

■ The Subjectiles at Work: The Secret Art of *The 9 Fridas*

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Abstract

The 9 Fridas, one of the feature productions of the 2014 Taipei Arts Festival, was produced by Mobius Strip Theatre Company in association with Hong Kong Repertory Theatre and staged at The Wellspring Theater in Taipei on September 5-7. Directed by Phillip Zarrilli and scripted by Kaite O'Reilly, the production of *The 9 Fridas* attempted to portray Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) from a wide variety of perspectives. What it evoked, for me, went beyond the theme "ways of looking" designated by the festival organizer and directed our attention to what I term "the subjectiles of Kahlo." This paper is concerned with Frida Kahlo, a woman of many faces and layers, and *The 9 Fridas*, a production which claims to offer an alternative interpretation and a refashioned representation of Frida Kahlo. The notion of subjectile is essential to the overall scheme of the paper. As a critical device, it serves both as a method for thematic study and as a tool for aesthetic exploration, and through it we can closely examine the interpretation and performance of Kahlo's life and art as manifested in the script and the production of *The 9 Fridas*. In this paper, first of all, I explore the subjectiles of Frida Kahlo in the "Prologue." Its purpose is not just to highlight the layered

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complexities of Kahlo's life, paintings, and legacy but also to chart some trajectories projected from *The 9 Fridas*. Next, of all the layers and subjectiles, I intend to tease out three unique aspects of *The 9 Fridas* for discussion—that is, the play's textiles, actiles, and affectiles—in the hope that we can read both the play and its production as well as Kahlo's life and paintings anew. Finally this paper attempts to assess the production of *The 9 Fridas* critically.

Keywords: Phillip Zarrilli, Kaite O'Reilly, Frida Kahlo, *The 9 Fridas*, subjectile, psychophysical acting

Produced by the Mobius Strip Theatre Company in association with the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre, *The 9 Fridas* was one of the feature productions of the 2014 Taipei Arts Festival at The Wellspring Theater in Taipei on September 5-7.¹ Starting from 2012, the Taipei Arts Festival created an artistic director position to organize the annual festival for a term of three years. The first artistic director Yi-Wei Keng initiated a new intercultural working model to invite an internationally known director to direct and work with a local performing group so that local practitioners could benefit from the cooperation experience.

In November 2011, Keng contacted and invited the world-renowned scholar, director and actor-trainer Phillip Zarrilli to direct a production in the 2014 Festival. In 2013, they finalized the plan by inviting Mobius Strip Theatre to stage Kaite O'Reilly's *The 9 Fridas*.² This play by O'Reilly was originally commissioned by Sherman Cymru Theatre (Wales, UK), and was licensed to the Taipei Arts Festival for the Mandarin premiere outside the UK. Before starting the five-week rehearsal, Zarrilli led a three-day intensive workshop, entitled "Making the Body All Eyes: Body, Breath, Activation and Performance" (全身盡化成眼—身體、呼吸、活化以及表演肢體工作坊), from July 28 to 30 as part of his residency as guest director for the Festival. In this workshop, he introduced his psychophysical approach to the cast, local practitioners, and interested theatre students. Along with the debut of *The 9 Fridas*, the Chinese version of Zarrilli's award-winning book *Psychophysical Acting: An Intercultural Approach after Stanislavski* (《身心合一：後史坦尼斯拉夫斯基的跨文化演技》) was released as part of the promotion activity.³

This production attempts to portray Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) from a wide variety of perspectives. What it evokes, for me, goes beyond the theme "ways of looking" designated by the festival organizer and directs our attention to what I term "the subjectiles of Kahlo." In his work, *To Unsense the Subjectile (Forcener le subjectile* 1986), Jacques Derrida takes issues with the untranslatable word "subjectile" coined by Artaud and attempts to illustrate layered implications of the word and thus Artaud's thoughts and artistic practices. This paper is concerned with Frida Kahlo, a woman of many faces and layers, and *The 9 Fridas*, a production which claims to offer an alternative interpretation and a refashioned

¹ *The 9 Fridas* was remounted on stage in Hong Kong at the International Black Box Festival 2016 on October 27-30.

² Kaite O'Reilly is an award-winning playwright and a recipient of two Cultural Olympiad Commissions. As a playwright, her awards include the 2010 Ted Hughes Award for her new version of Aeschylus's *Persians* for National Theatre Wales and the 2009 international Susan Smith Blackburn Prize.

³ This book was awarded the ATHE 2010 Outstanding Book of the Year Award at the ATHE convention in Los Angeles (August 1-6, 2010).

representation of Frida Kahlo. The notion of subjectile is essential to the overall scheme of the paper. As a critical device, it serves both as a method for thematic study and as a tool for aesthetic exploration, and through it we can closely examine the interpretation and performance of Kahlo's life and art as manifested in the script and the production of *The 9 Fridas*.

Kahlo's physical pain and her passion for life are integral to her life vision and artistic creativity. Like that of Christ, the "passion" of Kahlo shows that her suffering and passion are always inextricably linked. She views her enthusiastic act of painting as having the potential to redeem her from suffering in the here and now. From the vantage point of artistic creation, all her life tragedies can be seen otherwise. O'Reilly's script *The 9 Fridas* is an attempt to recognize Kahlo's positive attitude toward life. To her, Kahlo's life and art are not only an assertive act of self-affirmation but also a defiant triumph over desperate pains, melancholy, abjection, and death. Over time, Kahlo has developed the stamina to embrace suffering and painfulness as essential parts of her creative gift and life.

In this paper, first of all, I explore the subjectiles of Frida Kahlo in the "Prologue." Its purpose is not just to highlight the layered complexities of Kahlo's life, paintings, and legacy but also to chart some trajectories projected from *The 9 Fridas*. Next, of all the layers and subjectiles, I intend to tease out three unique aspects of *The 9 Fridas* for discussion—that is, the play's textiles, actiles, and affectiles—in the hope that we can read both the play and its production as well as Kahlo's life and paintings anew. Finally this paper attempts to assess the production of *The 9 Fridas* critically.

1. Prologue: The Subjectiles of Frida Kahlo

Kahlo's life is rich in legendary events. In September of 1925, at the age of 18, she experienced a serious accident when a streetcar crashed into the bus she was riding. She was traumatically injured with an iron handrail piercing her back and uterus, and coming out through her vagina, leaving her naked and bloodied, but covered with gold dust carried by an artisan. The accident impaired her reproductive capacity, fractured her spinal column, collarbone and ribs, shattered her pelvis, injured her left shoulder, and crushed her right foot. This terrible traffic scene is closely examined in Scene 19 of *The 9 Fridas*. Before her traffic accident, she seldom painted. After the accident, she started to paint during her convalescence, using the act of painting to release her psychological and physical pains. Painting, thus, has become her "salvation, the thing that gave meaning to this *interlude* called life" (O'Reilly, *The 9 Fridas* 58),

says Actor F.⁴ Using the first person voice, Actor F expresses also Kahlo's hidden "anatomical drive" in Scene 20:

When I was encased in plaster—like a coffin—when I was buried alive, bound to my bed—all those hours spent looking up into the mirror, preparing poses, practicing expressions, perfecting the mask—it was a relief to have my father's brushes finally pushed by my mother into my hands. I became the doctor I wanted to be before the accident, and did surgery on myself, removing my skin and flesh, displaying the heart, the foetus, the spine—and all anatomically precise. (*Fridas* 51-52)

Staring upwards into the mirror hung by her parents from the canopy, gazing resolutely at that familiar face, she created one self-portrait after another and eventually became known for her multi-faceted self-portraits, which reveal her double identities, unfathomable pains, and artistic talents.⁵



A mimic image of *The Two Fridas* is presented in Scene 24 (Photo courtesy of Mobius Strip Theatre Company)

As shown in her arguably best-known painting *The Two Fridas* (1939), Kahlo uses two self-portraits to come to terms with the rift between her and her husband Diego Rivera over his betrayal and their divorce, between the Frida in a white Victorian garment (the one spurned by Rivera) and the other Frida in a Tehuana dress (the one adored by Rivera), and between her paternal influence

⁴ Hereafter *The 9 Fridas* is referred to as *Fridas*.

⁵ According to Frida Kahlo website, "During her lifetime, Frida created some 200 paintings, drawings and sketches related to her experiences in life, physical and emotional pain and her turbulent relationship with Diego. She produced 143 paintings, 55 of which are self-portraits." <http://www.fridakahlo.com/>.

