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VIDEO ARTICLE

Performative Ethnographies of Migration and Intercultural Collaboration in *Arrival Cities: Hanoi*

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This video article explores the embodied experience of migration by revisiting the process of making *Arrival Cities: Hanoi*. This piece of experimental music theatre sought a new format for politically informed theatre that would be responsive to the challenges of a globalized society. It is built on ethnographic fieldwork carried out by the Vietnamese/Swedish group The Six Tones, in collaboration with director Jörgen Dahlgvist and the composer Kent Olofsson.

The role of this ethnographic process was manifold. It was a means of a political engagement, which also created images that could be shared and transformed in the performance. In *Arrival Cities: Hanoi*, the stage was set so that the three performers could play their instruments, perform choreography, and tell stories. A central aim was to make the individual memories of the performers a cornerstone of the dramaturgy. We are interested in how memory is embodied and how performative ethnography can constitute a method for an ethically and artistically grounded practice, within which we also emphasize the role of empathy and the sharing of individual life stories.

In this video article, we give particular attention to the choreographies that were recorded and created as part of this process. Intercultural music and theatre operate in a liminal space between traditions, where aesthetic choices are difficult to negotiate. Without trust and empathy, these negotiations cannot reach beyond the surface. In *Arrival Cities: Hanoi*, composer, director, and performers were all engaged in such

learning processes, and the music as performed can be seen as the embodiment of a particular narrative, grounded in an intercultural collaboration.

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Keywords: performative ethnography; empathy; intercultural collaboration; embodied knowledge

VIDEO ARTICLE

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STILLS FROM THE VIDEO ARTICLE





VIDEO ARTICLE TRANSCRIPT

[00:10]

**Performative ethnographies of migration and intercultural collaboration in
*Arrival Cities: Hanoi***

a video article by Nguyễn Thanh Thủy & Stefan Östersjö

Arrival Cities: Hanoi

Swedish premiere in Malmö 2014

[Ngô Trà My:]

I was born in the countryside in Vietnam in a small village called Ninh Phúc.
When I was six my parents moved to Hà Nội. They wanted to change their life.

The Six Tones:

Ngô Trà My, đàn bầu

Stefan Östersjö, đàn tỳ bà, Vietnamese guitar

Nguyễn Thanh Thủy, đàn tranh

[01:09]

[Nguyễn Thanh Thủy:]

Arrival Cities: Hanoi is an experimental music theatre production, which was created in 2014 and 2015 by our group The Six Tones, the director Jörgen Dahlqvist and composer Kent Olofsson.

Stefan Östersjö and Ngô Trà My doing fieldwork in Hà Nội in 2014

It seeks a new format for politically informed theatre, which is responsive to the challenges of a globalized society. *Arrival Cities: Hanoi* builds a narrative from the life story of Lưu Ngọc Nam, an actor and costume maker.

Nguyễn Thanh Thủy interviews Lưu Ngọc Nam, a Tuồng actor.

His experience of moving from the countryside to Hà Nội, the homesickness and the tension between traditions within Vietnamese Tuồng theatre,

becomes the source for an expansive portrait of a city vibrant of memories from the Vietnamese countryside. In an interview with Lê Minh Huệ for the Hanoian newspaper *Nông Nghiệp Việt Nam*, Nam describes his perception of the piece:

[02:08]

[Stefan Östersjö:]

To me, the countryside and Hà Nội are like the two sides of the hand. One side is an overwhelming image of a modern city with offices in skyscrapers. If you turn the hand over you see a rural culture being broken to pieces. *Arrival Cities: Hanoi* expresses exactly what I have experienced: the transition from traditional to modern society Lê, MH. (2015, n.p).

