



NYU Keynote, 2018

PING CHONG

PING CHONG + COMPANY

On the afternoon of November 6th 2016, I boarded a plane from LaGuardia Airport for Winston-Salem, North Carolina. I had a rendezvous with an audition the next day at Wake Forest University with my collaborator, Talvin Wilks. As you all know it was Election Day. By the time I arrived at my hotel, it was already dark and as my driver turned into the parking lot, the radium glow of a TV beckoned through a large window. The TV was tuned to the election. Once inside as I waited to check-in, the announcement came that the GOP had taken Kentucky. I didn't think much of it. It was a predictable win and as far as I was concerned all bets were off anyway. That night, drifting down sleeper's lane, my eye lids growing increasingly heavy, the telephone rattled me back to wakefulness. Without turning on the lights, my hand fumbled for the telephone. It was Talvin Wilks. His flight had just landed. Without preamble Talvin said, "I can't believe it, Trump took Michigan." The next day Wake Forest University was like a tomb. The air seemed to have been sucked out of the campus except for one place: the Student Union. There two white students ran tearing across the broad, expansive space

of the Union, shouting at the top of their lungs one word, and one word only, over and over again. It was the “N” word.

Talvin and I were in the right place at the right time. In fact the timing was uncanny. We were both prepping for the third incarnation of our production *Collidescope: Adventures in Pre and Post Racial America*. *Collidescope* was originally commissioned by the University of Maryland at College Park, it was followed by a production at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst a year and a half later and then Wake Forest University in 2017. It is a documentary theater work, a time machine moving back and forth in time displaying the violence perpetuated against Black people continuously throughout American history. However, *Collidescope* had a particular conceit: To view the layers of violent historical evidence from the point of view of an alien race the better to see things from a fresh perspective. We also occasionally cross gendered, cross color cast the actors with this same purpose in mind. If you have a black actor playing a white racist in 1861 at a ball in Charleston, South Carolina on the eve of Lincoln’s election for example, you are forced to look at the historical reality differently. If you have a scene taking place on the eve of the American Revolution in which a slave who is a Muslim is fighting for his freedom against the American Revolutionaries, you have to reconsider the meaning of that history. The purpose of the color blind, cross gendered casting was also to remind the audience that our fraught history belongs to all of us, to every American regardless of color or gender, living or dead. We are all in this psychic, leaky boat together and together we will have to plug the leaks sooner or later. Talvin and my idea for the show was to slowly awaken in the audience the horror and insanity of racism through the accumulation of irrefutable evidence from an objectified point of view, the alien’s point of view, to expose the lies of the official American narrative. We want to force the audience to see the cause and effect of this history as it continues to impact our collective, troubling present.

Whenever I am invited to mount a production with students it’s an opportunity not only to open their minds to the creative process and the craft of interdisciplinary work, but also to expose them to the history of injustice wherever it may be in the world. Raising the consciousness of students is of paramount importance to me. I knew that much of the history, whatever it may be, would be unknown to most of them and I was right. For example, in 2004 I was invited to Kent State, where the students primarily did musical theater, in other words escapist theater.

Instead, Michael Rohd and I created *Blind Ness, the Irresistible Light of Encounter*, a gritty and provocative work about the rape of the Congo by King Leopold of Belgium where 5 million people died from enslavement, starvation, murder and disease thanks to Western Civilization. I wanted the students to learn a new, interdisciplinary language of theater making and at the same time become aware of the consequences of historical events as it relates to the present. I wanted them to understand that this obscure piece of 19th Century history about a little known epic genocide was directly related to their lives in the present day. I wanted them to understand that the equally epic rape of the Congo in the present for its minerals including Coltan, which is indispensable in all their digital devices, was part of the continuing legacy of 19th Century colonialism into the present. More than 5 million people have died since the mid-1990's. All Islands Connect Under Water. And we are all responsible.

