways that were all the more pronounced for the triviality of the gesture.

Inhale. Exhale. The symmetry centres the performance as a whole, even as each act threatens to neutralize the motivations and consequences of the other.

Inhale. When Yang's cigarette is finally lit, the bright tip becomes the focal point towards which so much talk, emotion, action and inaction has

⁷ By comparison, in England, the Smoke-free (Exemptions and Vehicles) Regulations 2007 exempt performers from the smoking restrictions of the Health Act 2006 '[w]here the artistic integrity of a performance makes it appropriate for a person who is taking part in that performance to smoke' (National Archives 2007).

been tending. Although it is tempting to view the entire episode as a storm in a teacup, anyone who is familiar with Tsai's films will know that to forbid his characters from smoking is practically sacrilegious. Like the clouds of incense through which Chinese spirits are believed to travel, cigarette smoke is, quite literally, the air his all-too-mortal characters breathe: their medium. In *Rebels of the Neon God*, no-one does anything without first lighting up; in *Vive l'Amour*, the fug that envelopes the separate café tables of smokers Mei Lin (Yang Kuei-mei) and Ah-Jung (Chen Chao-jung) foreshadows their coupling long before they or the viewer are consciously aware of the possibility; in *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* this dynamic of carcinogenic congress is inflated to a tragicomic extreme when Lee and Chen Shiang-chyi's characters must abort their hazebound love-making since the more aroused they become, the more incapacitated they are by the smog they inhale. And so it goes on: in Tsai's films, cigarettes function as bribe, trace, plaything, punchline; they afford risk, trust, intimacy, comfort; they enable inaction, reflection, encounter, exchange.

By comparison, the Singapore Government's assurance that *Only You* does not promote smoking seems an almost comically limited interpretation. Yet such reductiveness does have the somewhat unexpected effect of cutting to the quick of Tsai's work. Inevitably, the healthy, happy families and individuals that populate *The Supporter's Guide* are absurdly at odds with the dysfunctional and disrupted relationships that hold Tsai's characters together. But in this, the booklet provides a reasonably accurate diagnosis of the situations Tsai depicts. A major reason people smoke, we are informed, is 'because they feel stressed, unhappy, bothered or even bored. They turn to cigarettes as a distraction from their problems, or a way to cope with their stress' (Health Promotion Board 2011: 4). That is a fair, if somewhat negative, assessment of the people Tsai depicts – and, by implication, of how it positions the rest of us. Despite the questionable presumption behind the original ban that watching a character smoke on stage would make audience members want to take up the habit, the booklet is not a finger-wagging warning about the perils of such behaviour, but rather a guide to helping others stop. As such, one is encouraged to adopt the attitude of concerned and sympathetic onlooker towards the character. This is at once a bizarre imposition upon one's spectatorial agency, and an unsettlingly accurate intensification of the ethical investments that Tsai's oeuvre invites from its viewers, particularly in the case of Yang Kuei-mei. One of the most notorious of all Tsai's scenes is the ending of *Vive l'Amour*, which features a close-up of Yang's face as, exhausted, lonely and hopeless, she weeps, and then smokes, and then weeps some more. At length. No

single event triggers this moment. Rather, it crystallizes the hitherto dull emotional ache that pulses through the three lives presented to us in the preceding hours. Lacking a specific incident to sympathize over, we empathize instead, projecting onto Yang whatever generalized sense of urban anomie or personal loss we may, ourselves, harbour.

It is these kinds of identifications that an informed audience is liable to bring to bear upon 'The Spider Demon of Yang Kuei-mei', though our worries may be over-stated. If Yang requires any help from her 'supporters' in the auditorium, it is of a practical, rather than existential, nature: although *as* supporters, we find ourselves unable to provide her with the one thing she needs – a light. Juggling a damp cigarette, a broken lighter, an insistently malfunctioning handphone and a hairdryer, Yang instead performs a minor masterpiece of object theatre that is every bit as convoluted as the regulatory wrangles that beset the play's presentation in Singapore. It is not glamorous, and it certainly does not 'promote' smoking. However, by the time Yang finally hits upon the solution of lighting her cigarette with the hairdryer element (Figure 6.1), the sense of expectation amongst audience members is palpable; her release at that first big puff just as liberating for us. I'm no smoker, but I take that inbreath with her and savour it like it's my last.