(a father of Hungarian and Jewish descent) and maternal kinship (a mother of Spanish and Mexican Indian descent). The two exposed and torn-out hearts reveal Frida's heart-wrenching mood inside. The arteries connect the two hearts and show the indivisible psycho-physical reality of affects and identities. What Kahlo has portrayed for us in *The Two Fridas* is exactly the provisional condition of the abject as defined by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*: "The non-distinctiveness of inside and outside is unnameable, a border passable in both directions by pleasure and pain" (61).

In the painting, *Tree of Hope, Remain Strong* (*Arbol de la esperanza, mantente firme*) (1946), one can detect that the theme of double identities recurs. Painted after Kahlo's serious spinal operation in New York in 1946, this painting divides the composition into two parts: the left of the painting features the sun against the broad daylight and the back side of a wounded body; the right represents the night with the moon and the frontal image of Kahlo herself with a tear trickling from her right eye and a back brace being held in her left hand. The words on the banner, "Tree of Hope, Remain Strong," held in her right hand reveal her strong will to hold on, no matter what has happened to her. Her self-portrait *Broken Column* (1944) is a crude and naked way to present her broken spine which is supported by steel nail bracket. The Frida Kahlo in the painting tries her best to prop up her back. Her resolute but tearful eyes send out the message that she will not easily surrender but will use her will to withstand the test of life.

"I paint myself because I am alone. I am the subject I know best" (qtd. in Fuentes 14), says Kahlo. As Carlos Fuentes cogently writes, "Her reality is her own face, the temple of her broken body, the soul she has left" (14). Incorporating symbolic portrayals of physical and psychological wounds, these self-portraits issue forth forces of suffering and passion as well as intense and vibrant colors of Mexican folk art in all directions. To paint her own image based on her own reality is her means to combat her dejection, suffering, and delirium. The scenes of the liminal tipping point in her life thus have become her favorite subjects, projecting the images that traverse the limit between the inside and the outside of the body. In her article "Frida Kahlo and the Improper/Unclean: Toward the Condition of Abjection," Leticia Pérez Alonso employs Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection to argue that Kahlo's main concern is to put herself on trial in the process of creating art. By exposing herself or laying bare her body and organs, "she experiences the cathartic effects of visual language as an antidote to her corporeal and spiritual anguish" (408), writes Alonso. In 1938, André Breton vividly explained that Kahlo's art is "a ribbon around a bomb" (qtd. in Burrus 55) and oftentimes she was being identified as a surrealist. Kahlo herself rejected this "surrealist" label and resisted

being easily classified.⁶ She insisted that she was not an artist of dreams and the unconscious but a painter of her everyday life and stark reality.

In the play, Actor F defends Kahlo's style by arguing that her work is "truly epic—a monsterist—and all on 12 by 15 inches" (*Fridas* 53) because she paints her own reality, such as "bleeding, weeping, bristling with 67 nails and 9 arrows [referring to *Broken Column* (1944) and *Wounded Stag or The Little Stag* (1946) respectively]" (*Fridas* 53), and her style is nothing like her husband's massive mural style (*Fridas* 53). Also, Kahlo's manifesto on art and politics quoted in Scene 16 is closely linked to Marxist aesthetics whose purpose is to create beauty that can enlighten people and stir them to struggle: "The makers of beauty must invest their greatest efforts in the aim of materializing an art valuable to the people, and our supreme objective in art, which is today an expression for individual pleasure, is to create beauty for all, beauty that enlightens and stirs to struggle" (*Fridas* 40).

Kahlo's multiple "subjectivities" and broken bodies intertwine with her unyielding passion and personality, traversing every aspect of her life and multiplying her professional identity as an artist. As a critic once wrote: "It is impossible to separate the life and work of this extraordinary person. Her paintings are her biography."⁷ Different biographers or art critics tease out different profiles from different trajectories of her life and art. Kahlo most importantly has been looked upon as a perfect example of an artist suffering from bodily pains. Nevertheless, she is also recognized as a betrayed wife, an adulterous mistress, a bi-sexual lover, a communist activist, a fashion model, a national and indigenous tradition emblem, an uncompromising feminist, and a disability icon. Her life and art, thus, are truly "subjectiles" in *couches*. Each layer or *couche* is an affective projectile embedded with more layers of affect, including the abjection of physical suffering, the feeling of betrayal, the devastating grief incurred by her three miscarriages, etc.

In *To Unsense the Subjectile*, Jacques Derrida reads Artaud's drawings as "pictographs" and examines the subjectile in Artaud's work, which signifies what lies beneath or what refuses to be dominated by the creative process. "Subjectile, the word or the thing, can take the place of the subject or of the object—being neither one nor the other" (61), writes Derrida. Paradoxical in every sense of the word, the word "subjectile" creates a scene of flexible identity and exists in double-sensed *couches*, signaling at once the labor of giving birth and layers, layers that underpin a piece of artwork (Derrida 145-46). This is not to say that

⁶ As Kahlo says, "They thought I was a Surrealist, but I wasn't. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality" (qtd. in Kettenmann 48).

⁷ This is a quote from <http://www.fridakahlo.com/>.

under the working of subjectile there will be no subject or object, but rather that subject and object coexist and always appear or return as a multiple, fragmented agent, under different guises and within different frames.

“‘To tear’ and ‘to manifest’ at the same time, to tear or rend in order to manifest, a properly *revealing* gesture against the veil” (88)—Derrida’s comment on Artaud which emphasizes on “the rent veil” and “the revealed truth” applies to Kahlo’s paintings equally well. In this paper, I propose to use the term subjectile to formulate a theoretical framework that enables us to discern and manifest the working of O’Reilly’s script and Zarrilli’s staging of *The 9 Fridas*. Derrida claims the subjectile is like a projectile formed into a concept, a work of art, and a style: “We will never grasp the drama of the subjectile without grasping this strategy of the projectile” (85). As a projectile, it hurls life and work as well as body and mind together, and the force deployed in this action is important to my analysis of the production of *The 9 Fridas*. For me, the phenomenon of subjectile at work in this production manifests itself in the projectile of textiles, actiles, and affectiles. These three trajectories are one, different but inseparable, distinct yet intimately connected. I believe that we can better grasp the production through the above-mentioned three trajectories.

2. Textiles: Post-Dramatic Dramaturgy

In her script, Kaite O’Reilly not only reactivates the dynamism and turmoil of Kahlo’s life and art but also incorporates the complexity and extremism of her Mexican cultural and social background. The textual display of the multi-faceted Kahlo is aimed to let the audience experience her multiple subjectivities at work. In this section, I attempt to look into the way O’Reilly deals with Kahlo’s art and life by examining the “textiles” and the dramaturgy in *The 9 Fridas*. I have decided to use the term “textile” because it not only designates the fabric or composition of a play but also emphasizes the non-literary composites of dramaturgy. Poetic and yet fragmentary, *The 9 Fridas* features a constructed script that suggests new ways of negotiating presence and interrogating our roles as spectators and critics because the play’s textiles deconstruct the notion of character and disorient the dramaturgy of characterization by disrupting characters’ underlying mechanism within performance.

The play starts with a cultural radio programme with many voices commenting and arguing about Kahlo and her paintings from different perspectives. Some praise Kahlo’s “heroic suffering” and her “intense dignity.” Some recall what has happened to her in the near fatal traffic accident. Some raise the issue of

Kahlo's multiple social identities as an intellectual, a Stalinist, an atheist, a Mexican saint, an artist, a Christ figure, and a woman. Some focus on her iconoclastic challenge to the ideas of selfhood, disability, and gender power relationships. Some present the heated debate about the relationship between art and life. Some discuss the aesthetic qualities of Kahlo's iconography, especially what is shown in her famous paintings such as *Broken Column* and *The Two Fridas*. Some express their dislike because everything about Kahlo has something to do with blood, suffering, and pain (*Fridas* 3-5). What immediately follows is Scene One in which O'Reilly uses the character F's words to give us a poetic and yet poignant snapshot of Kahlo: "She is everywhere. A woman with flowers in her hair. A woman with a lipsticked mouth like a bleeding wound. A woman whose whole body is a wound. Wounded. Wounding in the even-eyed stare out from the picture frame. Steady. Wielding an emotional machete, necklaced with the barbed wire of truth: This is how the body hurts. This is pain. This is what the body endures" (*Fridas* 6).

