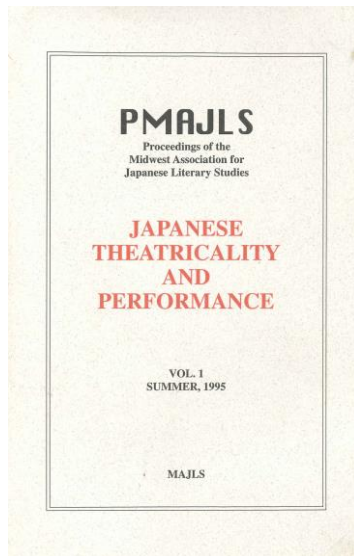


“Japan: The Presentational Urge”

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JAPAN: THE PRESENTATIONAL URGE

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Most countries experience some kind of presentational imperative: the urge toward that form of ritual which we call theatre indeed seems universal.

At the same time each country has its own ritualistic needs and consequently its own theatrical codifications. In any comparison among these I feel that Japan would rank high, that as a culture it experiences a strong need for ritual and hence exhibits a wide range of its theatrical manifestations.

Among the various origin myths I think only the Japanese offers a paradigm for theatre. You are all familiar with the circumstances as related in the *Kojiki*. Amaterasu Ōmikami has in a fit of pique retired into her cave. Since she is the Great Divinity Illuminating Heaven, a translation of her name, she leaves her world in darkness. She is lured out again by the feigned merrymaking, dances and the like, performed by the other deities. Curious, she peers from her shelter and is drawn forth to again illuminate her world. It is a presentation, a performance, which is the salvation of the land. The theatrical paradigm is in place from the very first.

Japan is certainly not alone in creating such myths as this, but I think it is very nearly the only culture to so plainly label its solar myth as performance. The goddess is fooled, the merry-making is feigned--it is all false--and this is approved.

While it is not unusual for the legends of other cultures to include some kind of performance (Judas kissing Jesus is a

dumb-show for the centurions) it is highly unusual that this be approved--given the blessing, as it were, of both Shintō church and Yamato state. And so I think it can be said that Japan early expressed a theatrical urge and has continued to manifest this in much of its culture.

A familiar example is native Japanese architecture. Though much influenced by that of Korea and China, this way of making a building is--as many have noted--rather like making a stage. The reference is to the traditional Japanese house which many earlier observers saw as a performing area. It is raised off the ground, like a stage, it has no fourth wall (indeed it has no walls at all), and its interior divisions can, like stage sets, be moved about at will.

Admittedly one cannot make too much of this because such structures share much directly with domestic architecture elsewhere, but inside this theatrical house is a smaller theatre which might be unique to Japan.

This is the *tokonoma*, an alcove in the main room of the traditional house which serves as a place of presentation--nowadays mainly of a flower arrangement or a scroll, or both in some kind of artful juxtaposition.

To be sure there are Eastern antecedents, and the West has something like this in its furniture of display, the what-not, the china-closet, and so on. In Japan, however, the theatrical analogy is much stronger. Not only are there featured players--the scroll, the flower arrangement, sometimes the valuable vase as well--but also there are frequent changes of bill as the seasons pass.

The *tokonoma* as stage has thus built into it the spatial and temporal considerations which limit and define the theatre itself. It might thus be used as indication of theatrical urge in Japan.

Another might be the way in which domestic nature is presented. The Japanese garden is well-known, indeed nearly notorious, for being actually contrived spectacle.

That stone is moved over three feet, and this bamboo stand is moved back five. The pebbles or sand is brought in at much expense and the view of the distant mountain is purloined and called borrowed scenery. This then is the natural garden.

One might argue that European and Middle-Eastern gardens are even more constructed, with their balanced symmetry and their geometrical intentions. And so they are, but the inventors and admirers of these gardens never called them natural and this is just what the Japanese assume theirs to be.

Nature has been presented. Tidied up, stylized, it has been made--as the old garden manuals have it--to express nature better than nature itself does. It is presumed that the integrity of any original does not exist. As in any dramatic presentation the only integrity is that of performance.

Not only does nature in the form of the Japanese garden become spectacle--as in, for example, the garden at Ryōanji--but it also becomes the theatrical experience itself--as in the Edo tour gardens where vistas are disclosed, scenes hidden and then revealed in a manner most reminiscent of the stage itself.