A momentary suspension.

Exhale. And then the outbreath. The smoke hangs briefly in the air, the volume, it strikes me, of Yang's lungs. I'm leaning forward now, nostrils dilated, sniffing for any trace of that fabled 'second hand smoke' that I have made an 'informed choice' to expose myself to. 'Remember, there is NO safe level of cigarette smoke', warns a leaflet tucked into *The Supporter's Guide*. Each cigarette contains over 4,000 harmful chemicals, we are informed, of which at least fifty can cause cancer. The perennial threat of environmental catastrophe in Tsai's work has leapt from the screen, and is playing out in miniature before us. I'm sniffing for it anyway. I want to know how far through the room Yang's breath can penetrate. I want to register some molecule of her in me – to absorb her.

This sounds erotic, proprietorial. It is neither – at least, that's an oversimplification. In retrospect, as I think my way back into that moment and try to understand why I experienced it so intensely, I am put in mind of other images from Tsai's work – not, this time, by way of unfavourable comparison, but instead as prompts, accessories: concrete images to help explain the encounter. I find a similar concentration of otherwise dispersed forces and features in *The Hole*, where the titular opening between Yang's and Lee's apartments (in the ceiling of hers and the floor



Figure 6.1 *Only You*. Directed by Tsai Ming-liang. Yang Kuei-mei in 'The Spider Demon of Yang Kuei-mei'. Taipei 2011. Photograph by Liu Chen-hsiang. © National Theater & Concert Hall, R.O.C.

of his) serves variously as aperture, orifice and doorway. It is a focal point for the characters' curiosity and desires, and an intensifier of the strange intermingling of building, bodies, fluids and subjectivities that the film performs. The set-up recalls Gilles Deleuze's characterization of the fold as a means of overcoming conventional distinctions between inside and outside. Since no entity is ever entirely closed off from its circumstances, interiority is the contingent and incomplete folding-in of a continuous surface upon itself: 'The problem is not how to finish a fold', writes Deleuze, in his discussion of an architectural set-up curiously similar to that of *The Hole*, 'but how to continue it, to have it go through the ceiling'⁸ (1993: 34).

⁸ The 'ceiling' to which Deleuze is referring is to be found in the allegory of the Baroque house with which he opens *The Fold*. It consists of a lower floor, which is open to the senses and houses 'the

A related problem preoccupies Tsai and his characters in *The Hole*, as the hole opens up the interiors of the two apartments, and their contents, to each other. As waterlogged wallpaper peels off the walls around her, Yang folds in upon herself, scurrying around like a cockroach, and building an insectoid nest from hundreds of rolls of toilet paper. Above, Lee impassively maintains order, interrupted only by the occasional irritation emanating through the hole – the sound of an alarm clock, insect spray. It ends with Yang grasping Lee's downstretched hand in order to ascend to the austere apartment above. Deleuze provides one way of interpreting such a denouement: 'in every event this becoming is an elevation, an exaltation: a change of theater, of rule, of level or of floors. The theater of matter gives way to that of spirits or of God' (12).

One way of thinking about Yang's cigarette in *Only You*, and why I find myself so captivated by it, is as both hole and fold. Relative to the size of the theatre, it is a capillary: an opening that appears in the middle of the room, and establishes an abrupt division between the outside of Yang's body, where we are, and the inside, those 'pleats of matter' (in Deleuze's phrase (3)) where the air she draws in is now heading. Any other orifice could do as well, one might say. They are holes too. But what further exaggerates the suddenly apparent division between these two spaces is that the cigarette is no mere straw. The tobacco blend and fibres of the filter are packed densely into the paper, the industrial outcome of a process of rolling, cutting and folding that has its historical roots in the exemplary fold of the rolled tobacco leaf.