Music from *Arrival Cities: Hanoi*

Swedish premiere in Malmö 2014

[03:05]

[Nguyễn Thanh Thủy:]

This video essay explores the embodied experience of migration, by revisiting the process of making *Arrival Cities: Hanoi*. A central example will be a choreography, which was first performed by Nam as part of our interviews with him. We are interested in how memory is embodied, and how performative ethnographies can emerge from the making of documentary. But experiences of migration are also embodied by members of The Six Tones, just as expressed by Ngô Trà My in the opening scene.

[Stefan Östersjö:]

Since the group was created in 2006, the Vietnamese and Swedish members of The Six Tones have come to embody a particular form of intercultural music making, based on mutual learning and a wish to embrace friction

between traditions, rather than to seek a resolution through world music oriented consensus. The music of *Arrival Cities: Hanoi* was created through a long-term collaboration between the Swedish composer Kent Olofsson and The Six Tones, starting already in 2009. Hereby, this music, through its performative and material manifestations, embodies other stories of migration and transculturation. We argue that the collaborative process, and the method of performative ethnography created a foundation for intercultural collaboration built on empathy and trust.

The Canadian journalist Doug Saunders discusses 21st century migration in his book titled *Arrival City* (2010). Building on research on five continents, his book chronicles the final shift of human populations from rural to urban areas, which Saunders (2010) argues is the most important development of the 21st-century. He argues that this migration creates “arrival cities,” neighbourhoods and slums on the urban margins that are linked both to villages and to core cities, and that the fate of these centres is crucial to the fortunes of nations.

Music from *Arrival Cities: Hanoi*

A journey out on the countryside outside of Hà Nội also becomes a journey back in time. The Vietnamese economy has developed rapidly since the country opened up to market-oriented economic system with the Đổi Mới reforms in 1986. This economic growth has led to significant improvement of the living standards in the country, but the development has not been equitable.

Swedish premiere in Malmö 2014

A report looking at 18 years of economic growth concludes that while the country has developed from being a lowest- to middle-income country from 1990 to the present day, “poorer groups, ethnic minorities and rural populations have seen their share in economic progress decline. Income

growth has been concentrated mainly around the large cities and in areas with export-oriented economic activities" (Vandemoortele & Bird, 2011, p. 8).

[06:07]

The Six Tones have a long history of collaborative work with the Swedish director Jörgen Dahlgvist.

The Six Tones in conversation with the director Jörgen Dahlgvist and the composer Kent Olofsson

In May and June of 2014, we worked together in Hà Nội, making documentary recordings and interviews with people who had migrated to Hà Nội from the countryside.

Long Biên night market

Many of them were street vendors, a characteristic category of guest workers in the city. Together we visited migration zones in the city, but we also talked to people out in the countryside. The Long Biên market is one of the central arrival points in the city, where street vendors both live in sheds under the bridge and buy fruit and vegetables in the early morning.

[06:49]

[Nguyễn Thanh Thủy:]

When we approached street vendors in Hà Nội, it was initially not easy to convince them to participate in the interviews. Many were shy or unwilling to talk to us. We were aware of the fragility of their situation, and careful to ask for the consent from each individual. Often I had to approach them on my own to start a conversation, and if they agreed to make an interview, I would introduce the director and the other members of the group.

Huê, a street vendor

Hoa, a street vendor

Eventually we managed to record a good number of interviews with street vendors, several of them made in the sheds and other locations where they stayed, often upon invitation from them, but also in the streets. Once the conversations got started, many generously shared their life stories, while others gave only sparse accounts, and we of course did not want to urge anyone to share more than what they wanted.

[07:49]

[Stefan Östersjö:]

It is a hard life to work as a street vendor. You need to learn how to negotiate your existence in an area with the police (it is illegal to sell goods in the street), and even if you bribe them to be allowed to be there, there will be *razzias* when you suddenly have to flee away on your bike (people normally pass the message on when police are out looking for street vendors). Hà Nội is a city of paradoxes. The sound of the street vendors' calls are often referred to in the tourist agencies' depictions of the city. The tradition of street vendors goes far back in time, and the calls are a fascinating sonic signature of urban life in Việt Nam. There are calls concerning almost any kind of service, not just the obvious offers of various kinds of bread and fruit, but also for many other chores: to sharpen your knives and scissors, to sell your broken machines, to exchange your old pots and pans to new ones, and so on. It would be more correct to divide these activities in two branches: the actual street vendors who walk the main streets and aim at selling their items to bypassers and the various services offered to people in their own house and advertised with calls from the bicycle or motorbike. The latter category are the ones you hear the most. Today, most of them have pre-recorded calls which are played back from little horn speakers.

