

“Report on Round table Discussion: The Teaching of Japanese Theater and Film”

James O’Brien

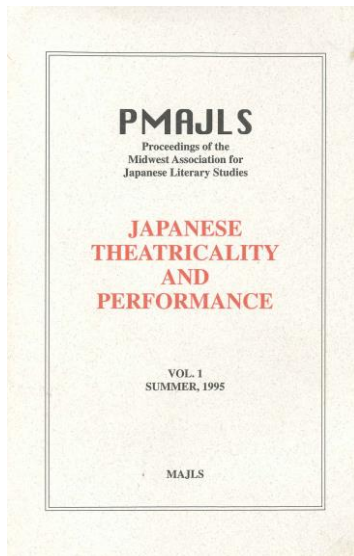
William Matheson

Marvin Marcus 

Phyllis Lyons 

Sumie Jones 

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## THE TEACHING OF JAPANESE THEATER AND FILM

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WILLIAM MATHESON, *Washington University*  
MARVIN MARCUS, *Washington University*  
PHYLLIS LYONS, *Northwestern University*  
SUMIE JONES, *Indiana University*

*The round table on the teaching of Japanese theater and film was chaired by Professor James O'Brien and participated in by Professors William Matheson and Marvin Marcus from Washington University-St. Louis, Professor Phyllis Lyons of Northwestern University, and Professor Sumie Jones of Indiana University. Programs organized by the panelists at the above three institutions were introduced in detail to the audience. The description below summarizes the panelists' reports on courses:*

**Matheson:** At Washington University, we have a course called "Confrontation," in which Chinese, Japanese and Comp Lit faculty team-teach and cover genres of poetry, prose narrative, theater, and so forth. It has a sequential structure so that, for instance, Chinese poetry, Japanese poetry, and Western pieces are examined in a sequential order.

**Marcus:** In the catalogue, we have course listings for Japanese drama and theater, thanks to Thomas Rimer's effort. However, since he left the university and I came in, those particular courses have never been taught. I once offered a

course on Japanese films, thanks to the school administration's request and support, but I taught the course rather poorly by preparing at such a pace as to view one film ahead of the audience. My experience of teaching the dramatic genre is thus limited, and it is with the Comp Lit program that the teaching of this genre has been developed at our school.

**Matheson:** A quick look at the comparative approach to Japanese and Western drama is like this. First, we set up productive modules to work with by collecting Western adaptations of Japanese dramatic pieces. What we can do with Noh, for example? Then, we find a certain number of Western pieces: a reworking of *Sumidagawa*, poetry by Yeats, a drama piece by Claudel, a Noh play by Wallace Stevens, and so forth. You can also work on influence of imagery through a comparison of, for instance, animal images between Kabuki and Western pieces. You can learn from reading Zeami's criticism by comparing its subtle quality with Western dramaturgy. Furthermore, you can examine historical intertextual play exercised by Japanese texts: For instance, Aoi's image created by the *Tale of Genji* is transformed by Zeami's piece, and is later modified further by Mishima's modern Noh play, etc. We can learn a lot about Japanese theater through this kind of comparative approach.

**Lyons:** I am interested in dramatic materials because they provide students with the practical experience of seeing. This practice is particularly important in order to critically examine the issue of translation, which questions who we are when we interact with two different mediums. At Northwestern, we have a course entitled, "Conflict of Reading" in the catalogue. I believe that such concerns about the experience of reading

can be applied to, and further examined through, the study of presentational genre. Here is the outline of the course I would like to teach: First, a comparison may be made between the *Old Testament* and *Kojiki*: They are both rich in cultural prototypes and present stories performatively and secularly. A second list may be between *Chanson de Roland* and *Heike monogatari* because of their popular heroism, filled with cultural icons still affecting today's respective cultures. The third comparison will be between Shakespeare and Kurosawa, which will shed light on the extension of the translatability between largely differentiated texts in terms of time, space, and cultural contexts.