In what follows, the play features five performers—numbered 1-4, and F—in the definitive version. "1-4 double up and play different personas as well as chorus" (*Fridas* 2), explains O'Reilly. For the sake of keeping a basic guideline, she assigns actors 1-4 a somewhat central role respectively: "1: Leader of chorus, replacement child/political figure. 2: An irreverent, politicised, disabled character. 3: The would-be mother. 4: The betrayed woman" (*Fridas* 2). Only actor F "remains the same throughout" (2). What is unique about O'Reilly's dramaturgy is that she invests these five actors with flexible identities and they are not characters as in traditional plays. They are and are not Frida Kahlo because they might assume other roles as well. Thus, it is not "I" but "it" that is speaking. What's more, O'Reilly does not want to "fix the size of the cast" (*Fridas* 2) and lines can be reassigned according to each performing situation. She continues to make a very important stage direction note: "The cast is a mix of male and female, disabled and non-disabled performers, but all dressed as Frida Kahlo from her portraits and paintings—some in her famous Tehuana regional Mexican dress, others in her western clothes—Levi's 501 jeans, overalls, a three piece suit, etc.—and various corsets—some orthopaedic, others lingerie" (*Fridas* 2). With this arrangement, the fragmentary "textiles" can be sutured and perhaps more than nine avatars of Kahlo are introduced as the title indicates.

Literally speaking, *The 9 Fridas* is a piece of fabric woven together by fragmented words, descriptions, and chorus-like comments. It is exemplified by the following speeches:

- 1: Once upon a time there was a little girl of mixed cultural heritage who caught polio aged six, and survived.

- 4: Once upon a time there was a woman who divorced, forgave, then remarried her faithless husband.
- 3: Once upon a time there was a would-be mother who miscarried and miscarried and who could never carry her baby full term.
- 4: Once upon a time there was a little damaged wife who became a world famous artist.
- F: Once upon a time there was a (beat)
 I paint my reality so they cannot contain me.
 I paint my reality so they will love me.
 I paint what I know
- 1: Joy
- 2: Pain
- 4: Betrayal
- F: I paint my reality so they will not forget me. (*Fridas* 11)

O'Reilly's intention is quite self-evident in these opening scenes in which a multi-faceted Kahlo is presented. She challenges traditional characterization by radicalizing the limits of representation. According to O'Reilly, *The 9 Fridas* is meant to be "a mosaic, a collage of impressions and stories" ("Notes") reflecting many representations of Frida Kahlo. For me, the play, however, is not just a "mosaic" or a "collage." Rather, it possesses a plastic dynamism and creates a moving montage effect which sets the cubist or futurist portraiture images in motion. Or the play is very much like a "mirrorball" (*Fridas* 19), a term that Actor 1 uses to describe Kahlo, which is "made of multiple, shiny, sharp, pointed pieces" (*Fridas* 19), mirroring back Kahlo's fractal but shiny existence. The result is a peculiar figurative portrait of a wounded, traumatized, and yet unyielding woman of passion.

The play is a script written with an "alternative" dramatic form or the so-called "postdramatic" style, which invites us readers and spectators alike to piece together or re-configure an image of Kahlo in our own way. In his seminal *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann uses the term "postdramatic theatre" to refer to the diverse range of alternative scripted and devised performances produced since the 1970s. As Lehmann explains, "The adjective 'postdramatic' denotes a theatre that feels bound to operate beyond drama, at a time 'after' the authority of the dramatic paradigm in theatre" (27). However, postdramatic theatre "includes the presence or resumption or continued working of older aesthetics, including those that took leave of the dramatic idea in earlier times, be it on the level of text or theatre" (27). Differing from the all-inclusive term "postmodern theatre" which deals with a wide field in terms of "epoch" and through a long-winded list of features, such as deconstruction, heterogeneity, ambiguity, non-textuality, etc. (25), to name only a few, the term postdramatic theatre is not time-bound. Though sharing some features with postmodern theatre,

it refers particularly to the theatre that goes beyond or after the time-honored dramatic form, and anticipates a “decentered” theatre in which a story with character and plot developments is no longer of the central focus and concern. As Lehmann elaborates, “In post-dramatic forms of *theatre*, staged text (*if* text is staged) is merely a component with equal rights in a gestic, musical, visual, etc., total composition” (46).

In other words, using this kind of “postdramatic” style or alternative dramaturgy, O’Reilly deconstructs subjectivity and thus dramatic character, and pronounces what Elinor Fuchs calls “the death of character” (10), that character is no longer the center of drama and that drama is more and more performance-oriented as well as more “theatricalist” than representational (149). Through various mechanisms, such as doubling, multiplication, and fragmentation of the characters that the actor embodies, O’Reilly’s script overthrows the unity and cohesion of the stage character. She doesn’t merely “haunt presence-structure with trace-structure”; rather she directly stages “the traces” (Fuchs 80), namely the traces of/about Frida Kahlo. Her dramaturgical strategy offers a credible vantage point from which she can “hold two or more planes of reality in ambiguous suspension” and express “the relative and multiple nature” (Fuchs 33) of Kahlo’s identity.

In O’Reilly’s *The 9 Fridas*, Kahlo’s image evolves and metamorphoses over the course of the play. We, the audience, witness her suffering and passion pronounced through multifarious presentations. Another noted fact in the play is that actors stand in for characters; ambiguous, multilevel, and multivocal figures take the place of univocal representation of Kahlo; multiple and random perspectivism replaces the accountable relations of Kahlo and her world; and lastly a multiple subject and a dispersed field of attention substitute for the unified perception of Kahlo, the passive spectator, and the concentrated social focus. The lack of narratives, dramatic action, and psychologically fashioned characters have enforced the move towards a non-representational mode or a post-dramatic theatre, in which only actors, and not characters, appear on stage. In place of the old dramatic shaping devices, like dialogue, conflict, and plot, new elements, like visuality, intermediality, intertextuality, self-referentiality, and *mise-en-scène* theatricality, prevail on this postdramatic stage.

Other than action and description, the script of *The 9 Fridas* constantly conjures up Kahlo’s paintings to serve as frames of reference to address different aspects of Kahlo’s art and life on the one hand and as devices to enlist various art criticisms on the other hand. For example, Scene 3, entitled “The Would-Be Mother,” addresses Kahlo’s experiences of miscarriages and refers in particular to her painting called *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932). “The hospital in Detroit—my

stillborn baby floating like a kite above my head, attached to me by a red ribbon as I lie naked, weeping, on the bed" (*Fridas* 9), says Actor F. Other than the fetus, Kahlo's trauma is shown within and without, along with other images of a deformed pelvis, an orchid, gynecological utensils, a snail, and a female abdomen part. All these images surrounding the bleeding body in bed manifest a deep abjection and a futile yearning that will never go away.

In Scene 10, entitled "The Long Haired Wife Listening to the Radio," Actor 4's speech reveals Kahlo's longing and waiting mood for Rivera, and her decision to cut off her hair and put on Rivera's suit—an image referring to Kahlo's painting *Self Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940). Scene 15 stages an individual comment on the painting *My Dress Hangs There* (1933), in which we can see a native traditional dress hanging against the Manhattan skyline. This painting shows Kahlo's ironic comment on capitalism from a Marxist point of view (*Fridas* 37). Likewise, in Scene 21, an art response to *Itzcuintli Dog and Me* (1938) is provided by Actor 4, who focuses on discussing Kahlo's smoking habit and the technique she used for the background called "*sfumato: smoked*." At the end, Kahlo is honored as "the patron saint of smokers" and "The Madonna of Marijuana" (*Fridas* 50).

At other times, such as Scene 5, O'Reilly makes use of recorded videos projected on the screen to show extended dimensions of the world that Kahlo lives in. The Speaker in the video introduces the 9 Underworld levels in Mayan myth: "In Mayan myth, the heavens, the Road to Xibalbá, was represented by the dark rift visible in the Milky Way. Yax'ché, the world tree, is at the center of The World, and grows through the 9 Underworld levels. Each level has its own ruler, but Mitnal, the lowest level, is the most terrible of the nine hells of the underworld, for here everybody suffers, being ruled by the skeleton Death God, Ah Puch" (*Fridas* 15). In Scene 9, a recorded video showing three actors playing with three Kahlo-like dolls is projected on the screen. Using a farcical acting style, the three dolls exchange taunting words about "how to be a good wife" (*Fridas* 18). In Scene 11, a mediatized cooking Frida (F2) demonstrates how to make "dead man's bread," while Actor 4 and Actor F are discussing Rivera's faithless betrayal by having an affair with Kahlo's sister. In Scene 14, a mediatized speaker introduces the Mayan belief system, the 9 Underworld levels, animism, the cycle of life and death, etc. In Scene 17, a mediatized video explains with a celebratory voice the reason why Kahlo eventually becomes "Madam Wow" or the so-called "Comrade Fashionista" (*Fridas* 41). Kahlo is known for her exhibitionism, her theatrical flair, and her knack for role-playing. Her bodily pain, her marked facial expressions, as well as her clothing, headdress, and accessories all make her the center of people's attention. As the mediatized figure comments, "Possibly because she resembles a glamorous Long John Silver with her hand-tooled couture peg leg, she is an excellent vessel

for kitsch. Bring on the fou-frou—long skirts, voluminous petticoats hand embroidered with smutty one-liners, the German braided topknot is Eva Braun meets Carmen Miranda—the Teutonic meets Tehuna—no wonder she graced the covers of French and American Vogue. Bow down to the powers of Madam Wow and the style secrets of her little red book: Comrade Fashionista” (*Fridas* 41).