The particular sound of this amplification situates the sound of the street vendors of today at the threshold between the ancient and the modern Vietnam. The women selling fruit in the streets rarely use any calls today; they rather walk up to people and address them individually, rather than with louder calls. Sometimes they also bribe policemen to be allowed to set up their bike with their goods in a certain spot and stay there throughout the day. This is the working situation which street vendors today prefer. In this respect, the fruit vendors walking the streets with their bicycles are some of the most silent of all inhabitants in Hà Nội, surrounded by the clamor of car horns and the many machines that fill the air from morning to night. The ability to contribute to the noise in the city is partly related to one's income.

[09:54]

Hiệp, a street vendor

[Nguyễn:] Cô trọ ở đây một mình hay trọ với mấy người ạ?

[Hiệp:] Cô trọ cùng cả xóm nhà cô ở đây, khoảng mười người.

[Nguyễn:] Mười người trong một nhà ạ?

[Hiệp:] Ừ, mười người. Cả xóm. Rủ nhau đi.

[Nguyễn:] Toàn là phụ nữ hết ạ?

[Hiệp:] Con gái hết. Toàn những người đi chợ như cô đây này.

[Nguyễn:] Thế chồng cô ở nhà làm gì ạ?

[Hiệp:] Chồng cô ngày trước nuôi lợn giống để đi lấy giống đực đấy. Nhưng bây giờ người ta bỏ lợn nái rồi, nên không có việc gì, nên bây giờ cứ ở nhà thôi, trông nhà với đi làm ruộng. Làm ruộng, rồi trông nhà trông cửa, có cháu trông cháu.

[Nguyễn:] Do you live there alone or do you share that place with other people?

[Hiệp:] I share it with other people who also come from my village. Ten people.

[Nguyễn:] Ten people in one flat?

[Hiệp:] Yes, ten people. From my village. We went here together.

[Nguyễn:] Are all of you women?

[Hiệp:] All women. We all do the same job as I do now, selling things in the street...

[Nguyễn:] What does your husband do at home?

[Hiệp:] He used to raise boars. But then there were no more sows around, so he quit. Now he is only at home to take care of the house... work on the rice field, and looks after our grandchildren.

[10:33]

[Nguyễn Thanh Thủy:]

The stories that we collected were shared with us by people in fragile situations, and we felt the need to consider how these images could best be presented, both from an artistic and an ethical perspective. We also became concerned with our own role as individuals and artists in the process of creating this piece.

[10:58]

[Nguyễn:] Hồi đấy là tự cô quyết định đi hay là bạn bè rủ?

[Hiệp:] Cái này nó là cuộc sống. Đi chợ kiểu này cô đi từ khi cô còn nhỏ cơ, chứ không phải đến lúc ấy cô mới đi. Cô đi mãi rồi, xong đến lúc lấy chồng, đẻ con đẻ cái thì cô không đi, xong đến lúc con nó sôi sôi thì cô lại đi.

[Nguyễn:] Cháu thấy đi bán hàng rong kiểu này toàn là phụ nữ, thế tại sao các ông chồng không đi bán hàng rong ạ?

[Hiệp:] (Cười) Chồng...Các ông chồng làm sao mà đi cả trưa nắng như các cô được, có lúc 40 độ ngoài đường, làm sao các ông chịu được.

[Nguyễn:] Các ông không chịu được ạ?