When Yang exhales and I strain for a whiff of her smoke, there is, we might say, a moment of mutual unfolding. To the extent possible within their physical constraints, 'our' respective 'pleats of matter' open out. Not so much towards each other (that would be the romantic fantasy that – do you mind if I tell you this? – I briefly entertained in its more conventional form when I first watched *Vive l'Amour* at the cinema as an isolated exchange student in a French provincial town in 1995). But rather, into the room. Insides recover their outsides. As it diffuses through the space, the smoke provides particulate traces that materialize the air we share. I,

pleats of matter', and the upper, composed of 'the folds in the soul' (1993: 3). In accordance with Leibniz's concept of the monad, the upper floor is 'a dark room or chamber decorated only with a stretched canvas "diversified by folds"'; these folds represent an innate form of knowledge, though they can be moved into action when triggered by matter, 'through the intermediary of "some little openings" that exist on the lower level' (4). It is through these openings, in other words, that the folds within each room also fold upon each other.

too – at least, the part of me that goes by that name – begin to dissolve into that same environment.

It is an infratheatrical moment, too fleeting and fragile and too numerous in its parts to count as ‘theatre’. To be sure, the groundwork was laid by a minor controversy that heightened anticipation of the moment. The moment came as the theatrical pay-off to one of Tsai’s trademark sequences of downtempo slapstick. And, no doubt, the lurid and uncouth operations of subjective desire that may or may not be usefully described as the ‘male gaze’ were at work. But still. Deleuze’s language has it, if not his meaning: ‘an elevation, an exaltation: a change of theater’. In those seconds, the theatre became aerosolized: briefly dissolved into the finest of mingled particles. An infratheatre of infinite variety.

But there is only so far one can go in rhapsodizing what, in Deleuzian terms, we might call the deterritorializing effects of Yang’s smoking. After all, a part of its affective force lay in the build-up from being a one-time exemption from the law. To disavow this would be to ignore the role of what Deleuze calls ‘the fold of the relations between forces’ (1988: 104) in the material folding and unfolding of the body. More prosaically, in light of the basic theatrical disappointments of the production overall, it was almost inevitable that such an effect could not last long. In the end, another image from Tsai’s work presents itself as a more fitting summary. ‘Fish’ features a video of Lee Kang-sheng showing how he kills the octopi he catches by turning them inside out and stripping off their organs. Lee then passes some cut octopus around for the audience to eat. This is, amongst other things, almost a cruel parody of what Deleuze might call ‘the inside as an operation of the outside’ (1988: 97) (to say nothing of the *Body without Organs!*). It is more an inversion than a fold, and ultimately I cannot help but view Yang’s smoking along similar lines. Relative to the rest of the performance, the act was so powerfully distinct that although it did indeed constitute a moment of vaporizing intensity, the final sense I am left with is of the cigarette as a kind of nozzle, which sucks the entire production briefly inside out, and then blows it back into shape again, unchanged. Infratheatrical moments are powerful, but their effects are hard to sustain. In the final section of this chapter, however, I examine a part of the *Only You* trilogy that did just that.

Bystander Affect

In name and deed, ‘The Intravenous Drip of Lu Yi-ching’ aims at the dissolution of boundaries between the external world and both the physical

interior and subjective interiority of the titular character. In so doing, the performance could be said to enact a sustained process of unfolding whose extensivity, I will argue, is infratheatrical.