In April 1953, Kahlo had her first exhibition in Mexico at the Galeria de Arte Contemporaneo. Kahlo was escorted to the opening in an ambulance and was carried in on a stretcher. Festooned with dead skeletons and photographs, her bed had been set up in the gallery, as an integral element of the exhibition. With the exhibition hall exquisitely set up, the focus of the scene that evening was not so much the retrospective of her work as the artist herself. As Actor F ironically comments, “And then I realised it was an art installation and it was me who was going to be installed. The artist’s last act: Dying as art. Good business, great publicity. My husband the communist—such a gifted capitalist” (*Fridas* 51). Scene 25, the last scene, starts with a mediatized video showing Cooking Frida (F2) demonstrating how to perform the ritual to consecrate a talisman to Santa Muerte, the White Lady of Mexico.

Since O’Reilly’s post-dramatic script is not organized around a plot or recognizable individual characters, a variety of alternative “aesthetic logics” (Lehmann 18)—such as music, dance, pantomime, mimicry, gesticulation, intonations, architecture, lighting, décor, mediatized projections, different languages, etc.—are employed to inform the structure and type of action as well as the tasks of the performers. As a result, by jettisoning the art of characterization and the poetics of representation, the play has achieved a unique textual phenomenon that I call “textiles” in which as in a hall of mirrors Kahlo’s images have been woven and refracted through a variety of lenses and represented through a multiplicity of frames. Challenging the most profound and permanent ambition of Western theatrical aesthetics, the textiles of *The 9 Fridas* revolutionize the dramatic form and affirm the provocations of Derridean *différance* and Nietzschean perspectivism.

To conclude, O’Reilly’s textiles in *The 9 Fridas* have the advantage of initiating or stimulating the dynamics and the energy of textual flows and deployments. From Scene 2 to Scene 25, the last scene, the life and art of Kahlo are repeatedly opened up, examined, broken up, and reassembled from a multitude of viewpoints, very much like the fate of Kahlo’s wounded body, which had endured more than 30 operations in her lifetime. Every bit and piece of Kahlo is placed in different social and critical contexts, through which Actor F and other avatars/choral commentators journey through the nine hells of the Mayan Underworld together. Other than the textiles, this production also provides ways to channel actiles and affectiles.

3. Actiles: From Psychophysical Pre-expressive Preparation to Performative Mise-en-scène

In this section, I use the term actiles to account for the way “actor’s dramaturgy” (Zarrilli, 2009: 113) is at work in the performance text of *The 9 Fridas*. According to Phillip Zarrilli, “dramaturgy” here refers to “how the actor’s tasks are composed, structured, and shaped during the rehearsal period into a repeatable performance score” (2009: 113). Meanwhile, the word actiles is also concerned with Zarrilli’s psychophysical approach to acting and his directorship in the production of *The 9 Fridas*.

Zarrilli is known for his psychophysical approach to acting and has engaged himself in enacting the training method for many years. In Part III “Production Case Studies” of his *Psychophysical Acting*, Zarrilli talks about the know-how of his directorship. When working with a text, he often begins by laying bare its aesthetic logic and seeks ways to try out its possibility within a specific mise-en-scène. As he writes, “I identify specific structural units and their requirements within the aesthetic logic as the whole. I then develop (1) an overall strategy for the period of devising/workshopping/rehearsing, (2) the acting tasks that will constitute and create each major structure or unit of action within the performance score, and (3) the actor’s point and mode of entry into embodying each task, i.e., *how* the actor approaches each specific task” (2009: 113). Zarrilli also identifies his twofold directorial goals: Firstly, “to find a means of activating each actor as an individual through psychophysical processes and images that constantly engage that actor’s bodymind, energy, awareness, and the sensation/feeling of form” and secondly “to find a means of activating the actors intersubjectively as an ensemble so that they are being active/reactive in the moment for each other” (2009: 113). In what follows, I intend to examine Zarrilli’s working procedure in the production of *The 9 Fridas* from the stage of psychophysical pre-expressive preparation to that of performative mise-en-scène.



Intensive masterclass (7/28-30, 2014), Chinese *taijiquan* and Indian *kalaripayattu* (Photo courtesy of 2014 Taipei Arts Festival)

Psychophysical Pre-expressive Preparation

As a director, Zarrilli often uses Indian yoga and Asian martial arts, such as Chinese *taijiquan* and Indian *kalaripayattu*, to train performer's mindfulness, energy flow, and overall psychophysical acting skills. This time before mounting *The 9 Fridas*, as part of his residency as guest director for the 2014 Taipei Arts Festival, Zarrilli led a three-day intensive masterclass (7/28-30, 2014) with the cast of *The 9 Fridas*, local actors, and interested students on his approach to psychophysical actor training. The three-day masterclass was immediately followed by the five-week training and rehearsing process. The training process started by implementing psychophysical exercises drawn from traditional Asian disciplines of body-mind training to assist the performers to awaken their body-mind continuum, develop their interiority, coordinate their breath with movement, lengthen their spine, circulate their energy from dantian (two inches below the navel) to the top of the head and throughout the whole body, and eventually deploy their energy mindfully and freely. With all these pre-expressive preparations, an individual performer was expected to develop a full awareness which formed a sound foundation to create more cohesive actions with other performers so that they could fine tune and resonate their body-mind together and create a specific performance score shaped by particular dramaturgies through structured improvisations.

Zarrilli's approach does not work from psychology or emotion as in Stanislavsky's method acting. Instead, he focuses on the pre-performative preparation, especially the working of one's awareness and bodily energy. In other words, Zarrilli's approach emphasizes what Eugenio Barba terms "pre-expressive" territory and stage. The goal of this approach is to guide the actors to enter an embodied style which suits the postdramatic text of *The 9 Fridas*. In the end its purpose is to effect a specific experience for the audience. Barba has consistently set out in his writings to stress the significance of pre-expressive intensities because each manifestation of intensity in performance discloses a prior state of intensity, the pre-expressivity, and each plane of intensity is already a coupling that exposes the qualitative character of quantity and reveals the attraction and opposition of energy particles. In other words, the pre-expressivity is the moment in which the action is both thought and acted by the entire organism, which reacts with impulse and counter-impulse, even in immobility. It is the state which engages intense muscular, nervous, and mental commitments, directed towards the next state. It is the tightening or the gathering together of opposing forces in a body which is ready to move or act. Barba concentrates on exploring "the pre-expressive level of the performer's behaviours" (1995: 148) by comparing the work methods of both Eastern and Western theatre and by reaching down into a common technical substratum.

At this pre-expressive level, the principles are the same, even though different theatre traditions nurture the enormous expressive differences in the art of the performer. The move from the daily technique to the extra-daily technique is a process of becoming which begins at a pre-expressive level and ends with the presence of performer's scenic *bios*. This dilated body is the body-in-becoming that must keep on becoming, in an indefinite movement of invention and an alteration of dynamic balance, becoming a role, an impulse, and a "flow of energies" (2005: 52), opening wider and wider zones of performing space during a performance. While Gilles Deleuze discovers becoming as the prototype of an immanent relation, Barba believes that *sats* is the moment of pre-expressive or preacting dynamic preparation. *Sats* is the drive for an action or the prologue for the dilated body. According to Barba, "In the instant which precedes the action, when all the necessary force is ready to be released into space but as though suspended and still under control, the performer perceives her/his energy in the form of *sats*" (1995: 55). *Sats* engages the entire body by combining impulse and counter-impulse. By exercising *sats*, the dilated body retains its dynamic immobility and altered balance. It is a body at stake, at risk, and in crisis, always in position of self-overcoming, self-fashioning, and self-expanding.

In the postdramatic production of *The 9 Fridas*, actors, not characters, dominated the scene. Other than gearing up their pre-expressive energy state, *sats*, through rigorous psychophysical training, they were also required by Zarrilli to employ different performing strategies to meet the script's aesthetic demands. Again, their individual performance scores were derived from multiple alternative dramaturgies which were by no means consistent and developmental. Sometimes realistic, actors got together to discuss and gossip about Kahlo's life and art; sometimes image-based, they posed certain gestures derived from Kahlo's paintings. We now shift our focus to explore the performative aspect of the production.