[Hiệp:] Không. Các ông chỉ đi thợ xây, trưa phải nghỉ trưa. Nó có giờ có giấc. Các ông không vất vả được. Chỉ có các cô mới chịu được thôi. Có lúc 40 độ cũng phải đứng ngoài đường. Có khi trong nhà 40 độ, nhưng ở ngoài 42 độ, có thời điểm nó thế đấy, các cô vẫn phải đứng ngoài đường.

[Nguyễn:] How did you come to that decision, to work as a street vendor?

[Hiệp:] That is life! I have been working like this since I was very young, not only after I got married. I stopped when I married and when I gave birth. When my children could speak, I started again.

[Nguyễn:] Why do only women work as street vendors? Why not the husbands?

[Hiệp:] (laughing...) How can the husbands work in the hot sun of the mid day as we women do? Sometimes it can be 40 degrees. How could they stand it?

[Nguyễn:] Can't they manage this?

[Hiệp:] They can work as construction workers. They need a rest and a nap at noon. They need clear working hours. They cannot work hard. Only we, women can work hard. I have to stand in the street even when it is above 40 degrees. It was 40 degrees indoors, but was 42 degrees outdoors. There were such times. And we still had to work in the streets.

[11:50]

Music from *Arrival Cities: Hanoi*

[Stefan Östersjö:]

The collaboration between The Six Tones and composer Kent Olofsson started in 2009, long before the ideas emerged for *Arrival Cities: Hanoi*. In 2009 and 2010 he composed two shorter pieces which were released on CD in 2012.

Nguyễn Thanh Thủy and Kent Olofsson
in wlabs in Malmö

The first two scores unveil some specific points of friction in the relation between his mode of composing and the musical background of the two Vietnamese performers. In particular, the rhythmical structures were difficult to master. But for the composer, the traditional Vietnamese instruments caused other difficulties that were only gradually resolved. However, and thanks to the sustained collaborative process, by the time of the recording sessions in 2012, a more in-depth understanding began to emerge which lay the ground for the music in *Arrival Cities: Hanoi*.

[12:45]

[Nguyễn Thanh Thủy:]

For each participating artist, not only was the experience of Hà Nội essential for the creation of the piece, but also, how the relations within the group deepened was even more important. As put by Jörgen Dahlqvist in conversation with Kent Olofsson:

Director Jörgen Dahlqvist

Composer Kent Olofsson

[Jörgen Dahlqvist:] That's why I think you have to experience, you know, the culture, to see a little bit who you are, in relation to who we are, and all the Vietnamese culture.

[Kent Olofsson:] No it's interesting, because I really don't think we could have made all the music, or not in that way really. It's difficult to say. I mean if I hadn't went to Hà Nội and, as you say... I mean, it's both about Hà Nội,

the city, and those places you visited. But of course it's also getting to know you better, and also to know about your life and...

[13:52]

The Six Tones at Long Biên, Hà Nội 2015

[Nguyễn:] What do you think when you are here in this area?

[Östersjö:] Well, first when we came to Long Biên, of course I was struck by the poor circumstances and the poverty that people live under here. But when we talked to people, many different stories emerged. So, I think first I was struck by how everyone we met actually had their families and their homes hours away from Hà Nội. They're really guest workers here.

[Nguyễn:] Yeah...

But then you also see... There are also many stories of ambitions and hopes for a better life for your children. So, many of the women you see here are actually saving money to pay for their children going to university in Hà Nội.

[14:50]

Ngô Trà My visited the shed where she stayed some years ago.

[Nguyễn Thanh Thủy:]

We gradually came to see ourselves as participators rather than as makers of documentary. When we started creating the staged performance this became even more clear. The artistic idea emerged to include our individual experiences of migration to and from Hà Nội in the piece. Through these personal narratives we wanted to create a situation built on sharing and empathy within which the stories from the street vendors could be presented.

[Stefan Östersjö:]

When we met the women by the Red river, you cried. It reminded you of your own...

When we met the women by the Red river, you cried. It reminded you of your own...