In 2007, I was invited to the Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, a year after Hurricane Katrina. I was invited by a friend, Vince Licata who taught BioChemistry there, who also happened to be a playwright. We agreed to collaborate on a work about a real life hero/warrior named Krisana Krasintu, a Thai pharmaceutical chemist. She pretty much single handedly stopped the AIDS epidemic in Thailand. Who in America has heard of her? It is a rarity in the American theater to learn about a real life hero who is an A type woman, and an Asia woman at that, who made a huge difference in the world at the height of the AIDS epidemic. It is rare that Americans take an interest in, or are aware of the accomplishments of other worlds. I wanted the students to see first-hand an example of a human being of conscience who acted on her conscience to make a difference in the world against great odds. Bristol Myers Squibb sent 6 CEOs to intimidate her, claiming she did not have the patents for her work. At the same time they refused to lower their prices for their AIDS medication preferring to let the epidemic in Thailand spread at a catastrophic rate. Dr. Krasintu however, was not intimidated by Bristol Myers Squibb. She stood her ground. As it turned out they had lied about the patents. This was a David and Goliath story and David won. Dr. Krasintu was the first person to create a two pill AIDS regiment that saved thousands and thousands of lives. When *Cocktail* premiered in Baton Rouge, Dr. Krisana Krasintu was invited by the university as a guest of honor. The students had a chance to meet a real life hero. *Cocktail*, *Blind Ness*, and *Collidescope* are some

of the examples of how I bring activism into the classroom. Today I spend more time in University theater departments than in professional theaters because the young matter. They are the future and as we have seen recently they are capable of forceful activism. They are the hope of the future.

In both, *Blind Ness* and *Cocktail* what interested me most was the mystery of empathy. What made a lowly shipping clerk in Liverpool named E.D. Morel, and a British diplomat of Irish descent named Roger Casement empathetic toward the fate of the Congolese in King Leopold's so called Congo Free State, an euphemism if there ever was one? These two men help found one of the first international human rights movements in modern history. What made them see human beings where most of the West at the time saw savages? And Dr. Krisintu, why did she insist on moving forward with her AIDS research alone, when the Thai government laboratory where she was employed opposed and abandoned her? In Dr. Krisintu's case, she had personal models to emulate; her father was the barefoot doctor on the island where they lived. She often traveled with him on his rounds by donkey to the poor villages where peasants would pay him with bags of rice, a pair of ducks, or some yams. She often saw him serving the villagers for free when they had nothing to give him in return. She saw his example as a doctor and above all as a human being, but most of all it was Dr. Krisintu's Grandmother who had the greatest effect on her. She was a Buddhist nun who freed her slaves. It was Dr. Krisintu's Grandmother who taught her the need for compassion in a hard, hard world when she was knee high. As for E.D. Morel, who had a great deal to lose as a low paid clerk, nothing could stop him from his ferocious commitment to human rights, perhaps his Quaker roots was a key influence, but we will never really know for sure. In the case of Roger Casement, he may have been a British diplomat, but his ultimate loyalty was to his Irish roots, the roots of an underdog. Later in life he would be hung for sedition against the British. This and his personal secret as a homosexual may have made him more sympathetic to those framed as Other. Casement knew what oppression was. Maligned in life, he is now honored in death.

In 1992, I began a series of works collectively entitled, *Undesirable Elements* with each production yielding its own individual title. It is a series of interview-based theater works performed by the interviewees themselves. Each production allows community members to address the community in which they live on issues of racism, of intolerance, of

social justice, of marginality, and of identity. It is a work of documentary theater without actors, but members of a community from all walks of life. It is a dialogue within a community. It is a communion, a testimonial, a space for the marginalized and disempowered to have a voice. It is a bridge to understanding. It is the individual witnessing of history as performance. Undesirable Elements has been going on for 26 years across this nation and across the world. At its core is the question of empathy, to recognize that those who appear different from us in the end are more like us than we realize. Undesirable Elements is an opportunity for a community to meet members of their community they might otherwise not know, the better to recognize our common humanity. My staff and I have worked with people from hundreds of different cultures, children survivors of war, survivors of childhood sexual abuse, Congolese refugees, undocumented refugees, people with disabilities, marginalized youth, and as we speak, Native Alaskans and young Muslims.

I have been an artist for 46 years. I did not choose art, art chose me. It is my calling. It is my fate to have been called and it is my fate that I have always been Other, not by my own choosing, but by my societies constant, coded reminder of my marginality as a person of color, as an immigrant, as a bisexual man, and certainly as an artist. It has shaped my art. And in this time of fracture, of fragmentation, of micro-divisiveness even among like-minded people, we do well to move forward in a spirit of inclusion, of generosity and openness rather than repression. Our divisiveness will only weaken us against the fascist tide rising before us. It is essential that we move forward united against the darkness with all the people, of whatever color and gender wherever they may be.

Not too long ago in Champaign-Urbana, at a lecture I was giving about my work, an audience member raised his hand and asked about *Collidescope*, "Why is a Chinese man making a Black Lives Matter work?" My answer? Because I am an American and the problems of this nation are my problems, Because I am part of the solution or part of the problem, because I am an outsider to the Black and White divide, and an outsider's perspective can be valuable, because I am a human being just like you separated only by the myth of race which continues to divide us, and which we must all work hard to transcend, and finally because I am a human being who cares about the fate of our nation and our

common humanity.

