ZAIA. Written and directed by Gilles Maheu. Cirque du Soleil, The Venetian Macao-Resort-Hotel, Macau. 13 February 2011.

THE HOUSE OF DANCING WATER. Written and directed by Franco Dragone. Franco Dragone Entertainment Group, Dancing Water Theater, City of Dreams, Macau. 14 February 2011.

Andrew Lavender, University of Surrey

As I was on the TurboJet ferry from Hong Kong, before I had even reached the Macau Maritime Ferry Terminal, I received four unsolicited text messages. The first read: "Macau Govt Tourist Office welcomes you! Choose licensed hotels and inns for your visit, don't stay at illegal accommodation." A tourism hotline number followed. The rest were from casinos, offering me opportunities to "Spin for a Million!" (City of Dreams) or "SPIN 2 WIN" (Grand Lisboa). If the texts indicated the blithe grip of the gambling industry on Macanese culture, it is also worth noting that the government got in first. I was traveling to see two super-spectacular shows in a location where a certain sort of theatre—international, intermedial, and (up to a point) intercultural—is a bargaining chip in an ongoing commercial and cultural clean-up operation. (You are free to understand "clean-up" in both senses of the term.)

Cirque du Soleil's *Zaia* premiered on 28 August 2008, joining a stable of shows permanently housed in casinos (Cirque has seven such productions in Las Vegas). Along with *Zed* in Tokyo, *Zaia* is one of the company's two resident productions outside of North America and is a vehicle for its ongoing corporate engagement with China. Relatively hot on its heels, *The House of Dancing Water* is the brainchild of Franco Dragone, a former Cirque du Soleil director whose resume includes a number of Vegas mega-hits. The show opened on 17 September 2010 and comfortably wears a billing as "the world's largest water-based extravaganza." Both productions belong to that familiar genre of populist spectacles that set high-grade circus skills amid high-end production values. They must also be seen as a function of their setting in casino developments on the Cotai Strip—an

extensive land-reclamation project in the Pearl River Delta—where both have a strategic place in the consolidation of Macau's civic and geo-political identity.

A former Portuguese colony, Macau became a Special Administrative Region of China in 1999, two years after its neighbor Hong Kong. Long positioned as a meeting point between East and West, the region is the only area in China where gambling is legal, and it is now home to the most profitable concentration of casinos in the world. In February 2002, seeking to revitalize and re-legitimize Macau's lucrative gambling industry, the government awarded franchises to three operators, including two Las Vegas-based conglomerates. Macau now turns over four times the gaming revenue of Las Vegas, the result of 25 million trips made to the region, mostly by residents of mainland China. The Macanese government required investors to commit to "diversification": namely, the development of a wider range of leisure offerings and entertainment experiences. In this environment, theatre must be accessible, chic, and consumable, which is where Cirque du Soleil and Dragone come in.

The resulting productions, commissioned by the casino corporations to run for years, are located in bespoke venues integrated within larger leisure developments. An 1,800-seat theatre was built for *Zaia*, its round proscenium apparently modeled on Indian and Mayan architecture. The venue is located within Macau's lavish version of The Venetian: a hotel, mall, and casino complex modeled not so much on the Italian city as on The Venetian in Las Vegas, except that the Macanese iteration is three times the size of its US counterpart. Directly across the road is the City of Dreams complex, described in its marketing material as an "integrated entertainment resort" that includes three hotels and an apartment complex with 2,200 rooms, a casino with 400 gaming tables, and a shopping mall featuring leading Western designer brands. *The House of Dancing Water* was conceived, according to a press release, as "the iconic entertainment centrepiece of City of Dreams' leisure . . . offering." Its dependence on corporate subvention was exemplified by its media launch in 2010, at which the CEO of Melco Crown Entertainment (which commissioned the show) shared top billing with Dragone.