Even more theatrical is the art of *ikebana*. Here the stage is prepared (the *tokonoma* or its modern equivalent), the presentation has its rules (never mind that these "living flowers" are now dead) and--as in naturalist theater--the aim is to make the real more real than reality itself.

One could find many more examples of a pure presentational urge in Japan but, leaving unmentioned many, we might to turn to one of the most recent and most spectacular.

This is the annexation of an entire theatrical world. The paradigm is, of course, Disneyland, which is not Japanese at all, but the success of the concept and the ingenious ways in which it has been nationalized would indicate to what an extent the concept satisfies the Japanese theatrical urge.

One is more than familiar with the principle. The area (city, country, "It's a Small World" itself) is miniaturized and made portable. In the process it is simplified and domesticated. Finally it is ready to display.

It will be seen that the Disney imperative like so many post-modern idea shares much with traditional Japan--home of the *bonsai*, the *rikka*, and the domestic display area. It is not therefore surprising that more theatrical elements of Disneyland have already been made a part of present-day Japanese culture. To indicate but a few of these alternate performance worlds which have appeared in the last five years.

Japan created its first small world in Sasebo's Holland Village, an island built replica of Deshima, home of the first foreigners, and it was here that the Japanese could visit a part of his own culture. So popular was this venture that the parent company later opened up Huis Ten Bosche, and enormous 152 hectares of canals, windmills, tulips and wooden shoes. There are "European-style" hotels and those who wish can buy an on-site Dutch house right in the park and live the life of the *Nederlandisch burger* without ever having left Japan. Also there is, naturally, none of the dinge and danger of, say, Amsterdam. The original Dutchman could from his island view Japan as spectacle, now the Japanese can view Holland as spectacle from the comfort and safety of their own land. During its first year Huis Ten Bosche had nearly four million well-paying customers.

Shortly, Ashibetsu in Hokkaido--having lost its coal-mining industry--decided to go into the theme-park business. Canada World opened--Japan's largest lavender field, a complete St. Edwards's Island-like Ann of Green Gables Land, and seven resident Canadians quilting, playing the fiddle, chopping wood.

In Niigata's Russian Village one can, without the difficulty and danger of actually visiting Russia, see the Suzdai Cathedral, eat pirozhki, drink borsch, and enjoy a folk song and dance troupe and the talents of three performing seals directed from Lake Baikal.

Over in Shingomura in Aomori one may also visit the last resting place of Jesus Christ. It was actually his brother, Iskiri, who was crucified, you see. Christ himself escaped to Japan. He married a Shingomura woman named Yumiko, had three daughters, and lived to a happy one hundred six years of age. It is his "descendants" who have opened up this Christ's Tomb tourist attraction.

There is Nixe Castle in Noboribetsu, a full-scale replica of the castle and hometown of Hans Christian Andersen; Shuzenji's Britain Land, a slice of 17th-century British countryside complete with homes and shops. In Kure there is Portopialand which includes all of Portugal's Costa del Sol in some form or other.

Plus a number of New-Zealand-Valleys in Hiroshima, Yamaguchi, and Shikoku, which specialize in sheep shows, an exotic entertainment in non-mutton-eating Japan, and in addition the Tochigi Edomura, Hello Kitty Land, Yomiuri Land, the Yokohama Wild Blue, and the Chiba Hawaiian Center (with wave machine), etc.

Then, for those in a hurry, there is the newly opened Tōbu World Square where you can see 1/25 scale models of over a

hundred of the world's most famous buildings all at once. The Taj Mahal is next to the Empire State Building which is next to Saint Peter's which is next to the Eiffel Tower, and so on. All are complete down to the smallest visible detail--they were made by the Tōhō Eizō Bujutsu, the people who gave us *Godzilla*--and they offer the world at a glance.

Though the onlooker at these spectacles may be reminded of Dr. Johnson's maxim that nothing is more hopeless than a scheme of merriment, the financial success of these various artificial foreign lands within the safe confines of Yamato has proved their viability for the Japanese.

It also says something about the Japanese audience for such spirited theatrical recreations, and about the presentational urge itself. A part of its imperative is certainly acquisition, whether this be the reappearance of the Sun Goddess, the distant mountain view, or Anne of Green Gables Land.

But a part, the part which concerns us here today, is that vital need for ritual which has resulted in a culture which is, I believe, distinguished by what I have called the presentational urge. I have attempted to at least indicate this nexus and I would now ask our participants to illuminate the subject itself.