“Performance as Text: The Legacy of Post-1960s Japanese Theatre”

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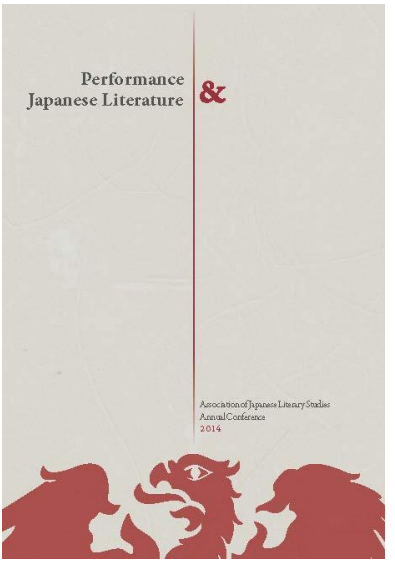

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Performance as Text: The Legacy of Post-1960s Japanese Theatre

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Pray tell me Ben, where doth thy mystery lurke
What others call a play you call a worke?
-A response to the publication of
Ben Jonson's "Works" (1616)

The theatre is the only place in the world where a gesture, once made, can never be made the same way twice. … It is neither a book nor a work but an energy.
-Jacques Derrida[1]

In the fall, when I first gave a version of this paper at the AJLS in Chicago, I gave credit to Frank Hoff, one of my professors at the University of Toronto in the early 1970s, for whetting my interest in Japanese theatre. A few weeks later I learned that Frank had died in Toronto, after complications suffered from a fall. It seems fitting to remember him here for his immense contribution to the field of Japanese performance studies. Frank's background, like mine, had been in what used to be called Classics (Greek and Roman Studies), but two years' service (1954-1956) in Japan as a naval officer changed the course of his life. At Harvard he received an AM in classical philology, but switched to comparative literature for his PhD, which he received also from Harvard, in 1966. As a Fulbright Scholar he had studied under Honda Yasuji at Waseda University from 1961 to 1964, and after three years of teaching at Princeton, he returned to Japan in 1968, where he taught at Sophia University and Tokyo Women's College until taking up a position in East Asian Studies at the University of Toronto. In Tokyo, Frank was a good friend of David Goodman, who was then publishing *Concerned Theatre Japan*, a seminal record of the cultural ferment happening in underground (*angura*) Japanese theatre at that time. (Sadly, David too passed away, in 2011.) *Concerned Theatre Japan* published "The Life Structure of Noh," in which Frank Hoff and Willi Flindt introduced Yokomichi Mario's analysis of *nō* theatre as "a performance event and not as a genre of literature."[2] Frank's work on *nō* anticipated the "performative turn" taken by scholars like Karen Brazell and Monica Bethe in their fine-grained analyses of *nō* plays like *Yamamba*, but like David Goodman he was equally interested in the ways that Japanese

[1] Jacques Derrida, "The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 233-34.
[2] Frank Hoff and Willi Flindt, "The Life Structure of Noh: An English Version of Yokomichi Mario's Analysis of the Structure of Noh," *Concerned Theatre Japan* 2:4 (1973), 212.

theatre and culture of the 1960s were overturning our own attitudes toward the cultural hegemonies of the West as Japan was asserting its own newfound sense of identity in the work of avant-garde artists like Kara Jūrō.

Hitherto my understanding of drama had been largely text-based, but Frank's classes—which veered from scripts for plays, to the popular songs of Japan's middle ages, to newspaper clippings of police raids on the Victory Burlesque House on Spadina Avenue in Toronto, discussion of rock concerts, Lou Reed, and Mick Jagger—were a heady and disorienting brew. Frank also introduced me to the work of Richard Schechner, now considered the "father" of Performance Studies. Schechner and his epigones expanded the definition of theatre to include practically all forms of communal expression, from music and dance to religious ritual, parades, happenings, concerts, ball games, and political rallies. The list goes on. Academics followed the path blazed by the sixties generation, whom Terayama Shūji had urged to "dump the books and hit the streets."

Many cultures tend to denigrate theatre for its ephemerality and valorize what purports to be permanent: the monumental, the textual. In his own time even Shakespeare sought artistic immortality first with his sonnets. When his friend Ben Jonson published his *Works*, in 1616, someone wrote:

> Pray tell me Ben, where doth thy mystery lurke
> What others call a play you call a worke?[3]

About a century later, Chikamatsu would be the first Japanese playwright to claim authorship on a playtext, but it was not until the nineteenth century that anyone seriously considered drama as a literary genre in Japan, and then only under the influence of Western literary theories. Modernity in Japan marked a literary turn, a rejection of the histrionic, public culture of the Edo playhouses and teahouses, for what Maeda Ai described as the practice of private reading.