Macau's scenario of civic makeover entails a remarkable blending of worlds. Consumerism here is both late capitalist and late communist. Theatre in this context is inherently international, drawing explicitly on the Vegas hallmark of Cirque's shows and the largely North American and European provenance of the acts in both productions. It is nonetheless also designed to fit seamlessly into Macau's South China casino experience. This performance genre is already interdisciplinary and intermedial, fusing circus, media design, movement, and music and foregrounding cutting-edge technical infrastructures. Both shows here were further hybridized with an interculturalism that is rather more strategic than systemic.

A sort of derivative creativity prevailed in Cirque du Soleil's *Zaia*, mixing familiar references within a bespoke dramaturgy. As director Gilles Maheu noted in the program, "ZAIA is the story of a present-day teenaged girl who lives in a large modern city and dreams of being an astronaut on a space voyage," during which she meets characters from her past, her memory, and her imagination. As is typical of Cirque shows, *Zaia* featured scenic set pieces that facilitated theatrical transformations, while sustaining broad themes like travel and exotic otherworldliness. The central feature here was a large sphere, illuminated from inside by six video projectors that created a continuous image across its surface, appearing variously as a globe, a hot-air balloon, and the moon. Guillaume Lord's scenic design endeavored to implicate the audience spatially into the action. The sphere circulated over the stage and then the auditorium and served as a suspension point for aerial acts that sometimes were over one's head. An oval track extended from above the stage area, over the audience to the back of the auditorium. The backdrop incorporated a star-drop featuring 3,000 fibre-optic lights arranged to represent the constellations that can be seen in the night sky over Macau, and was a screen for ubiquitous large-scale video projections. Throughout the show, space imagery joined other sorts of aerial iconography, counterpointed by different elemental figures (fire, ice, earth). For example, a spaceman floated across the galactic backdrop; then so did a polar bear. In a subsequent development of this snow-world reference, two performers on snowshoes undertook a slow-motion walk in the air from the back of the auditorium to the stage, and back over the audience.

They carried lanterns and were followed by a series of objects that appeared to be huge ice blocks, illuminated from within to reveal performers inside. Fake snow fell over the audience.

Mélange was the word that most immediately came to mind. Everything was mixed (you might say mixed-up), and then remixed. To take one small example: two astronauts on penny-farthings, one upside-down, cycled across the space in mid-air, each with a row of sparklers flaring off the back of their respective bike frames. This was quintessentially a remix moment, reprising things that we had seen before: astronauts, penny-farthings, cycling, surreal inversion—its gratuitousness was entirely the point. This texture of self-reference is part of the Cirque pleasure-economy.

There is a colonizing aspect to the way a Cirque show lays claim to anything it comes across, but that is not to say that the company simply flattens everything before it. Cirque du Soleil has an arrangement with the Chinese Performing Arts Association (CPAA) whereby each Cirque show features a CPAA act featuring Chinese artists. In *Zaia*, this was the lion act, its choreography influenced by Tai Chi and impressively performed by acrobats who flouted the seeming constraint of their massive leonine headpieces and costumes. The company has established an association with the Zhuhai Shi Li Ning Gymnastic School in China, which is relatively close to Macau, where selected candidates undertake artistic and acrobatic training. Cirque du Soleil sources local talent: the technical and production staff featured interns drawn from the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts.

This is glocalism in action, the imbrication of a major international brand with regional partners and operations. The difficulty for *Zaia* and its creators was that, for all the global bravura of the mega-installation whose presentation here required around eighty-five artists and a hundred technicians, the show struggled to escape the blandness for which Cirque du Soleil is often criticized. There were exemplary stagings of extraordinary acts, but somehow, in this age of requisite upgrade, I was left admiring super-capability rather than dashing innovation. In this respect, Dragone's show had forged ahead. If Cirque was struggling to pull in the punters from the gaming tables (the theatre

was perhaps half-full when I attended), Dragone offered a “wow factor” that was putting their bums in a different theatre’s seats.