Performative Mise-en-scène

The production of *The 9 Fridas* was characterized by alternative acting style, visual dramaturgy, and digital workflows. As a director overseeing actors' training and performance, Zarrilli was also concerned about how the actors' tasks were carried out within the framework of *mise-en-scène*. When enacting the script, he tried all the means not only to destabilize audience's attempt to identify with actors but also to erase any trace of characterization. Using artful images and multi-focused stage design, he explored the usual unacknowledged desires, agonies, pleasures, paradoxes, and pains in Kahlo's life and art. The production at The Wellspring Theater in Taipei featured a main stage, which was divided into five performing

spaces. There was a flight of stairs located at the back of the center stage, which was by design surrounded by four platform stages at four corners. Wooden frames of unequal sizes were hung in the air to define the five spaces. On this main stage, voices, gestures, postures, bodies, and movements were torn from spatial-temporal continuum because all the scenes in the play were linked through fragmentary textiles and not connected through the principles of unity. As a result, the actions taking place in the five spaces were presented more or less like tableaux vivants, in which carefully posed and theatrically lit actors were like living pictures carrying on dynamic dialogues with the images derived from Kahlo's life and art. This kind of display-approach successfully linked the dramatic scenes with Kahlo's paintings, throwing the audience into the abyss of *mise-en-scène*, or some kind of theatrical *mise-en-abyme*, in the de-subjectified space of subjectiles, with many "Kahlos" appearing here and there in the performing spaces, creating an eerie effect of shifting figurations and configurations.



Wooden frames of unequal sizes hung in the air to define the spaces
(Photo courtesy of Mobius Strip Theatre Company)



Kahlos and frames (Photo courtesy of Mobius Strip Theatre Company)

In addition, the production's mise-en-scène was instituted through a framing device, which was executed by layers of frames, frames of dramatic scenes, frames of mediatized videos, and big and small dangling wooden painting frames. Under Zarrilli's meticulous arrangement, every scenic frame had become a figure of thought for audience's contemplation. There was always more than one frame at work. And yet the acting enclosed by the frame did not let itself be easily summed up by any interpretative framework because there was no final definitive frame or a focal frame of reference upon which all other frames were able to be arranged in an orderly fashion. Thus, in the production of *The 9 Fridas*, the audience witnessed a complex figuration and re-configuration at work. Instead of replacing the actual role playing of the actor, Zarrilli intensified the actors' presence by extending role playing and the scope of actors' acting. As the course of performance gradually leads toward creating the final image—that of a traditional *ofrenda*—an altar to the deceased, Kahlo's life and art became an intricate game of masks carried between the selves of the actor and the embodied figures, along with other representations of Kahlo: puppets, dolls, and iconography. With multiple personalities and a dilated, multifunctional self to create still images of Kahlo's self-portraiture, each individual actor in the production transfigured him/herself into a hybrid creature and a Kahlo avatar—be it a betrayed wife, an adulterous wife, a social activist, a struggling artist, or a disabled patient. “Everyone on stage is and is not Kahlo” (“Notes”), writes O'Reilly.



An *ofrenda*, with Actor F holding a frame and others sitting next to the altar to the deceased (Photo courtesy of Mobius Strip Theatre Company)

Upon facing the alternative dramaturgy of *The 9 Fridas*, the spectators found themselves exposed to a multi-faceted and fragmentary Kahlo, and surrounded

by a dissemination of voices. Uttered by actors and not characters, these voices, blending with media, music, lyrics, and dance, served the function as choral comments, responses, and interpretations of the principal events in Kahlo's life and art. The reality of the voice was fabricated, arranged, and made poetic and rhythmic according to different purposes. Through gesture and costume mimicry,⁸ speech repetition,⁹ painting gesture reenactment,¹⁰ farcical mediatized video,¹¹ and solemn reiteration of Mayan myth,¹² the production attempted to exhaust Kahlo's multi-faceted personality, artwork, and life through a potpourri of materials from her life and art. It ended up in creating a composite of multifarious frames and pictures in which the features of Kahlo's different faces were superimposed over one another.

4. Affectiles: Pain, Abject Passion, and Death

In this paper, I argue that what this production makes palpable and memorable for us is its dealing with the whole spectrum of Kahlo's affectiles in terms of pain, abject passion, and death. In other words, the play's affectiles do not concentrate on building up a consistent identity for Frida Kahlo, namely Kahlo as the subject or the object, but on presenting her "corporeal reality" which gives rise to "an extremely strong feeling that is at once somatic and symbolic" (1996: 118) as defined by Julia Kristeva.

Pain

In 1929, Kahlo married Diego Rivera, the famous Mexican muralist 20 years her senior, at the age of 22. Their stormy and yet passionate love relationship survived the ordeal of many disputes and scandals, such as Rivera's infidelities, their divorce (November 1939) and remarriage (December 1940), Kahlo's several

⁸ Gesture and costume mimicry happens throughout the play.

⁹ For example, the following set of dialogues is repeated three times in the play: "1: It's all part of the process. 3: The letting go. 2: The moving on. 4: The taking leave." It first appears in Scene 5, and recurs in Scene 14 and 19 with slight variations.

¹⁰ The most typical reenactment of Kahlo's painting in the play is the representation of *The Two Fridas* on stage in Scene 24.

¹¹ In Scene 9, three actors play with dolls representing Kahlo and gossip about how to be a good wife and in Scene 11, mediatized Cooking Frida (F2) gives instructions on making dead man's bread. These two scenes are all presented in a farcical way.

¹² In Scene 5, a mediatized Speaker appears on a screen addressing stories about the Mayan myth, especially the nine hells of the underworld. In Scene 14, a mediatized speaker talks about the old Mayan myth again, introducing the way through the 9 Underworld levels, animism, etc.

bisexual love affairs,¹³ and her several miscarriages. Kahlo once said: “I suffered two grave accidents in my life . . . One in which a streetcar knocked me down and the other was Diego” (qtd. in fridakahlo.com). The streetcar accident left her crippled physically whereas Rivera crippled her emotionally.

In his perceptive “Introduction” to *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait*, Carlos Fuentes gives us a telling description of the unbearable pain that Kahlo went through:

She suffered thirty-two operations from the day of her accident to the day of her death. Her biography consists of twenty-nine years of pain. From 1944 on, she is forced to wear eight corsets. In 1953, her leg is amputated as gangrene sets in. She secretes through her wounded back, “smelling like a dead dog.” She is hung naked, head down, from her feet, to strengthen her spinal column. She loses her fetuses in pools of blood. She is forever surrounded by clots, chloroform, bandages, needles, scalpels. She is the Mexican Saint Sebastian, slinged and arrowed. (12-13)

Identifying herself as a disabled artist because of her weak eyesight or amblyopia, O’Reilly feels strongly for Kahlo’s attitude in facing pain and adversity in life and admires her perseverance in creating extraordinary artwork and her engagement in political activism. Rather than conceiving Kahlo’s life as “tragic but brave” or “pity-inducing,” or representing her as a “little broken betrayed wife,” O’Reilly argues that her intention in the play is “to reclaim Kahlo as a disability icon and inspiration” (“Notes”).¹⁴ “Before we coined ‘crip culture’ she was living it . . .,” O’Reilly stresses, “I adore her for her refusal to be constrained by what could be viewed at the time as the limitations of her gender and impairment—for the fact she created extraordinary art the likes of which had not been seen before—for her laughter, her anger, her attitude in her paintings—what André Breton called ‘the pretty ribbon tied around the bomb’” (“Notes”).

In Scene 6, Actor 2, using the first person voice as an observer, addresses the issue of disability in the painting *Self Portrait with the Portrait of Doctor Farill* (1951): “I’d never seen a woman in a wheelchair in a painting before. Na-

¹³ Kahlo is known for her many bisexual love relationships. Other than Diego Rivera, her love affairs with men include American artist and landscape architect Isamu Noguchi and Communist leader Leon Trotsky. As for her love affairs with women, Kahlo was linked with African American entertainer Josephine Baker, American painter Georgia O’Keeffe, and Mexican singer Chavela Vargas.