The narrative, such as it is, concerns a middle-aged woman who treats herself in her apartment for an unnamed condition. As is often the case with Tsai's work, the affliction seems to sit somewhere between physiological disease and existential malaise, and, while debilitating, also presents an opportunity for a renewed relation to world and self. Projected text tells us that the woman suffers from fever, malnourishment and sleeplessness. In the course of the performance, Lu tries various means of restoring the balance between her body and environment. She consumes numerous fluids (tea, water, coffee, a health shake), and spends time hooked up to an intravenous drip (Figure 6.2). She applies medicated analgesic patches to her back (which function by generating a warming sensation in muscles and skin), beats herself with a massage paddle, and eats cake and salad. However, the passage of matter is not one way. Vocalizing in order to channel her breathing, Lu performs *qigong*-like exercises. At several points she cries, and in a film projection towards the end of the performance, we watch her floating luminously in a dark body of water, rising and falling on the waves. This image of immersion brings the acts of consumption and absorption full-circle, and suggests that the woman attains a state of suspended animation, where the equalizing of conditions inside and outside the body causes the corporeal and subjective boundaries to become more permeable, if not dissolved.

If we follow Deleuze's formulation of the fold in his discussion of Foucault, we can say that Lu's actions involve folding as a process of subjectivation. Deleuze described Foucault's conception of folding as a contingent individuation by which the chaotic, vertiginous line Outside (which is 'everywhere thought confronts something like madness, and life something like death' (1995: 110)), is managed in order to make living endurable. 'The most general formula of the relation to oneself is the affect of self by self, or of folded force. Subjectivation is created by folding', he writes (1988: 104). In Lu's case, this involves self-medication, but ultimately treatment is not the primary focus of the performance. Sickness is displaced onto Chuan-chang, a character whose tragic story Lu (and the audience) listens to on the radio. Chuan-chang, we are told, who likes to wear an unfashionably long cheongsam (a sleeveless, high-collared Chinese dress), courts a doctor, but falls ill and eventually dies. For the final scene of the performance, Lu changes from her 'home clothes' of shorts and t-shirt into a rose pink dress that partly aligns her with Chuan-chang. However, whereas the latter



Figure 6.2 *Only You*. Directed by Tsai Ming-liang. Lu Yi-ching in 'The Intravenous Drip of Lu Yi-ching'. Taipei 2011. Photograph by Liu Chen-hsiang.
© National Theater & Concert Hall, R.O.C.

wastes away, the former sits in a chair, sipping coffee. Following on from the apparently climactic (and somewhat deathly) image of Lu floating in the sea, the scene gestures towards continuity, rather than finitude. Lu has been busy not only curing herself, but caring *for* the self. The result is by no means triumphal – on the contrary, this being a Tsai Ming-liang production, it is ineffably sad. But by this point Lu has, through innumerable acts of self-cultivation, managed, as Deleuze puts it, 'to fold the line and establish an endurable zone in which to install ourselves, confront things, take hold, breathe – in short, think' (1995: 111).

Narrativized thus, 'Intravenous Drip' sounds packed with incident. In fact, Lu's performance of these various activities unfolds with what at the time felt like excruciating slowness. By comparison with 'Spider Demon' and 'Fish' – themselves not short on longueurs – 'Intravenous Drip' is monotonous: the pace barely accelerates, the mood rarely lifts. An 'endurable zone in which to install ourselves' is by no means an easy place to be. But of course, this experience of duration is integral to its effects. As the mechanics of an intravenous drip attest, it takes time for things to pass into or be absorbed by the body, especially when that is not all that is

happening (and it never is). Lu lies still for fifteen minutes with the drip taped to her arm, and for another ten minutes once she has taken it off. She takes twenty minutes to drink a health shake while listening to the story of Chuan-chang, and another fifteen to drink her coffee at the end.

This lugubriousness has several consequences. The first is that the performance feels boring. There simply isn't enough visual or narrative interest on stage to hold the attention, and nor are there the tonal shifts that (if nothing else) characterize Tsai's long film takes. Instead, we are confronted with what, at first blush, looks like indolence and lassitude. Certainly this was the conclusion of numerous audience members who walked out at about the forty-minute mark, just as Lu was embarking on her second period of bed rest, and it became apparent that a pronounced change of pace or tone was unlikely. This is not to say 'Intravenous Drip' was without its 'moments'. When an amusing interview with a well-known Taiwanese blogger was played (and Lu performed her exercises), I embraced the abruptly increased cognitive demands of listening, reading surtitles and interpreting meanings with relief; when, after the story of Chuan-chang, a seated Lu performed a sensuous dance to Li Xiang-lan's sultry song 'Plum Blossom', it felt as if the space had opened briefly onto a small window of theatrical activity (the sort that had, inversely, overwhelmed 'Spider Demon'.)

