

‘The conversation’s changed’: how Asian culture edged into the Australian mainstream

Dancer Daniel Kok was recently in Melbourne in a show he devised with Australian performer Luke George called *Bunny*: an interactive exploration of bondage and the ancient underground erotic art of *shibari*. Kok’s works are provocative, often erotic explorations of current politics, of desire, of complicity. They’re not, in most cases, about being Singaporean.

But as part of the inaugural *Asia-Pacific Triennial of Performing Arts* (Asia Topa) in Melbourne, cultural categorisation is inevitable. Although not the festival’s overt aim, Asia Topa and festivals like it – including Adelaide’s *OzAsia festival* – categorise performers according to geography and culture in an attempt to improve a still underdeveloped relationship between Australia and its neighbours.

Kok is ambivalent about being involved in an “Asian” festival. He says the idea of representing his country through his work makes him “cringe”. But the existence of *Bunny*, alongside most of the shows in the triennial, speaks to a sophisticated international network of collaboration and funding which Kok and Asia Topa’s organisers believe is necessary to really engage with artists and venues in the region in a meaningful, ongoing way.

“This is what it means to be involved in cultural diplomacy; I realise I’m involved in a bigger picture, it’s not just about my work,” says Kok. He sees Asia Topa as the latest in a growing field of opportunities for collaboration throughout the region. “This is a very good moment to be working in Asia.”

Asia Topa, which started in January and is based in Melbourne, is a four-month-long juggernaut of 60 shows from 15 countries across the region, including a tour by celebrated Indian Bollywood composer *AR Rahman*, the Australian debut of the National Ballet of China’s *The Red Detachment of Women*, and an ever-changing program of Asian art, dance and music at the State Theatre’s *XO State*.

The festival’s creative director, Stephen Armstrong, who is in his 50s, says for his generation, Asia was a “transit zone” on the way to the cultural centres of Europe and the US. The associate director, Kate Ben-Tovim, says for a generation

younger, Asia has become a magnet for Australia's creatives, a place to learn and collaborate.

Asian cultural experiences – in art, design, music, food and spirituality – are no longer seen as unusual for Australians, and the thrust behind the triennial is to normalise it even further. “The whole point was removing the barriers ... even for the older generations,” Ben-Tovim says.

But while bringing Asian artists to Australia helps whet local appetites, what about those already on our shores? Residents of Asian descent make up Australia's fastest-growing demographic and represent more than the 12% of the population. Yet when it comes to culture, our stages and screens still show a marked lack of Asian faces or themes.

Australian stage and screen actor Ming-Zhu Hii, who has recently had roles in TV series *Party Tricks* and the *Ex-PM* and is currently appearing in *Newton's Law*, says the culture has only recently begun to change. “My colleagues and I have been talking about this for years,” she says. “We are the audience too. The interesting thing about *Asia Topa* is that you [now] feel the groundwork has been done politically.”

It's a sentiment shared by director and producer Tony Ayres, born in Portuguese Macau and co-founder of successful film and TV production house *Matchbox Pictures*.

Ayres says we're only now beginning to see white as one of many colours, rather than the default, and there has been a marked increase in Asian actors being cast in mainstream dramas. With shows like *Maximum Choppage*, *Nowhere Boys* and *The Family Law* among the *Matchbox* stable, Ayres's work represents a recent shift in telling non-Anglo stories on screen and in our theatres.

“The conversation's changed in the past few years. Diversity and colour-blind casting is increasingly becoming the norm in conversations,” he says. He welcomes *Asia Topa* as part of that broader movement. “Any opportunity to see

work from Asian cultures is of itself a good thing, and a multiplicity of tactics are needed.”

The Asia Topa triennial is shared between the **Melbourne Arts Centre** and venues throughout the city, and includes \$2m from the Sidney Myer Fund.

Three-and-a-half years in development, its blueprint, says Armstrong, is Queensland Art Gallery’s **Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art**, founded in 1993, which has fostered arts practices across the region, and developed international arts careers.

Asia Topa has a similarly devolved style of programming, with loose consortia of local and regional artists and producers of Asian descent and beyond, who devise their works in “labs”. The collaborations will hopefully continue and spawn other productions. As Armstrong puts it: “We are just as interested in the morning after as we are in the act.”

He says the regional sweep of the inaugural triennial feels necessary in order to “open the door as wide as possible”, but it’s just the beginning of a dialogue about what culture means for Australia and its neighbours.

For Kok, a performer with an international practice, work being made in Asia is now part of a “bigger conversation” – and although he finds being pigeonholed according to his ethnicity “plain ridiculous”, it’s “not surprising in a conversation about Asia that’s still quite new”.

“Twenty years ago artists tended to be more focused on their own sense of cultural identity,” he continues. “There’s still that, but a contemporary work [in Asia] today is not just about contemporising a traditional form or directly dealing with social commentary of our own country. It’s quite exciting.”