[Ngô Trà My:]

Yes...

Yes...

[Ngô Trà My:]

When we met the women living there, I remembered a part of my life. It's quite a hard part of my life. I rented a little house nearby the Red river, several years ago.

When we met the women living there, I remembered a part of my life. It's quite a hard part of my life. I rented a little house nearby the Red river, several years ago.

It was not exactly a house. It was a kitchen nearby the Red river. It was a very bad condition kitchen and... the wind would come through from the roof, and also the rain would come through...

It was not exactly a house. It was a kitchen nearby the Red river. It was a very bad condition kitchen and... the wind would come through from the roof, and also the rain would come through...

[16:17]

Vietnamese premiere in Hà Nội 2015

[Nguyễn Thanh Thủy:]

The dramaturgy emerged from the creation of situations that would evoke the lived experience of the performers, similarly to how the scripts in verbatim theatre is drawn from interviews with people's experience of a real-life situation (Forsyth & Megson, 2009). The stage is set up so that the three

performers either play their instruments or tell stories, drawing on their memories from the creation of the documentary or from their lives in Hà Nội.

Arrival Cities: Hanoi aims to create a space where the boundary between fiction and documentary is dissolved. While the audience cannot really know whether the stories told by the performers are authentic experiences or scripted dialogues, these accounts place the performers onstage as individuals rather than as actors. As put by an audience member after a performance in Berlin in December 2017: “The performers are there as people, who only happen to be musicians.” This presence in the moment of performance accompanies the images of the street vendors and other people in the documentary.

[17:44]

The Six Tones

in conversation with the director and the composer

[Nguyễn:] We all bring ourselves, out of our position as director or musician, but we are now in the same room talking with street vendors and Nam, here's Trà My, here's me, here's Stefan, here's Jörgen... We talk, we share our stories together. I think that's what makes the piece work well, to me, as a way of presenting a character or presenting topics.

[Dahlqvist:] And that's why it takes time also, to make it. Because of the labor.

[Olofsson:] You could not have done that in a year or half a year. It would not have been possible.

[Nguyễn:] Because it is still kind of a sensitive topic. It is not easy to just share our personal story onstage, in this... With some other people, the street vendors, they already shared their stories, and we also of course dare to share our stories in that context, to share with them.

[18:55]

Swedish premiere in Malmö 2014

[19:13]

[Nguyễn Thanh Thủy:]

The story that Nam told in the interview had the structure of a classic tragedy, and led up to the day when he had to give up his career as an actor and instead become a costume maker.

[Lưu:] Nhiều đêm không ngủ được. Nhiều đêm ứa nước mắt vì nghề.

[Lưu:] Many sleepless nights, I cried many times.

Many sleepless nights, I cried many times.

[19:42]

[Nguyễn Thanh Thủy:]

Empathy, and the sharing of the individual life stories, became a method in the making of *Arrival Cities: Hanoi*. It is a piece of music theatre without a script, but with a musical and dramaturgical structure in which the narrative draws on the personal memories of the participating artists. The role of the documentary is manifold. It is a means for a political engagement, but also creates memories and images that can be shared and transformed in the performance.

[20:19]

[Stefan Östersjö:]

We now want to return to the choreography that Nam performed when we made the interview. It could be seen as a representation of his memory of Tuồng theatre. In *Arrival Cities: Hanoi*, The Six Tones in turn perform their memories of Nam's choreography, as an expression of empathy with the

actor and his personal experience of migration to Hà Nội. These individual choreographies are performed twice, first in the opening and then again at the very end, when the video of Nam's performance is also presented.

If we think of performing bodies as archives, Nam, to a certain extent, performs a transmission of a Vietnamese theatre tradition. But the three musicians rather engage in an act of remembrance, not of this particular piece of Tuồng theatre but of Nam's individual fate: a re-writing of movement which is also a transformation, shifting, perhaps, for a moment, our sense of time, opening a door to a much earlier time when the same choreography was studied by a fourteen-year-old boy in Hà Nội, who had just arrived, alone, from the countryside (Nguyen & Östersjö, 2019, p. 292).