But anyone looking to these bursts of activity to redeem the monotony of the work, will have been disappointed. In their brevity, they served only to distend it further. The mind wanders ... one enterprising audience member has brought a pair of high-powered binoculars to this small studio theatre, in order, it appears, to recreate the performance as a film, with close-ups on demand ... fair enough: after a while, it isn't 'theatre' any more because there's nothing *left* that couldn't equally describe sitting in a doctor's waiting room, or taking a long-haul flight on a budget airline ... Then the mind wanders *back*, and the show's still going on, and it's at about this point (which is of course different for everyone, but some version of the realization, I'll hazard, was widespread), that some otherwise intensely mysterious lines in 'Plum Blossom' start to make sense:

The mind of the plum blossom is known to no-one
 Only through the austerity of snow and storms can you understand
 The poor plum blossom is waiting for your sympathy
 To ease its troubled heart. (Esplanade Theatre 2012a: 9)

One would be hard-pressed to say that sympathy was the dominant feeling of the audience towards Lu – many of us were probably too busy feeling

sorry for ourselves. Nevertheless, in my own experience at least, the idea that the austerity of the work gave rise to a more or less sympathetic relation between us does seem to get to the crux of the matter. After all, the dissolution of boundaries between inside and outside was not limited to those actions that Lu performed upon herself. The different sounds made by the massage paddle as it beat across her body – now cavernous, now denser – provided us with a kind of aural mapping of her interior; in the silence, we could hear our own breathing, and, in my case, the rumbling of a fellow audience member's stomach; we listened to the stories and music Lu listened to as she sat like we did, shifting position occasionally without affectation or imitation; and as she dozed in the dim light, I, for one, nodded off.

In short, we were joined in our perceptions, and experienced sympathetic states of consciousness. Retrospectively (for obvious reasons, it was not reflexively apparent at the time), I would say that Lu presented herself to the audience as an object of contemplation. But this was not a meditation retreat, and 'object' may be overstating the case. Lu was not so much a focal point as an occasion for thought. My attention wandered, but it was not distracted: committing to staying in the room meant that when I came back around to the unfolding event, whatever ideas I had been entertaining were now integrated into the increasingly expansive world of the work.

The result is a spectatorial mode that runs somewhat counter to the intense involvement many theatre participants expect or aspire to. While some accounts of peak performance privilege the ethically-implicated (and religiously-freighted) act of witnessing, in 'Intravenous Drip', audience members (and perhaps the performer, too) approached the condition of the bystander. In popular psychology, bystanders are much maligned. The so-called 'bystander effect' suggests their interest in a given event is prurient, and their ethics indifferent or diluted to the point of inaction. Tsai, however, proposes a different conception. We might call it bystander *affect*. Near the beginning of Tsai's film *The River*, for example, the viewer watches a film crew trying to shoot a mannequin as it emerges from a sewerage outflow pipe into a river. On the road above the riverbank, a crowd of onlookers has gathered to watch. But things are not going well. However many takes the director orders, the dummy remains an inadequate stand-in for the corpse it is supposed to represent. As the single-take scene continues, one's interest in the activity wanes. One finds oneself mirroring the bystanders within the frame: watching the action because it

is there to be looked at, rather than because one has any personal investment in the situation or its outcome. It draws the eye, but not the gaze. The pay-off comes later. When Hsiao-kang (Lee Kang-sheng) is subsequently persuaded to perform as the corpse, the shot is taken from the position where the on-screen bystanders were previously standing and, with the dummy abandoned in the foreground, Lee's lengthy, lifeless immersion in the filthy water is captivating.