On November 7th 2017 the day after the election, I received an email from a friend in San Francisco. The message was simple. It said, "Let there be light," and with it was the image of a lit candle. I forwarded it to my grieving friends. Talvin and I were privileged and fortunate to be at Wake Forest University that day. Without missing a beat we could as artists and educators act in the affirmative, to let there be light. On September 11th 2001, Talvin and I had a similar experience; that night we were to have had our first rehearsal for Undesirable Elements, Atlanta. That cast consisted of six young teenagers, from India, Nigeria, South Africa, Mexico, the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina and an African American. There we were young and old Americans, experiencing the same tragedy together. We were collectively impacted. My producer called me after Talvin and I had watched images of the smoking towers on TV that morning. She wanted to know if we were planning to rehearse that night. And I said yes, absolutely we would be rehearsing that night because that was the affirmative thing to do. The darkness was not going to snuff out the light.

After the election the despair in our nation was palpable. Today, the dread of what this new President might do has come to pass and yet the horror and the inhumanity has been with us all along since before the founding of this nation. It is only that the true savagery of it all is naked now and we can no longer pretend otherwise. The poor excuse of a president that we have now is only the boil that ruptured to reveal the aged rot beneath. Along with the despair that so many people felt about the recent election was the impatience to act, to fight back, to crush the bad guys NOW, but the enormous crimes of our forefathers and the continuing legacy of crimes into this century cannot be resolved so quickly. An appreciation of patience is in order, not passive patience, but active patience, the patience of water wearing down a rock, a stubborn patience that nothing can ever stop. My father who was a good man once said, "You cannot remove a mountain in one fell swoop. You must chip away at it patiently, relentlessly, a little bit at a time until it is flattened. There is no other way." Let everyone in this room chip away at the mountain because it is going to take a long time, let as many people as possible everywhere chip away at it. If we all do this together putting our differences aside we will finally inherit the truly just, fair and free society that was promised to us, the truly inclusive society that was promised to us instead of the hypocritical double talk we've had to

endure for 400 years. Let us be the water that wears down the rock and above all let there be light.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Ping Chong is an internationally acclaimed artist and pioneer in the use of media in the theater. His theatrical works bring his unique artistic vision to bear on major historical issues of our times, and focus on bringing unheard voices and under-represented stories to the stage. Encompassing puppetry, dance, documentary theater, sound, media and other experimental theater forms, his works have explored a wide variety of subjects from a hidden genocide in Africa to modernization in China to the experiences of Muslim youth in post 9/11 America. Throughout, the common thread has been a unifying commitment to artistic innovation and social responsibility.

Since 1972, as founder and artistic director of Ping Chong + Company, he has created over 100 productions which have been presented at major theaters, festivals and museums worldwide. Major interdisciplinary works include *Collidescope: Adventures in Pre and Post Racial America* (with Talvin Wilks, 2013 University of Maryland, 2015 University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2017 Wake Forest University), *Throne of Blood* (2010 Brooklyn Academy of Music and Oregon Shakespeare Festival), *Cathay: Three Tales of China* (2005 the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts), *Kwaidan* (1998 Center for Puppetry Arts, Jim Henson Festival), *Deshima* (1990 Tokyo International Theater Festival), *Nosferatu* (1985/1991 La MaMa), *Angels of Swedenborg* (1984/2011), among many others.

In 1992, he created the first Undesirable Elements production, an ongoing series of community-based oral history projects, working with real people to explore issues of culture and identity. Representative works in the UE Series include *Difficult Lives* (2019, Tokyo Metropolitan Theater) *Beyond Sacred: Voices of Muslim Identity* (2015, LaGuardia Performing Arts Center and touring) *Inside/Out: Voices of the Disability Community* (2008, Kennedy Center), *Cry for Peace: Voices from the*

Congo (2010 Syracuse Stage) and *Gaijin* (1995 Yomiuri Prize, Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre.) His puppet theater work *Alaxsxaialaskai* premiered in August 2017 and continues to tour.

Theatre Communications Group has published two volumes of his plays, *The East West Quartet* and *Undesirable Elements: Real People, Real Lives, Real Theatre*. Ping Chong is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, a USA Artist Fellowship, two BESSIE awards, two OBIE awards, a Doris Duke Performing Artist Award, a 2015 Ford Foundation Art of Change Fellowship and a 2014 National Medal of Arts.