¹⁴ In her Taipei lecture entitled “Representations of Impairment in the Western Theatrical Canon” on August 5, 2014, O’Reilly considers that disability is “a social construct” and a label imposed by the society. For her, what disables a disabled person is not his/her impairments but “the prejudices, fears, physical and attitudinal barriers of a society” (“Notes”). Because of this label, disabled persons are treated as “Other” (them, not us), being expelled from the mainstream groups. In order to strengthen disabled person’s value and presence on the stage, O’Reilly insists that a disabled character should be enacted by a real disabled actor so that this actor can really express disabled persons’ life experiences. This is the reason why she cast a real disabled performer Chih-Chung Cheng (鄭志忠) to play a vital part in the production.

ked, stretched on a bed, yes, or drowning in the river, yes, but sitting in a wheelchair looking out at me?” (*Fridas* 18). Referring to the painting *La Grand Odalisque* (1814) by French neoclassical painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres as well as the painting *Ophelia* (1851-52) by British artist Sir John Everett Millais, here O’Reilly compares and contrasts the representations of women with a special purpose, that is, to stress Kahlo’s blunt attitude in facing her disability—“no shame . . . , no apology, or embarrassment, just fact” (*Fridas* 18). In what follows, there is a subtle shift of voice. The “I” as observer is immediately replaced by the “I” as Kahlo, affirming and confirming her disability with a firm voice, without shame and without reserve: “I can be whole and in control and an artist even with polio, with spina bifida, even with a missing limb” (*Fridas* 18).

Throughout her work, Kahlo painted of her physical pain, torment, torture, and suffering as well as her being torn apart by her troubled love relationship with Rivera. But all the same, her emotional distresses incurred by both her psychological and physical sufferings were stretched to the point of needing art as therapy in order to reenter life. What the production of *The 9 Fridas* offers us is not just a perpetual play of frames which changes from scene to scene and moves from one portrait to another but also a perpetual play of emotions which flows from distressful tears to resolute determination to fight against all odds, and shifts from the mood of agonized abjection to the mood to celebrate the dance of death. From the beginning “Cultural Radio Programme” to the last scene “Frida’s Fiestas,” we spectators were led to embark on an emotional roller coaster ride filled with situations or experiences that go up and down, alternating between what makes Kahlo feel excited, exhilarated, or happy and what make her feel sad, disappointed, or desperate.

Abject Passion

According to Julia Kristeva, the abject exists in a liminal space, outside the symbolic, somewhere between the object and the subject, disturbing identity, system, and order (1982: 4). Kahlo, being forced to face her abjection, experiences something inherently traumatic and maternal in her body and life (Kristeva, 1996: 118). Using the paintbrush to paint unceasingly, thus, has become her therapeutic ritual to restore and renew her contact with the maternal. Abjection unto artistic creativity: Kahlo translates her abjection into an art of embodiment in states of painfulness. In the end, her paintings allow us to see into her affectiles at work. Pains become bearable only insofar as they are closely connected to her “abject passion”—a paradoxical attitude toward life.

In Scene 23, Actor F complains: “Pain in my bones. I can feel them rubbing

together, chaffing, like a splintered chicken bone. And then there's the scar tissue—those nubs of flesh, the ridges from where the skin didn't heal, or forgot to, or couldn't be bothered to, or wasn't allowed to. 'Open her up again, doctor!' 8 operations in one year" (*Fridas* 54). In what follows, other actors, Actor 2, 3, and 4, serving as choral members, ironically comment on Actor F's words:

- 3: It doesn't take long to learn that special attention comes with illness and surgery and being the patient.
 2: Pity is stronger than love.
 4: You can't leave an invalid, you can't leave a martyr. You can't leave a saint.
 3: "The poor thing."
 2: "But isn't she marvellous, considering?"
 3: 'So brave! So uncomplaining!'
 F: I am not sick. I am broken, there's a difference.
 Why do you torment me? (*Fridas* 54-55)

In Scene 25, Actor F explains that it is impossible for her to paint at all when extreme pains and pain relief impact her and make her hands shake: "What use is it to see when the hand is no longer steady? I can't paint for pain, and pain relief brings tremors. This blurring. The colours are muddy, paint caked on. My hands shake—devastating little earthquakes" (*Fridas* 59).

As time went by, Kahlo gradually cultivated the stamina to embrace sufferings and emotions as essential parts of her creative gift and life. For her, her physical pains were integral to her way of thinking, writing, and artistic creativity. In other words, her paintings were symptomatic manifestations not just of her "painfulness" which continued to dominate the scene of painting but also of her thoughts, feelings, and creative drives.

Here, I want to argue that what her broken body manifests is not the "meaning" of her painfulness but the Deleuzian "affect" of her existence which defines the disabled body's ability to affect and to be affected.¹⁵ In Scene 20, Actor F recalls and describes her operations in gendered terms: "Pain. I want to speak of pain. I know the body prepped, sedated and strapped to the operating table, the section uncovered where seconds later the surgeon will make his incision. His incision, for it is always a man. It is women who feed and dress me, play with my dolls, plait my hair. It is men who prep sedate and strap me to the operating

¹⁵ Brian Massumi notes in "Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgements" of *A Thousand Plateaus: AFFECT/AFFECTION*. Neither word denotes a personal feeling (sentiment in Deleuze and Guattari). *L'affect* (Spinoza's *affectus*) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act. *L'affection* (Spinoza's *affection*) is each such state considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body (with body taken in its broadest sense to include 'mental' or ideal bodies" (xvi).

table. Thirty four times. I went through this thirty four times. Tree of hope, hold firm" (*Fridas* 48). As Kahlo writes, "To me, nothing seemed more normal than to paint what had not been fulfilled. My painting carries with it the message of pain . . . painting completed my life. I lost three children . . . painting substituted for all of this" (qtd. in Herrera 75). Kahlo's uncompromising depiction of her feelings and bodily experiences in feminist expressions makes her a feminist pioneer.

In her painting *The Wounded Deer* (1946), Kahlo places her head on a deer whose body is fatally pierced by arrows. This image implicitly expresses her fear, disappointment, and desperation towards the operation on her spine in New York in 1946. Broken and torn inside her own body and heart, physically and emotionally, Kahlo is the Kristevan abject, harboring an in-between space, occupied by passion and pain, life and death, laughter and suffering.

Death

In Scene 5, the issue of death (la pelona) is the main topic of several speeches because for Kahlo death is her companion through life:

F: Is that where I am? The lowest of the 9 hells, where everybody suffers . . . ? For we do. We put a good face on it, lipstick on the sugar skull, but we suffer.

1: It's all part of the process.

3: The letting go

2: The moving on

4: The taking leave

1: The dying.

F: Am I dying? (beat)

I thought I was already dead.

I'm dead. Aren't I?

It's over, surely?

Am I not done yet?

2: All except the last journey.

4: You know the way.

3: But you will always live on in your art.

F: Such clichés are the very substance of hell.

1: The 9 hells through which you pass, Friducha.

Speaker: In the realm of Xibalba, the K'iche Shades, the place of fear. Passing through the house of ghosts, through the 9 houses of the underworld.

F: Where I am is where I have always been.

A place of the living, a place of the dead. (*Fridas* 15-16)

In the script, O'Reilly refers to the ancient Mayan belief system from time to time because Kahlo herself also often mentions this belief system in her writings. Descending from death, through the nine houses of the underworld, Kahlo always

has this sense of living with death. Like many Mexicans, she considers death as a process of life, at once as the origin and the end, the departure point and the home. Along with pain and pleasure, death is a humorous and companionable friend for the wisdom of life. As Kahlo writes in her diary, "Pain—pleasure and death are no more than a process for existence . . . in this process is a doorway open to intelligence" (243).

Again in Scene 14, Actor F's speech touches on the issue of death:

F: Am I not done yet?

Look at the cadaver dressed for day of the dead in her frippery and gaudy finery. Put red lipstick on the corpse. See the dead walk and grin. A conjuror's trick. Smoke and mirrors. Now you see me, now you see me even more . . . (*Fridas* 35)

Fusion and confusion, solemn and yet gaudy, death has a deadly grin. Dressing in full beauty, lying in bed, and holding the paintbrush in her hand, Kahlo's message is loud and clear. "I am not sick . . . I am broken. But I am happy to be alive as long as I can paint" (qtd. in Fuentes 23), says Kahlo. For Kahlo, to do the painting was particularly difficult in times of extreme discomforts and bodily crises because during those occasions she had to paint on her sick bed. However, even under the worst adverse conditions, she persisted and believed that the redemptive potential of laughter was a positive attitude towards her desperate condition and the world she was in.