Another perennial critique of theatre has to do with its essential artificiality. For all Shakespeare's talk of holding "a mirror up to nature," it was never meant to be real. It has always been an act, and hence calls into question and even undermines the ways in which we assert our identity, serving as a counter-discourse to dominant theories of selfhood, truth, and appearance. Thanks to Judith Butler, we now know that gender is a performance; but in the theatre since earliest times, gender—indeed all character—was role-play. Identity, sexual and otherwise, was ever provisional.

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[3] C.H. Herford, Evelyn & Percy Simpson, eds. (*Ben Jonson*, IX, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902. p.13) goes on to note:

> "*Thus answer'd by a friend in Mr.*
> *Johnsons defence.*
> The authors friend thus for the author sayes,
> *Bens* plays are works, when others works are plaies."

Epigrams 269 and 270, *Wits Recreations*, 1640.

It is significant that early twentieth century European encounters with Asian theatre, via people like Eisenstein, Meyerhold, Brecht and Artaud, initiated their own "performative turn" in Western theatre studies and practice. In this respect, theatre would mirror developments in other arts like literature, music, and the visual arts. By the early twentieth century, European drama had realized a degree of verisimilitude that emulated the photograph's ability to capture the essence of lived reality, but just as the photograph undermined the hegemony of Beaux-Arts realist painting, so would film outdo whatever could be accomplished in the realm of stage realism. Rather in the same way that Van Gogh, Gauguin, or Picasso turned their eyes to African or Asia-Pacific arts, European theatre artists would seek solutions to artistic problems in the non-Western performance traditions of Balinese dance, Chinese opera, or Japanese kabuki.

Though Antonin Artaud was certainly not the first to do so, his writings have informed the work of many of the most creative people in contemporary Western theatre: not only Ariane Mnouchkine and her Paris-based Théâtre de Soleil, but also Peter Brook, Robert Wilson, and Robert Lepage. The influence of Artaud and Asian theatre has hit the mainstream with director Julie Taymore's Tony-Award winning production of *The Lion King*. Many other contemporary theatre artists, like Simon McBurney, consciously employ traditional Japanese theatre techniques. The marvelous puppets in South Africa's Handspring Puppet Company's award-winning *War Horse* are inspired by the *bunraku*. Most of these influences have been, however, from *traditional* Asian theatres. "The theatre is Oriental," wrote Artaud. There has been a necessarily Orientalist impulse to many of the cultural appropriations of Asian theatre in modern Western stagecraft.

At the centre of Artaud's radical critique of modern Western theatre was its focus on language and the mimetic function of drama. "How is it that Western theatre cannot conceive of theatre under any other aspect than dialogue form?," Artaud asks.[4] "Whoever said that theatre was made to define a character, to resolve conflicts of a human, emotional order, or a present-day, psychological nature, such as those which monopolise current theatre?"[5] Artaud wished to restore to the theatre the sense of "the stage as a tangible, physical space that needs to be … allowed to speak its own concrete language"[6], what he called a Theatre of Cruelty "where violent physical images pulverise, mesmerise the audience's sensibilities, caught in the drama as if in a vortex of higher forces." [7] Art was not an imitation of life, but rather "life is the imitation of a transcendent principle which art puts us in communication with once again."[8] And in the

[4] Antonin Artaud, *Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), 25.
[5] Ibid, 28.
[6] Ibid, 25.
[7] Ibid, 63.
[8] Artaud *Oeuvres Completes* 4, p. 310, quoted in Jacques Derrida. "The Theatre of Cruelty and the

modern world, Artaud claimed, this sense of the sacred can only be accessed through the body.

The restitution of physicality as a central feature of the theatrical experience, and of theatre's resistance to standing for anything other than itself, are Artaud's cardinal contributions to the theory of the modern stage. Thus, as Jacques Derrida writes in his seminal study of Artaud's work, "whatever can be said of the body can be said of the theatre."[9] Derrida goes on to write: "The theatre is the only place in the world where a gesture, once made, can never be made the same way twice. … It is neither a book nor a work but an energy,"[10] thus claiming for theatre its unique artistic quality—its temporality—which has hitherto been the very thing excluding it from the realm of serious art. This ephemerality is as much related to the mortality of the human body as to the temporality of performance itself.

