The subject of translation in relation to performance is in this fascinating book of essays, at once highly specific and hugely multi-dimensional. Scholar Jennifer Lindsay, while watching a performance of Javanese shadow puppetry (wayang kulit) at the Adelaide Festival in 1994, which includes a live translation of its narrative into English, is seized by the idea of researching further into the possibilities of translation as an integral element of performance. She is keen to draw attention back to the verbal element of performance, given that international presentations of Asian theatre tend to favour the visual and physical at the expense of the verbal. So this is the specific question that forms the impetus for the book: what might it mean for performances from Asia to incorporate translations? Further, what might it mean for such translations to not just convey linguistic
meaning but also, because of their forms, introduce a performative dimension (translation embodied in a live, onstage translator, for instance, whose engagement with the verbal becomes part of the dynamic of the performance). There are at once related questions, of course, regarding what such translations would do. Would they, asks Lindsay, “challenge the imagined cultural frames of nations, of international festivals, even of ethnicity and race? Or does the provision of translation precisely contribute to the globalisation of experience? Is it a way to acknowledge heterogeneity, or is it part of a process of homogenisation?” (31)

Many of the ideas that form the basis for this book were the outcome of a 2003 workshop on translation and/of/in performance in Asia. It is clear that at this workshop, the question that Lindsay started with turned upon itself, as it were, to reveal the incredibly rich and complex landscape of Asian performance, which appears to thrive on linguistic multifariousness. The use, as a political act, of multiple languages in performance; the challenges of translating for multilingual audiences; internal translation or the translation between an obscure language (say Sanskrit) and the vernacular (say Malayalam), which is often built into traditional performance; language itself as the subject of performance; the deliberate decision to not translate – these are only some of the ideas explored in essays that consider performance forms and practices from across Asia but especially from Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia. The ‘clean’ act of translating from a singular language of performance to a singular language of audience must be understood alongside these more tangled questions to do not just with language and performance but also identity, power, and politics. As Indonesian essayist and poet Goenawan Mohamad said at the workshop, “Language seems to be a very dangerous thing in this part of the world.” (39)

The act that inspired the workshop and this book is, however, anything but a bland example of performance translation. What makes Hardja Susilo’s live translation of Javanese wayang kulit into English interesting is precisely that this is a form that already engages with language on many different levels. The dalang or puppeteer-narrator uses the very different poetic, polite, and familiar Javanese speech modes depending on the character who is talking and the scene in question. A description of a place is couched in an idiom different from the idiom in which dialogue is conducted and dialogue is conducted in different idioms depending on who is talking to whom. Also, there are different languages and dialects per se in a performance – old Javanese, modern Javanese, and Indonesian. Secondly, Susilo, who is well-versed in the form and not just familiar with the language in which it is performed is, in his own understanding, as much a guide to his audience as a translator, commenting on performance conventions as much as
presenting the narration. Translations of wayang kulit for non-Javanese audiences have been attempted before but Susilo is the first person to provide simultaneous translation and commentary which is relayed to his audience through individual transmitters (so that those who do not wish to receive the translation can switch theirs off). One of the biggest challenges for a translator is the semi-oral nature of wayang, an aspect which in the case of accomplished dalangs means that while the narrative may be formulaic and the framework familiar, sudden improvizations could stun a translator into silence.

Lindsay wishes to see what Susilo is doing as performance in its own right. She describes the rigorous preparation that goes into his translation, of which not the least part is the need to pay attention to all the language of wayang, something which Javanese audiences, familiar with what visual clues and performance conventions are ‘saying’, do not necessarily do. There are several things that make such translations performative. One, perhaps, is an acknowledgment of the audience. “As a host, I must know who my guests are,” writes Susilo (124) and Lindsay’s examples show how he talks with the audience, even going so far as to insert comments on the skills of a particular dalang or a singer. This acknowledgement of audience (which in turn rests on the audience’s recognition of Susilo as someone actively and visibly playing a bridging role) makes Susilo in his own person, and not just his translation, a part of the performance. Lindsay says such translation is an example of an “overt form of mediation” and will thus “…always be caught up with questions such mediation incurs, such as who is benefiting from this cultural traffic, and the desirability of intervention.” (167) However, Ward Keeler’s essay on polyglossia in Javanese and Balinese performing arts describes the overt mediation that takes place between diverse, hierarchically arranged languages or codes within performances. Both Balinese and Javanese wayang kulit include degrees of translation, interpretation, commentary, and glossing. Might it not be possible to see Susilo’s translation as part of this continuum rather than an ‘intervention’? If he were translating the non-Indonesian bits of wayang into Indonesian for local audiences, say, rather than the whole into English for foreign audiences, would this be interpreted as less interventionist? So the questions concern not performance translation per se but the location of this translation, the language into which it is being done and the target audience. Lindsay points out that when a performance is taken out of its locality, there might be various reasons why presenters might not want to translate it. They “…might want to savour the foreignness, to precisely savour the distance of total non-understanding of the linguistic element. Conversely, however, presenters and audiences might not want to acknowledge the foreignness that translation reveals.” (167)
Separate from political considerations regarding the desirability of translations are aesthetic ones. Lindsay points out how carefully Susilo times his narration so that the listener has access to the sound of the original language as well. The unique aesthetic pleasure to be had in experiencing both the original and its translation side by side, is something Keeler draws attention to. He writes about how translation between one language and another is intrinsic to many Balinese performing arts and how some genres incorporate translation even when the language that is translated might be intelligible to its audience. One of the reasons for this could be the pleasure derived from listening not to one or the other language but to the “play of contrasts” between them. Further, “…the fact that the translations are not brief and to the point, but rather expansive and highly stylised in their content and delivery, indicates that they are not intended as a utilitarian device to maximise intelligibility, like surtitles at the opera, but rather are conceived as intrinsic to the enjoyment a performance affords, part of its overall pleasure.” (216).