In 'Intravenous Drip', whose images of illness and immersion directly recall *The River* (which focuses on an indeterminate sickness Hsiao-kang contracts following his cameo), Lu's performance evokes an engagement that sits part way between these two shots. Whereas Yang's pulvinate beauty tends to absorb the viewer's gaze (and, for those so inclined, attendant emotional investments), and Lee's diffidence to reflect it right back, Lu deflects. She always plays supporting roles in Tsai's films, and as the mother figure she mediates the relationships between others. But she also harbours anxieties and desires of her own, and this combination arguably makes her more versatile than Tsai's other actors. In *Wayward Cloud*, it is she who plays a spider demon in a raunchy musical number, whereas in *Only You*, one might view a sequence where she stares at a vacuum-packed frozen fish, eats salad and cries, as a tragicomic reprise of Yang's performance at the end of *Vive l'Amour*.

In 'Intravenous Drip', what is striking is the effect of this deflective performance style in a solo performance. Gradually, over the course of the play, the audience is invited to settle in to a state of reciprocal co-presence, in which periodic absence (wandering thoughts, doziness) is no shame for anyone, and where the experience of transition between these states is where the performance really happens. This comes to its fullest realization ('culminates' would be too strong here) in the final scene, where Lu sits quietly and sips coffee. In my recollection, these fifteen minutes were both compelling and extraordinarily delicate; full of detail, but impossible to describe. Following on from the immersion video, I felt that I, too, was now in a state of suspension – floating, but not light-headed.

How can I explain this? I am sufficiently familiar with aspects of Chinese life and culture to recognize that the creation and performance of 'Intravenous Drip' was informed by a worldview rooted in Chinese philosophy. I am insufficiently expert, however, to draw philosophical conclusions. On the contrary, it is important to recognize that my experience of watching *Only You* will have been partly formulated in ignorance of elements that the 'implied audience member' of the work is presumed

to be aware of. Nevertheless, despite the differences in context, I do find this passage on classical Chinese literati painting by the French sinologist François Jullien to be particularly useful in helping me think through those moments:

[I]n order to render a character well, his image must be captured at moments of spontaneous, unstudied reaction: when he suddenly changes position, starts moving forward or backward, or begins to gesticulate; when he is shouting, singing, recovering his breath, smiling, starting to reply, frowning, yawning, hurrying. In short, a lively rendering requires grasping the fleeting moment of real life: not contemplating the subject face to face, but observing him obliquely so as to capture what his features cannot help letting through, unbeknownst to him. (2007: 79)

Tsai has spoken in the past of his interest in portraits, and it is perhaps useful to see 'Intravenous Drip' as presenting a portrait of Lu along the lines sketched by Jullien. After numerous departures into her treatments of one kind or another – variously focusing on sleep, diet, exercise, emotional release – the final scene presents us with Lu returned to a state of actual (rather than imaged, as in the video) equilibrium. In her own time, she shifts her weight, circles the rim of her cup with her finger, looks up, looks down ... and although we are indeed 'face to face' with her, the sense that one has of her is, as Jullien puts it, oblique. I was not captivated, hanging on her every look or gesture, but nor could I take my eyes from her.

Jullien goes on to note that in literati art, figuration is best rendered using 'a loosely woven approach, leaving room for movement. Such an approach respects the floating nature of things and their capacity for 'life', and by evoking them from a distance, more vaguely – on the register of absence – renders them pervasive rather than present' (2007: 38). By this token, it is inaccurate to describe what is figured as an object, and the perceiver as a subject. The relationship between the component elements of this situation is predicated on continuity rather than separation, and this provides one way of thinking about the sense of airy – rather than intense – completeness that emerged in the final scene of 'Intravenous Drip'.