Derrida identifies in Artaud's ideas a fundamental critique of the Western humanist and logocentric metaphysic. Western theatre continues to be dominated by "a primary *logos* which does not belong to the theatrical site and governs it from a distance," a pseudo-theological system with a godlike author and directors and actors who are "interpretive slaves" in service of the text and performing for a passive public who are "voyeurs" and "consumers."[11]The re-theatricalization of theatre that Artaud and his epigones advocated was an attempt to rediscover precisely what theatre can express which other art forms cannot. In short, modern Western theatre reform has been fundamentally a search for form itself. Ariane Mnouchkine writes,

> We Westerners have only created realistic forms. That is to say, we haven't created a form at all, in the true sense. The moment one uses the word "form" in connection with the theatre, there is already a sense of Asia.[12]

Standing inside the tradition of realism, it may be difficult to see the form that the mimetic takes. (All artistic expression, even the most realistic, takes some form or other.)

If modern Western theatre has been a search for form, a quality identified as quintessentially "Asian," modern Japanese theatre during the first half of the twentieth century sought from Western realism a liberation from traditional form and convention. In short, a dialectic of mimesis and its critique has been at the root of most of the major trends in Japanese theatre for at least

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Closure of Representation," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 254.

[9] Derrida, 232.

[10] Ibid, 247.

[11] Ibid, 235.

[12] Ariane Mnouchkine, interview in *Catalyse* 4, June-August; quoted in Patrice Pavis. *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, (London, New York: Routledge,1996), p. 97.

a hundred years. On the one hand, traditional Japanese theatre can be seen to epitomize the Artaudian ideal of a pure and total work of stage art that was simultaneously sensual and metaphysical. By subordinating itself to language and representation, modern Japanese drama came under the domination of a *logos* where the stage became a reflection of the real world and the forum for the expression of ideas about that world. Human character, emotion and struggle became the focus and subject of *shingeki*—of modern drama and theatre in Japan.

Shingeki's hold on modern theatre was broken during the 1960s by people like Terayama Shūji, Kara Jūrō, Hijikata Tatsumi, and Suzuki Tadashi, who attempted to recapture the physicality and eroticism of early kabuki and other traditional forms of Japanese performance. To some extent, this trend was a "reverse Orientalism" (or *gyaku yunyū*). Certainly Artaud's ideas, not least his appreciation of Asian theatre, resonated with many in the Japanese theatrical avant-garde in the 1960s. Suzuki Tadashi, for one, admitted that he had no particular interest in *nō* theatre until he saw Kanze Hisao perform on the same bill at a theatre festival in France in 1972. (He was no doubt impressed by the enthusiastic reaction of French audiences to Kanze's performance.) Since then, much of Suzuki's acting method has been predicated on reviving what he calls the "animal energy" generated in the lower body—the hips, legs, and feet—by traditional Japanese dance theatre. To a large extent, the Japanese avant-garde foregrounded performance and rejected the notion of drama as a literary form; at best, the text was no more than a blueprint for performance. What is more, these plays eschew the realism and humanism of *shingeki* in favor of fantasy and myth in an attempt to make sense out of a contemporary world rendered absurd by the war and its aftermath.[13] In short, by way of a rejection of *shingeki* logocentrism and a considered appraisal of the avant-garde theories of Europeans like Artaud, post-*shingeki* was a nativist movement that attempted to restore, in a new form, the mythic and erotic spirit of traditional Japanese theatre. It was felt that only through myth, dreams and fantasy could Japanese theatre confront its modern history.

The major contribution of the traditional theatre to avant-garde performances in the 1960s was a foregrounding of the actor's body as an essential part of the theatrical experience. The restitution of the carnal (*nikutai* was the term favored over *shintai*) as a cardinal feature of the theatrical experience is one of the greatest legacies of modern performance, and in many respects the Japanese avant-garde was a global trendsetter. A disenchantment with old ideologies, both foreign and native, made many in the Japanese theatre at this time turn to the body as a pure and immediate site for the exploration of identity. Even the more literarily inclined playwrights, like Betsuyaku Minoru, felt it

[13] This tendency is described in detail in two books by David G. Goodman: *After Apocalypse: Four Japanese Plays of Hiroshima and Nagasaki* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) and *Drama and Culture in the 1960s: The Return of the Gods* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1988).

essential to write scripts that infused a sense of immediacy and raw theatricality into the performance of their work.