In order to endure her extreme pains and sufferings, Kahlo had to assume a vision of life which was not unlike Nietzschean life philosophy. As Nietzsche writes: "I had to invent a counterpart for myself. Perhaps I know best why man alone laughs: he alone suffers so deeply that he had to invent laughter. The unhappiest and most melancholy animal is, as fitting, the most cheerful" (1968: 56).¹⁶ In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche conjures up laughter as a means to fight the spirit of gravity: "Not by wrath does one kill but by laughter. Come, let us kill the spirit of gravity!" (41). In a similar fashion, Kahlo wrote in her journals, "There is nothing more precious than laughter. It is strength to laugh and lose oneself, to be light. Tragedy is the most ridiculous thing 'man' has" (239). Laughter symbolizes Frida's creative will to power to overcome her physical pains, abjection, and death.

Near the end of the play, the image of death haunts Kahlo's death bed scene:

Speaker: I am in the realm of Xibalba, the K'iche Shades, the dark rift in the Milky Way. The lords of this realm emaciate people, waste them away. Ahaltocob, Stabbing Demon, catches people and pierces them til they die. Xic and Patan cause sudden

¹⁶ In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche repeats this message and writes: "The most suffering animal on earth invented for itself—laughter" (517).

death on the road.

F: Is that why I'm here? Are the lords of the underworld angry with me? I gave so many blood offerings, but escaped sudden death on the road: Xic and Patan, who caused the streetcar to collide with the bus, who brought about my major accident.

3: Ssssh, chamaca Friduchita . . . Let the bones heal.

1: It's a delirium brought on by the morphine.

F: Am I hallucinating? But it all feels so real.

4: You're dreaming.

3: Dreaming dreamy dream.

2: You're dead, dreaming of life.

F: Alive, dreaming of death.

2: He dances, le pelona, the bald one, around the bed at night. (*Fridas* 55-56)

As death approaches, Kahlo and death dance together, performing an intimate dance of death, variously called *danse macabre* (French) or *danza de la muerte* (Spanish). Like Nietzsche, Kahlo is a Yes-sayer to life. In her "Yes" life quest, she has to withstand the most detested and unbearable pains of existence. From her long years of suffering, Kahlo learns to view differently all her mishaps. She does not halt at a negation, a No, a will to negation. She crosses over to the opposite side to embrace the Nietzschean Dionysian affirmation of existence—the formula of *amor fati* (1968: 536). And it is on this agonized and yet ecstatic hymn of praise to life that Kahlo crowns her life.

In the last scene, an altar is set up, with rosaries and rituals, in the mood of commemorating and celebrating what Kahlo has suffered. Kahlo is honored by different actors with different titles based on particular incidents in her life:

2: Blessed Saint Frida of spondylitis, curvature of the spine, name saint of the peg legs, the polios, the corset-wearing spina bifidas.

3: Patron saint of the childless, the infertile, the fractured pelvis which won't hold life to full term.

.....

2: Crybaby of Coyocan, martyr Frida delorosa, the virgin lacrimorum.

.....

1: La Huesuda, Lady of bones, she who is shattered and pieced together again.

3: Mayauel, goddess of all intoxicants, eater of sins.

F: I'm done.

2: Patron of love, beauty, flowers, and prostitutes.

F: I have passed through the 9 hells, K'iche shades, the dark rift visible in the Milky Way.

4: Our Lady of the Dead. She who protects, inspires, who exists in eternal darkness.

1: She who is four faces of the moon.

F: I have shed my skins.

Let me go, return to where I have always been. A place of the living, a place of the dead.

Let me return to the dark: forgetfulness.

All: La Santa Meurte, goddess of death. (*Fridas* 60-61)

Paying tributes to Kahlo, to the goddess of death, the play ends in a memorial note and concludes with her words in the last written passage of her diary, which were written a few days before her death on July 13, 1954, soon after turning 47:

F: Let the going be joyful.

And may I never come back. (*Fridas* 62)¹⁷

5. The Problematic of the Production—A Critical Assessment

Going against the customary practice of characterization and representation, the three Taipei performances of *The 9 Fridas* amazed viewers with their stunning aesthetic design and yet confused quite a few spectators who were seeking to discover Kahlo's true image and nature. Also, the production disappointed some theatregoers because it did not meet their expectations in the aspect of acting and overall directorship. Transgressing cultural boundaries, the production was an example of intercultural theatre. Oftentimes, in an international theatre or arts festival, foreign collaborators are invited because they are expected to add something distinct or special to the local theatre tradition. This desire to internationalize one's theatre, however, often does not take into account cultural differences and language barriers that rise to the fore when creating a production under the pressure of limited time and budget, and with people whom one does not know well. In the case of the 2014 Taipei Arts Festival, the artistic director Yi-Wei Keng did take the above concerns into consideration. For one thing, Zarrilli is no stranger to Taiwan theatre circles. He has been to Taiwan several times. For another, several of the cast members in this production are Zarrilli's former students; they know his approach and working methods well, and the language barrier is not a serious issue.¹⁸ Thus the opportunities for misunderstandings or miscommunications were assumed not to be a problem.

During the process of creating *The 9 Fridas*, the actors, playwright O'Reilly, and director Zarrilli worked together on good terms.¹⁹ But how come the result

¹⁷ In *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait*, these two lines are translated as "I hope the leaving is joyful—and I hope never to return" (285).

¹⁸ The cast members who are Zarrilli's former students in this production include Wai Hang Fung (馮蔚衡), Zi-heng Lin (林子恆), Ying-ni Ma (馬英妮), and Hui-Yun Chen (陳慧勻).

¹⁹ This statement is based on my personal observation and interviews with the actors. I went to observe the rehearsal of *The 9 Fridas* at Mobius Strip Theatre in August 2014 a couple of times and discovered that both Zarrilli and O'Reilly were very personable theatre workers. The atmosphere of the rehearsal room was agreeable most of the time.

of the production was not so satisfactory according to some reviews?²⁰ Some spectators liked the poetic lines delivered by the actors and found the elaborate sets and costumes fascinating. Others were troubled and confused by disjunctive images and words and found the performance disappointing. The majority of the critics, nevertheless, agreed that the production challenged the audience's perceptions in frustrating rather than productive ways. At its best, we can say the production had a mixed success. To examine the production process as a whole from script, translation, interpretation, to presentation, the three parties' collaboration was a mutually benefiting and illuminating intercultural interaction. Unlike Robert Wilson's two major intercultural collaborations with Taiwan actors and local production staffs (*Orlando* in 2009 Taiwan International Festival of Arts and *1433—The Grand Voyage* in 2010 Taiwan International Festival of Arts), Zarrilli did not have a huge foreign production team with him. Rather, what he had was a small local working group for *The 9 Fridas* project. Other than having a long-standing partnership with O'Reilly in several projects, Zarrilli this time mostly relied on devoted actors/students as well as Taiwanese professional theatre artists (costume designer, set designer, etc.).

Is this intercultural collaboration counter-productive? If the purpose of this project is to promote intercultural exchange or bartering, does the production team achieve its goals in the production of *The 9 Fridas*? According to Zarrilli, the goals of this project are twofold. First, the main purpose to invite him over to direct *The 9 Fridas* is to familiarize Taiwanese performers and audience with the psychophysical training approach. Second, the decision to stage O'Reilly's *The 9 Fridas* is aimed at offering a chance for Taiwanese actors and spectators alike to experience a poetic postdramatic script and the alternative dramaturgy that comes along with it (Zarrilli 2014).

From the workshop to the final production, we can witness that there was a close collaboration at work and detect good chemistry in the interactions of the three parties—Mobius Strip Theater, Zarrilli, and O'Reilly—involved.²¹ The purpose of Zarrilli's psychophysical training approach is to enable the performer to develop an intuitive awareness. For him, the ideal state of his approach is

²⁰ According to these reviewers, the production as a whole can only arouse their lukewarm interest. While recognizing the performance's aesthetic elements as well as poetic and exquisite language and narrative skills, they criticized the play's slow tempo, not very interesting acting style, voice articulation, etc. Please consult the reviews written by Ken-Chuan Yeh, Shanlu Yu, and Siraya Pai.

²¹ O'Reilly's contribution to the project is worth noting here. As a playwright, she was present throughout, including the three-day workshop, five-week rehearsal, and three-day performance. She kept revising the script until the last moment. In addition, she was invited by the British Council to give a workshop in writing and then a public lecture: "Representations of Impairment in the Western Theatrical Canon" on August 5, 2014.

for performer to achieve the state of “*Meyyu Kannakuka*,” literally “the body becomes all eyes” (2009: 1). As Zarrilli explains, when one’s “body is all eyes,” then like Lord Brahma “the thousand eyed,” “one is like an animal—able to see, hear, and respond immediately to any stimulus in the immediate environment” (2009: 1). To attain this ideal state, a step-by-step long-term practice is required. However, due to this project’s limited time and budget, Zarrilli’s actor training was only skin-deep because some actors were unable to develop well-integrated psychophysical skills in such a short period of time. As Zarrilli explains in a special interview when being asked the question of Taiwanese performers’ response to his psychophysical approach, he said that for those performers “who never or seldom ‘used the body’ to feel and learn, they need to spend longer time to adapt themselves to the approach” (2014).