Here, then, is a more substantive kind of infratheatre than the failing or fleeting modes already identified in *Only You*. Although theatre conditions the event, what arises in the course of it has little to do with theatrical representation, or even affective intensities. In the process, one might say that Tsai succeeds in realizing in 'Intravenous Drip' an aesthetic that is as appropriate to the theatre as his more established approach is to the medium of film. The fact that the latter is, as I have discussed above, a theatrical naturalism means that in returning to his 'home' in theatre

(Huang 2011)⁹ Tsai needed to take a step back from conventional theatre aesthetics: to move upstream of the traditional separations that we find between stage and auditorium.¹⁰ What is telling is how difficult it is to achieve such a state, though it is not so much redoubled effort that will get us there, as a collective and mutual relinquishing of the kinds of presentational investment and spectatorial desire theatre more conventionally cultivates.

A Fugitive Concept

Since, as I said at the beginning of the chapter, definitions are a mug's game, there is limited mileage in concluding with too schematic a summary of what infratheatre 'is'. After Perec and Adair, the idea that it describes what theatre 'also is' means that it always arises in relation to whatever else is underway. Some aspects of the *Only You* trilogy suffered by intermedial comparison with Tsai's filmic oeuvre, familiarity with which was implied by the production, and integral to at least some aspects of its reception. Here and in the case of Yang's smoking scene, infratheatre arises in the ways the performances were variously drained and charged by contextualizing factors and supplementary meanings. At the same time, I have argued that 'Intravenous Drip' disclosed an infratheatrical dimension of the performance that sat – as the etymology of 'infra' implies – 'beneath' the theatrical event as conventionally conceived. Lu's unselfconscious paring-back of many of the components of the mutually constitutive relation between performer and spectator, and the tacit acceptance of this by the audience members who stayed, meant that distinctions between subjectivities and roles, between watching and being watched, speaking and listening, were ultimately less important than the shared instantiation of the material substrate where the event largely 'happened'.

In preceding chapters, I have suggested that many features of performance that we tend to think of as unique effects of the event are in fact continuous with the larger processes of theatrical production. It follows that such features can also be detached from the theatrical event, and

⁹ As the artistic director of the commissioning venue put it: 'Cinema is the "other place" where TSAI Ming-liang showcases his talent and theater is probably where he calls home. He ventured out from theater to seek further development and now the man away from home has finally returned' (Huang 2011).

¹⁰ 'Upstream' is a term Jullien uses: 'We have seen that the figurative process truly begins upstream from man, with natural markings or tracings, and we also know that man's place in the world is where the world becomes conscious of itself through language and makes itself explicit' (2009: 133).

reconstituted in other media, and in different configurations; and also that the theatrical event itself is contingently created – rather than pre-determined – by those features, and that they may be unevenly distributed across performances we are inclined to view in totality. In this chapter, I have used the idea of ‘infratheatre’ to identify those dimensions of theatrical experience where something is happening that is recognizable to regular theatre participants, but whose component parts fail, for a variety of reasons, to crystallize into those conventionally thought necessary for an act of theatre to be engaged. To a degree, ‘infratheatre’ can be seen as a shadowy, intangible or fugitive dimension of the theatrical event. But it is not always insubstantial. In some cases, infratheatre names the irreducibly material; in others, it lies in the rather brutal exposure of the limits of what is presented to us *as* theatre. But ‘infratheatre’ is not a genre of theatre. Some performances may generate a tone or operate in a register that is more productively described as infratheatrical than as theatrical *per se*; in others, ‘infratheatre’ might be invoked to explain a perplexing moment or inadvertent side-effect. Moreover, ‘infratheatre’ does not exist only ‘out there’, as a quality of the event on stage, since it more readily describes those moments when the conventionally defining trinity of theatre – audience, spectator, space – are yet to find their proper place or level. In tracing the infratheatrical through *Only You*, I have given expression to multiple registers of spectatorial engagement, from the judgemental, through the riveted (and libidinal), to the contemplative. Each instance of infratheatre differs according to context, and the term is not ultimately as important as the demand it makes of us to give the details of each theatre experience its due: to allow that its meanings and effects may be conditioned by social factors that appear far removed from the aesthetic encounter; or conversely that what is happening in the course of an event varies widely from moment to moment, and that sometimes the best way of recovering and reflecting on it is blow by blow, if not breath for breath.