In contrast to the aesthetic possibilities that translation throws up when it makes for this ‘surfeit’ of understanding as it were, are the ironic possibilities inherent in translation when it provides for less understanding than is necessary. Goenawan Mohamad, writing about a comedic Indonesian theatre form called Srimulat, describes how the humour implicit in this form is transposed from a Javanese setting into an Indonesian-Malay one. An audience not familiar with class-based Javanese conventions or taboos regulating the difference in status between members of the upper and lower classes, may miss the humour in the encounter between batur (or servant) and master, because this humour derives from a transgression of such conventions and taboos. So while the characters are ‘translating’ in their own heads from Javanese into Indonesian-Malay, this translation is farce because it wilfully ignores the absence of the crucial ‘prior text’ – knowledge among the audience of Javanese class relations. Srimulat’s actors dive into this gap between language and understanding, so that misunderstanding itself becomes the vein that is tapped for its comic potential. The productions embrace what Mohamad describes as a “semantic void” whereby “only the sound of the spoken word, the phonetic phenomenon, is left, still groping to create a meaning.” (85) This is done, for instance, by mispronouncing English or Dutch loan words and thereby generating a chain of confusion or morphing English and Indonesian-Malay words with equally strange and yet comical results, or making jabs at the officialese of the national language.

The links between the lower classes, humour, performing a mediating role, and the speaking of the vernacular or of a casual, hybrid,
unregulated tongue (what Keeler quoting Henk Maier calls heteroglossia) are repeatedly established in relation to different performance contexts in Asia. In Srimulat, it is the batur or servant who is given a “parodic assignment” and who undertakes the risky enterprise of “acting as a translation”. In Thai Khon, as pointed out by Pornrat Damrhung in her essay on the form, the clowns who perform as low-ranking servants, guards or soldiers, speak colloquial Thai and fulfil a mediating role both by summarizing the performance and by satirizing elements of it. “They relate directly to the audience (to whom they are closest), and stand for the common person’s point of view” writes Damrhung. (255) This idea, that clowns/servants through their everyday speech and their commentary relate directly to the audience as against the more distant upper class characters with their stylized speech and manner, also runs through both Javanese and Balinese wayang kulit. Additionally, Keeler observes that the heteroglossia of the low status characters is connected to their social position. “It would be a serious gaffe for an epic or high status character to pronounce a word in the wrong code in Bali or Java. But a low status character can speak in any language at all [...] jokes that play on real or pretend knowledge of Indonesian, English, French and Japanese, and other languages are common when the servants take centre stage.” (213)

Tan Sooi Beng’s essay on multilingualism and humour in Malay comicsongs reinforces these connections between social position, language, and an awareness of how cultural hybridity through its strangeness creates space for humour. As Beng says, “In many ways, comic singers resemble the clown in Asian traditional and popular theatre.” (238). The comic sketches and songs composed during the pre-1957 colonial period in Malaysia, were performed by working class people of various ethnicities and in turn portrayed characters of different ethnicities. The language used was either colloquial Malay with different accents and styles corresponding to different ethnicities, or Malay along with other languages such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Hindi, and English. In Malaysia of the 1980s and ’90s a genre of pop music that fuses indigenous musical and linguistic elements carries forward the older form – Beng provides an example of a song that uses Malay, Chinese, and Tamil words. The colloquial multilingualism in these songs is an acknowledgement of Malaysia’s multi-ethnic society and a reflection of the languages spoken everyday. There is no necessity for translations, writes Beng, and “Even not understanding everything that is spoken is common and expected.” (240)