Zarrilli’s psychophysical approach seeks to reconsider, refashion, and move beyond “the psychophysical” as defined by Stanislavski. It wants to animate the vital energy within (the Sanskrit *prana* or *prana-vayu*, or the Chinese *qi*, or Japanese and Korean *ki*) through the breath and integrated bodywork (2009: 18-20) and allow new energy-filled embodied performance to emerge. Once awakened and raised, this vital energy is, Zarrilli writes,

“qualitatively modulated and shaped for use within specific practices such as traditional medicine (massage, acupressure, etc.), martial arts, meditation, and performance. By undergoing training in specific modes of embodied practice, this energy associated with breath and its accompanying force or power enlivens and quickens one’s awareness, heightens one’s sensory acuity and perception, and thereby animates and activates the entire bodymind. This inner activity is resonant and therefore ‘felt.’” (2009: 19)

Again, the limited workshop and rehearsal time undercut what Zarrilli desired, for actors have difficulties awakening their energy and establishing a distinguishable acting style. Also, language barriers had been underestimated. Even though language communication was only a minor issue during the rehearsal, this situation did not guarantee that all other language-related problems were likely to resolve naturally. Since both Zarrilli and O’Reilly didn’t know Mandarin at all, they had no clear clue how the speech articulations sounded to local audience’s ears. Ken-Chuan Yeh, a local critic, comments that there was a serious defect in several actors’ voice presentation, for they used an old-fashioned and stereotypical stagy voice which was not only full of mannerism but also very detached from colloquial expressions. Shanlu Yu, another local critic, also points out that what alienated the audience from the performance was mainly the nondramatic and monotonous narrative style of the production.

Perhaps the three parties’ concomitant assumption about the ease of mutual understanding and friendship created unrealistic expectations of immediate re-

ception across the stage using Mandarin as the medium of communication. Judging from its characteristics, this production was not a physical theater. Rather, it was a script-based theater. Problems arose from the rendering of foreign culture, here the Mexican culture, and the presentation of this culture in Mandarin. Also local audience had to overcome several barriers in a row which included knowledge about the life and work of Frida Kahlo, Mexican culture, O'Reilly's alternative dramaturgy, the lack of characterization, foreign languages, and the uncharacteristic voice articulation. Speaking of foreign languages, another unique feature of the production was that it was purposefully meant to be polyglossia, constantly shifting between Mandarin, English, Spanish, and even Mayan language. Since the Taipei production was a Mandarin production, the use of Spanish from time to time not only disrupted the unity of Chinese but also created an exotic feeling. Spanish was used mostly to name or introduce special aspect of Mexican culture, such as death "la pelona," Frida's nickname "Friducha," the place of fear "Xibalba, the K'iche Shades," etc. One special occasion in the play was to broadcast Kahlo's manifesto on art and politics in both Spanish and Chinese at the end of Scene 16. At other times, Spanish songs, such as *Cielito lindo*, or songs sung by Chavela Vargas were introduced.

To sum up, the production of *The 9 Fridas*, binding disparate styles and engaging two or more languages, cultures, and world views, blended and jumbled too many inconsistent elements together. As a result, the Mandarin premiere in Taipei could not create positive resonance and ties with the local audience, even though the two invited artists, Zarrilli and O'Reilly, were theatre workers who were willing to take into account the cultural and language differences of the people that they were working with or those who were interested in viewing their work.

Epilogue: "VIVA LA VIDA"

Eight days before she died, Kahlo wrote "VIVA LA VIDA" (Live the Life), her name "Frida Kahlo," the place of execution and the date "Coyoacán 1954 Mexico," on the melon's red pulp of a still life with watermelons. Widely believed to be Kahlo's last painting, this *VIVA LA VIDA* is all about the celebration of life and embracing of death, despite what happens in one's life. Also, watermelon, a frequent subject in Mexican art, is a popular symbol in the holiday *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead). In the same manner, the ending of O'Reilly's script also echoes this attitude toward life and death, seeing "death as origin" (Fuentes 23) and a divine companion of our life.

In this paper, I analyze the script and the production of *The 9 Fridas*. In order to expose O'Reilly's dramaturgy and examine Zarrilli's psychophysical approach to acting, I chart some trajectories—subjectiles, textiles, actiles, and affectiles—in the midst of the performative rhizome in hoping to identify different registers that respond to Kahlo's life and work and provide a glimmer of insight into the production. In retrospect, O'Reilly in her script subverts and critiques former views of Kahlo which focus more on aesthetic and traumatic dimensions of her work and life. Her purpose is to reclaim Kahlo's multiplicity and do away with Kahlo's stereotypes and to celebrate her otherness instead. Although O'Reilly can hardly be said to be the only one who celebrates and promotes Kahlo's life and art by adopting an alternative dramaturgy, she is no doubt one of the first who searches insistently for dramatic forms that would not only be innovative but also creative. Replacing dramatic representation with postdramatic performance, the production of *The 9 Fridas* puts great emphasis on theater as “process”—a rite of passage rejecting any fixed and finished roles.

Kept, concealed and yet exhibited, the secret art of the production lies in the skillful arrangement and coordination of different trajectories—subjectiles, textiles, actiles, and affectiles—at work. It shatters audience's habitual gaze and unsettles their expectations before the flowing and yet fragmentary spectacle and *mise-en-scène* by exhibiting the tensions created by the porosity of the trajectories. On the one hand, it resonates with many aspects of postmodernist or postdramatic thinking. From a theatre of images to a theatre of mixed media, the production uses and combines heterogeneous styles, and renounces traditional dramatic form which focuses on characterization and the progression of a plot. Its alternative dramaturgy provides an invaluable case study for us to reflect on postdramatic aesthetics and politics because in the play we find no obvious organizing principles but decentered subjectiles and its variants at work. In the meantime, I question the efficacy of Zarrilli's psychophysical actor training method, especially when the method is conducted and executed under the commercial mode nowadays. Also, like some reviewers of the play, I have reservations about some aspects of the directorial and the overall *mise-en-scène* in the project.

If the purpose of the theatre is to present music, images, scenes, and themes in a free-flowing manner, and not to tell a story or teach lessons to the audience in an obligatory way, we probably can conclude that the production of *The 9 Fridas* has somehow achieved this goal because it has left a lot of spaces for us to wander or wonder, and provided us with some interesting food for thought about what a theatre can be.

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工作中的 Subjectiles： 《九面芙烈達》的秘密藝術

摘要

《九面芙烈達》是2014年台北藝術節的主要劇目之一，於該年九月5-7日在台北水源劇場由莫比斯圓環創作公社協同香港話劇團製作演出。本齣戲劇本係由劇作家凱特·歐萊莉（Kaite O’ Reilly）執筆，並由知名導演菲利普·薩睿立（Phillip Zarrilli）執導，全劇試圖從多方面的角度來形塑畫家芙烈達·卡蘿（Frida Kahlo）（1907-1954）的生平與創作。本齣戲所召喚的遠遠超越藝術節藝術總監耿一偉所設定的主題「觀看」，將觀眾的注意力導向筆者所謂的「卡蘿的 subjectiles」。本論文所關注的對象芙烈達·卡蘿是一個有多重面貌與層次的女人，所欲處理的《九面芙烈達》是一個想要提供另類詮釋和芙烈達新面目的文本與演出。「subjectile」這個概念對本論文的整體架構而言是不可或缺的，作為一個重要的批評設計，此概念既是主題研究的方法，也是美學探索的工具，藉由此概念，我們可以仔細的檢視該戲的劇本與演出對芙烈達的生命與藝術所作的詮釋與表演。首先，本論文在「序言」裡將探索芙烈達的 subjectiles，其目的不只是強調芙烈達生命、繪畫與遺產的多層次複雜性，也在描繪《九面芙烈達》這個戲所投射出來的拋物線。接著，在所有的層次與 subjectiles 中，筆者打算找出《九面芙烈達》裡的三個獨特面向來進行討論，亦即這齣戲的文本、表演和情感，其目的不外乎希望我們能在劇本與演出以及芙烈達的生命與繪畫裡讀出新意。最後本論文將試圖評估《九面芙烈達》的製作與表演。

關鍵字：菲利普·薩睿立、凱特·歐萊莉、芙烈達·卡蘿、《九面芙烈達》、subjectile、身心合一演技

