

Androgyny 22 Years Later

Liu Wai-tong *China Times* literary column ‘三少四壯集’

This year, Hong Kong's rainfall is unstoppable. Early summer plants are still growing overwhelmingly; there is yet sight of autumn. Here I am trapped in the studio, with the rainstorm roaring outside, rereading Betty Ng's masterpiece *Ox* from the 1970s and Dung Kai-cheung's *Androgyny* from the 1990s. The experience is eerie. It's as if the Hong Kong four decades ago existed anachronistically with the Hong Kong two decades ago in a parallel universe. In the rainstorm, both of them sprouted, branched out and were mistakenly rooted in today's Hong Kong.

Perhaps it's because I'm reading the two books intersectingly – Dung Kai-cheung's *Androgyny*, which stunned the literary scene and won the United Literature's Novel Writing Competition for Novice in 1994, always reminds me of *Ox* – Hong Kong's earliest ecological/ magical realism novel. In particular that transitional paragraph: “the rain seemed to have penetrated my body and my body seemed to be melted into the mountain range. My body became the mountain range; the mountain range became my body. Suddenly, I sensed an impulse arising within me, joyous and intense...’.

Director of theatrical work *Nature* Tam Hung-man told me what moved and inspired him to adapt *Nature* from *Androgyny* was because of this very scene. Leaving the city and her husband, a woman enters the deep forest by herself, abruptly crossing the barrier and reconciling with an outlandish space. Later, she gains a deep understanding of a female asexual reproductive organism ‘Androgyny’ (an organism that Dung Kai-cheung made up, which conducts pseudocopulation among females with the scientific name ‘Capillisaurus Varicaudata’). After experiencing the entanglements with two men, she eventually chooses to be with another woman. Yet, can she really stand on her own?

Director Tam Hung-man was fully aware of the fact that the male gaze is inevitable in executing such a feminist text. Therefore, he might as well be very politically incorrect by using two male voices to narrate that female role. The otherwise silent female actor has only one line. This arrangement is completely different from that of Dung Kai-cheung 22 years ago. Dung imitated the female voice in writing, making it hard for the judges to differentiate the author's gender. The theatrical execution tends to trigger contradictions outright. The discomfort among the audience would actually

induce further reflection.

In the drama, not only has the character 'Caveman' in the novel been boldly turned into a unicorn, Ivanhoe Lam's choreography has also pushed the conflict between the two sexes to the extreme. The 'horn' of the unicorn has become the dance's significant props and sexual metaphor. In the duet, the relationship between the unicorn and the woman resembles the Western classic story *The Lady and the Unicorn*, connoting what seems to be half-willing sexual violence. The pas de trois intensifies the woman's sense of restraint; the three 'horns' become shackles. The pas de quatre strengthens the other female character in the novel and the gender conflict seems to be evened out.

What makes it bizarre is when the woman seizes a 'horn' in the solo dance: she attempts to erect this horn countlessly on stage in vain. The ending of *Androgyny* shares this sense of bitter independence: at last, the woman has to accept a man's sperm to conceive the daughter she has been anticipating, instead of refusing evolution like *Capillisaurus Varicaudata* and only relying on same-sex pseudocopulation to reproduce. However, the novel also hints at that if it weren't for the awareness of the existential meaning of another woman, the infertile woman would not get pregnant accidentally after the rape.

That other woman is like the *Capillisaurus Varicaudata* quietly watching the love and sexual struggles between men and women, existing ever above the woman, sometimes as an observer and sometimes an intruder. This is a dance beyond dance, just like the war beyond war in the body of the woman who is going to become *Androgyny*. 22 years later, Dung Kai-cheung has watched this new version of *Androgyny* and writes that he is astonished to realise that his character once entered the so-called 'State of Exception' coined by Giorgio Agamben and hence, a bare life.

It's precisely with a bare life can liberation be possible. 22 years ago, Hong Kong also entered the rainstorm of 'State of Exception' and yet to come face to face with the bare life of the arrival of 1997. After raining heavily for more than two decades, there came the Umbrella Revolution. After the umbrellas were destroyed, everyone was soaked. How could this *Androgyny* named 'Hong Kong' possibly conduct self-reproduction?