This is another important theme that runs through these wide-ranging discussions of ‘language-based’ performing arts in Asia – the frequent possibility, given the nature of Asian societies, of an audience not
understanding and in many cases the acceptance of not understanding. Chua Soo Pong writes about how till the introduction of surtitles, Chinese opera in Singapore, performed in one or another dialect, was understood by its multilingual audiences in varying degrees. This led to “a situation of tolerance of non-linguistic understanding of Chinese opera between Chinese “dialects”, and even between Chinese and other languages of Singapore.” (170) Quah Sy Ren in his essay on playwright and director Kuo Pao Kun’s work on representing multilingualism in Singapore, especially his ground-breaking play *Mama Looking for Her Cat*, says that one of the unique things about the play was that no single member of the audience could understand all the languages used in it. According to Ren, “those productions less concerned about the audience’s ability to understand the languages employed, were in fact the more successful in their representation of Singaporean multilingualism.” (95) *Mama Looking for Her Cat* was one such play, and according to one reviewer the theme of a Hokkien-speaking mother unable to communicate with her Mandarin- and English-speaking children “narrowed the gap between Chinese-speaking and English-speaking theatre lovers.” (96) Understanding the verbal in performance cannot be unqualifiedly connected with an enhanced appreciation of it, therefore. For while we may ‘understand’ the words, the larger meanings conveyed by the experience of listening to language in performance depends on the context in which that language is spoken and our relationship to the characters who speak it or to whom and what these characters represent.

In some cases, we may also choose not to understand or even pay attention to the language such as in the case of Javanese *wayang kulit* where, according to Hardja Susilo, because the audience knows from the appearance of a visual clue that the king is approaching, they don’t necessarily try to follow the narration concerning this event. Susilo also says, hinting at not just the practical limitations of his role but also the humility expected of an audience: “When you listen to my translation, I hope you don’t think you understand everything.” (112) Alfian Sa’at takes the idea of imperfect understanding further by exploring the idea of “bad translation as performance”, seeking to develop an aesthetic in his poetry and plays that reflects the kitschy and makeshift quality of a language like Singlish or the unintentional and therefore possible humorous effects of thinking in one language and speaking/writing in another. In the case of Singaporean director One Keng Sen’s multilingual *Lear*, the idea of ‘not understanding’ becomes part of the agenda of the performance. The programme notes for *Lear* stated, “No one culture should be able to understand LEAR in its entirety, no one culture appropriates another.” (190)
There is a darker side to this phenomenon of “not understanding”, however, which Anmol Vellani explores in his essay on performance translation in India. Multilingual milieus can, as described above, facilitate a tolerance of non-linguistic understanding (which in the case of performance implies a willingness on the part of audiences to engage despite not understanding or imperfectly understanding the verbal). This is also the case in India, where, as Vellani points out audiences continue to turn out in significant numbers for plays in languages they do not understand. However, the insistence on not translating performance or the disregard for the possibilities of performance translation implies a hardening of identity based on language – something that undermines the spirit of multilingualism which is what makes it possible for multiple languages to thrive in the first place. Language based performance groups in India are “reluctant to stray outside monolingual terrain because it would be inconsistent with how they conceive their own art as much as with why their state government might support it or how their immediate audiences understand and value it. The prejudice of language requires playwrights and performers to pretend that different tongues in India never merge in the same person nor ever conjoin and intermingle in the same street.” (60)

Vellani describes how the politics of exclusion favoured by the state (overlaid with the façade of the idea of a unified nation) leads to the creation of an “archipelago rather than a bazaar of cultures and languages.” (65) It is useful to contrast this with Susilo’s characterization of himself as “a host whispering in the ear of my guest” (123), a characterization that perhaps captures best what performance translation can do. Ashis Nandy’s theorizing on multiculturalism and secularism might provide a useful perspective here. Nandy critiques the concept of secularism as the idea of a neutral state in which it is only the suppression to a greater or lesser degree of cultural identity that can reduce communal or ethnic conflict. As a contrast to this idea he offers what he ironically calls the ‘inferior, inadequate concepts’ that he thinks have protected religious minorities in India. These are “old-fashioned neighbourliness or principles of neighbourliness, the principles of hospitality encrypted in the various religious traditions, and the persistence of community ties.” So one answer to Jennifer Lindsay’s question about whether performance translation contributes to homogeneity or is a way to acknowledge heterogeneity could be – neither. In performance translation as Susilo practises it, heterogeneity is already assumed and homogeneity is not the object. What he appears to be doing is beckoning the viewer in, and discreetly (by whispering into her ear) explaining what is going on. He is being friendly, a hospitable host, sensitive to the ignorance of his guest, strongly rooted in the culture he is describing, and confident of his ability...
to unveil it to some degree. And by performing this role he is reflecting the way we actually live in multicultural and multilingual Asia.

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