[21:38]

[Nguyễn Thanh Thủy:]

In the performance, the stories of migration collected in conversations with street vendors are woven together with the experience of the members of The Six Tones. Through this performative ethnography, personal memories of migration and travel across continents are merged with remembrance of encounters with poor women, struggling to create a better future for their families, and lays the grounds for empathic engagement with the other.

[22:19]

"It enacts the ways that performance itself is a social change agent: as a genre of representation, it attempts the act of transformative becoming."

"It assumes that performance is imbricated with, and constitutive of, cultural ideologies and political economies."

"It focuses on the ways that performance (narrowly or broadly conceived) is practiced and the ways it has effects, and it parses how these two valences are interconstitutive."

“It moves easily but stringently between the micro and the macro. It presupposes that performance is culture-making.”

“It attends to the subjectivities engaged and probably transformed through performance.”

“It moves between the subjectivities of the audience, the performers, the ethnographer, and others.”

(Wong, 2008, p. 78)

[23:25]

[Stefan Östersjö:]

Intercultural music and theatre operates in a liminal space between traditions. Aesthetic choices are therefore difficult to negotiate. Without trust and empathy, these negotiations cannot reach beyond the surface. Intercultural collaboration always demands from each individual to give up a piece of the self. In *Arrival Cities: Hanoi*, composer, director and the three performers were all engaged in such transformative processes. This empathic engagement created situations in which a different mode of listening could emerge, pointing beyond traditional forms and structures. *Arrival Cities: Hanoi* is the result of the political engagement which underlies such an openness of listening.

Video article written, narrated and edited by
Nguyễn Thanh Thủy & Stefan Östersjö

Video documentation from the premiere of *Arrival Cities: Hanoi*
at Inter Arts Center, Sweden 2014
camera and editing by Maria Norrman

Video footage from fieldwork in Hà Nội
by Jörgen Dahlgvist and The Six Tones

All music is drawn from the live recording of *Arrival Cities: Hanoi*
premiere at Inter Arts Center, Sweden 2014

mixed by Kent Olofsson

Arrival Cities: Hanoi

Concept: Jörgen Dahlgvist, Kent Olofsson, and The Six Tones

Transcribed stories by Lưu Ngọc Nam, Ngô Trà My, Nguyễn Thanh Thủy, Stefan Östersjö, and various street vendors in Hà Nội

Dramaturg: Jörgen Dahlgvist

Music: Kent Olofsson & The Six Tones

Choreography: Miguel Cortés

Room: Marcus Råberg

Light: Jörgen Dahlgvist & Marcus Råberg

Archive footage from Lưu Ngọc Nam's private collection. Reproduced with permission.

Actor on screen: Lưu Ngọc Nam

Performers: The Six Tones

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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Abstract

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The role of this ethnographic process was manifold. It was a means of a political engagement, which also created images that could be shared and transformed in the performance. In *Arrival Cities: Hanoi*, the stage was set so that the three performers could play their instruments, perform choreography, and tell stories. A central aim was to make the individual memories of the performers a cornerstone of the dramaturgy. We are interested in how memory is embodied and how performative ethnography can constitute a method for an ethically and artistically grounded practice, within which we also emphasize the role of empathy and the sharing of individual life stories.

In this video article, we give particular attention to the choreographies that were recorded and created as part of this process. Intercultural music and theatre operate in a liminal space between traditions, where aesthetic choices are difficult to negotiate. Without trust and empathy, these negotiations cannot reach beyond the surface. In *Arrival Cities: Hanoi*, composer, director, and performers were all engaged in such learning processes, and the music as performed can be seen as the embodiment of a particular narrative, grounded in an intercultural collaboration.

Keywords

Intercultural collaboration, performative ethnographies, migration, empathy, choreography, embodiment

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