Undoubtedly, modern Japanese theatre's greatest legacy to the world is *butō*, the dance form created by artists like Hijikata Tatsumi and Ohno Kazuo in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Both artists had studied modern Western dance, particularly the German expressionist *Neue Tanz*, but increasingly they sought a form more congenial to the Japanese physique. Hijikata later termed his dance style "Tōhoku kabuki," after his native region. He felt that *butō* epitomized the physique, postures, gestures, and habitual actions of the Japanese, people shaped by an agrarian life spent cultivating rice. Many artists fell under Hijikata's spell in the 1960s. One of Kara Jūrō's lead actors, Maro Akaji, trained with him and in 1972 founded the still active dance troupe, Great Ship of the Desert (Dai rakudakan). (He had a cameo in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill*.) Like Hijikata, Kara wanted to return theatre to the carnivalesque, risqué roots of early kabuki, in which the actor was an outcast gypsy, a "riverbed beggar" (*kawaramono*) thumbing his nose at the status quo. If *shingeki* was governed by reason and a preoccupation with psychological portrayal of character, *angura* regarded the body as a site to express whatever language had repressed: the unconscious, the erotic, the instinctive, the immediate, the violent, the natural. Implicit in Kara's notion of the "privileged body" was a duality in which the actor was both social pariah and a medium through which the audience's dreams and desires could be manifested. That is, the performer became a kind of shaman whose metamorphoses and epiphanies on stage created, for all to see, something mythic, ambivalently divine, or demonic, an ambiguous site for nostalgia, longing, transcendence, and even derision.

A restoration of the erotic, carnivalesque spirit of early kabuki was one of the chief achievements of 1960s theatre, especially in the work of such artists as Hijikata, Terayama, and Kara. Next to *butō*, Suzuki Tadashi's method of actor's training has become modern Japanese theatre's most successful export. Actors from around the world have trained with Suzuki and the American director Ann Bogart in workshops for Suzuki exercises.

Like Suzuki, the playwright and director Ōta Shōgo found in *nō*'s deliberate pace and stylized gestures an inspiration for his own intense performance style. Although Ōta founded his Theatre of Transformation in 1968, his first work to garner major critical attention was *The Legend of Komachi* (*Komachi fūden*, 1976), a work inspired by a cycle of *nō* plays about the Heian poet and beauty Ono no Komachi and performed on a traditional *nō* stage. In contrast to the speed, noise, and garrulousness of modern life, Ōta wished to restore the sense of silence, tranquility, and deliberation to theatre that he had discovered in *nō*.

The fundamental elements of the theatrical experience—the text, the identity of the actor, the use of performance space, and the relationship between actors and audience— all came under intense scrutiny during the 1960s. To

some degree, the matter of where to perform was a practical and economic consideration: few could afford to rent anything more than the "little theatres" (often no more than studios or rooms over cafés and restaurants), and many were alienated from the *shingeki* system, which would have given access to larger theatres. But it soon became evident that this lack of conventional performance space provided opportunities foreclosed to a theatre of realism, with its proscenium arch and "fourth wall" separating audiences from the actions and actors on stage. For Kara and Satoh Makoto, performance in a tent provided a womb-like intimacy between actor and audience that emulated the experience of the circus sideshow or early kabuki. Terayama's later works (often written in collaboration with Kishida Rio) became less text-based and were more attempts to design novel and disturbing events, like "happenings," intended to break down the boundaries between reality and fiction, actor and observer, while involving the audience in the performance. Terayama, like Kara, used public spaces like parks and city streets to demonstrate his theory that theatre, art, and culture at large should "infect" citizens, passing from one person to the next like a contagion. Even though Terayama never articulated a coherent political stance (and in this respect, he resembled Kara as well), he believed that theatre was a place to stage a revolution that was simultaneously cognitive, artistic, and social.

Various styles of theatre since the 1960s have attempted to address, if not resolve, a sense that contemporary Japanese are, mentally and physically, divided selves. Since the 1980s, this trend has produced a number of powerful and even violent performance styles that straddle the worlds of dance and multimedia performance art, such as Miyagi Satoshi's Ku Na'uka, Shimizu Shinjin's Theatre of Deconstruction (Gekidan kaitaisha), the Kyoto-based collective Dumb Type, and the Osaka-based company Reformation Group (Ishinha). Some feel that the future of Japanese theatre will be traced less in dialogue drama than in dance, which in the past twenty years has departed from *butō* and is now attempting to capture the essence of what it is to be human in the technologized world today.[14] The relationship of language to the body will always be a central theme and challenge for practitioners of live theatre, and in the work of contemporary playwrights like Okada Toshiki (who scores works that are both drama *and* dance), audiences in Japan and, increasingly, abroad can see the difficulties that we all face in negotiating body and soul.

[14] See, for example, Tadashi Uchino, *Crucible Bodies: Postwar Japanese Performance from Brecht to the New Millennium.* Seagull Books, 2009.

[Parts of this essay have appeared, in earlier forms, in M. Cody Poulton, "World History and Modern Japanese Drama: The Case of Hirata Oriza," in James C. Baxter, ed. *Nihonjin no kachi kihan to hisutoriogurafii* (Japanese values, norms and historiography). Kyoto: International Center for Japanese Studies, 2003, pp. 339-346; and in J. Thomas Rimer, Mitsuya Mori, M. Cody Poulton, eds. *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Japanese Drama*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2014.]