As its title suggests, *The House of Dancing Water* traded on its liquidity. The show was housed in a 2,000-seat arena around a huge pool, 160 feet in diameter and 26 feet deep, which according to the press release makes this larger than five Olympic-size swimming pools. The venue featured eleven 10-ton elevators that lift or drop a mesh floor, so that the performance can take place either in the water, on its surface, or on (as it were) dry land. Its highest high-dive drops over 24 meters. The production recruited a company of more than seventy performers representing more than eighteen nationalities from diverse circus and performance traditions: acrobats, contortionists, and, almost implausibly given the aquatic setting, a group of motorbike stuntmen. Here, then, was another multimodal, multicultural circus, although *The House of Dancing Water* was yet more flamboyant than *Zaia* in its transformations of space and scene.

Dragone arranged a series of surprises from the very start of the show. During the opening sequence, a man crossed the water on a punt; he then fell from his vessel and disappeared from view. Three masts rose bearing the rigging of a galleon. A group of lithe and Lycra-clad individuals surfaced from the fringes of the lake and swam to the masts, which became a set of rope swings and diving platforms for (if you’ll permit) an “aquabatic” routine that carved the air and sliced the water, eliciting many “ahh”s and “ooh”s from the audience. The ship submerged, taking the acrobats with it. A floating chest appeared, from which a man emerged. A girl in a basket-cage was lowered from above. The man swam to her. Suddenly he could walk to her, because there was no longer water, but instead a solid floor where previously divers had hurtled headfirst. The audience gasped—this really was a coup de théâtre. And I didn’t mention the giraffe that appeared midway through the performance.

The imprint here was of consumer spectacle, offering the frisson of continual surprise. Dragone’s *mise en scène*, based on swift transitions between sumptuous set pieces, transcended individual performances. The show clearly depended upon a series of circus-like routines supported by sophisticated technology, but it mixed these in a blended aesthetic and execution to achieve a

range of scenic effects with speed and efficiency. Many of its performers were high-divers, as well as acrobats; its twenty-eight underwater technicians were scuba divers, as well as stagehands. There were underwater breathing stations that facilitated seemingly impossible emergences. The story referred to both Chinese and Western archetypes: the "seven emotions" of Confucianism, and the wicked stepmother (in a fable about a queen who imprisons her stepdaughter). And there was a mixed bag of hoary archetypes: one minute the Tanzanian acrobatic troupe Pyramid were in face-paint as natives on an island; and in the next, a pagoda was surrounded by fountains and a chorus of swans. As with *Zaia*, the nature of the mix was noteworthy: the show was cocktail rather than a collage, a blend of narrative elements, performance modes, and cultural references. It hybridized theatrical gratification as the product of affective derring-do and situated consumption of the new (and, indeed, the not so new).

Macau itself is a place of quite pronounced blending, originally between its Portuguese colonizers and indigenous population, and now among political and economic systems and a consumerism that seeks to unite desirable artifacts with pleasurable leisure experiences. *Zaia* and *The House of Dancing Water* were not determined entirely by their location, but it seemed unsurprising that these hybridizing artistic projects should feature strategically within the larger mix of Macanese and Chinese ecosystems, as the former is folded into the latter.

After seeing *Zaia*, I ate baked chicken and rice at the "Typical Portuguese-Macanese Cuisine" outlet in the Festivita Food Court at The Venetian, overlooked by painted Italianate facades, under a fake blue sky touched with cirrus clouds. At that moment it seemed the only thing to do.

ANDY LAVENDER

University of Surrey

FIGURE CAPTIONS:

03_Figure 1. Trampoline and double teeterboard (X-board) routine in *Zaia*. (Photo: Red Dog Studio, © 2008 Cirque du Soleil Inc.)

04_Figure 2. The pagoda scene in *The House of Dancing Water*. (Photo: © 2011 Melco Crown Entertainment Ltd.)