Then, the transtextual component can be introduced: comparison can be made between Chikamatsu's *Shinjū ten no amijima* and its film version by Shinoda and Mishima's *Gogo no eikō* (The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea) and its British film adaptation. The last unit will be a non-textual and transcultural comparison between Itami's *Tampopo* and George Stevens' *Shane*. In Itami's film, we see an interesting reappropriation and parodization of the Western cowboy image, which was already japanized through the image of *samurai*, heroically stylized by Kurosawa and others.

In addition, I would combine elements of another course I taught on the subject of war. Colonialism at large will be viewed as an act of cultural warfare and compared, in particular, to films by Japanese directors on WWII and American films on the Vietnam War. This plan contains too much material to cover in our quarter system, but I would like to have a course from this kind of thematic perspective, with a list of materials like the above.

**Jones:** I would like to address here technical problems related to the availability of Japanese film. As a Film Studies faculty member at Indiana University, I have opportunities to teach film courses, as well as courses including films for Comp Lit and East Asian seminars. Japanese films have posed particular technical problems in our teaching in this country. Japanese film is usually included as a part of the world cinema type of course, or as a part of the courses dealing with Japanese culture. It is rather rare to teach Japanese films to students who thoroughly comprehend the film without subtitles. Therefore, we desperately need quality materials written on Japanese films on the one hand, and a number of subtitled Japanese films. Compared with films from European countries, too few Japanese films are available with decent subtitles. I have spoken with people from foundations and other fellowship agencies in Japan on this problem. They have started to realize that their leadership is needed to improve the situation in this area. I hope to see a lot of progress made in the near future.

Another technical issue is related to the distribution system of Japanese movies. Rentals on 16mm films are sometimes exceedingly high. In addition, certain films must be shown on 35mm with a wide scope lens (as Kurosawa, for one, insists his must be) costing several times more than the rental of 16mm films. The rental budget for one film course (including 13 to 18 films) is usually between \$1000 and \$1500. You cannot show Kurosawa's *Ran* for \$650 with this sort of budget. Because of the rental situation, I teach a Japanese film course only when I have a special grant. Because distributors make so much profit from rentals, no one is willing to sell films. Universities would rather invest in buying films for unlimited use, but have no chance to buy any. I depend on various

university archives for 16mm versions, as well as on local video shops for video versions, but both types tend to be inferior in quality.

Laser disks seem to be a solution both in terms of cost and quality. I hope that some government organization or foundation will support the production of Japanese films with subtitles on laser disks. I expect that many American universities are eager to purchase a large number of Japanese films in this format. For the benefit of institutions which do not have Film Studies Departments or film archives, it would be useful to have a large Japanese film archive, which would rent video copies of laser disks nationally.

Japanese films appeal to both graduate and undergraduate students. While European and American films are widely available, Japanese masterpieces are not so accessible in any useful form. Now that Japan Studies constitute a flourishing field, and proficiency in Japanese is very high in this country, efforts ought to be made further to make Japanese films as easily available as Western counterparts.

*The above report, along with interaction with the audience, offered us the realization that Japanese theater and film courses are offered fairly extensively and are in strong demand by students and administrators as well. We also realized, however, that this area of teaching remains experimental and less cultivated, especially for those literature faculty who do not specialize in theater and film studies. Besides the limited availability of qualified teachers, this area of teaching suffers further from the problem of availability of quality teaching materials. A number of translations, as well as of critical books on the genre of theater, are still very limited. Furthermore, the teaching of film*

*courses have technical complications related to the distribution of movies, as extensively explained by Professor Jones. Despite these difficulties, we all agreed that this area is gaining in interest among students and researchers; if effectively developed, it should enlarge and enrich our understanding of Japanese literature in a very important fashion. As the panelists' presentations all suggested, the teaching of this area for conventional teachers of literature must become most productive and creative when approached from the standpoint of comparative literary and cultural studies. Also as Professor O'Brien repeatedly stressed, interaction and discussion with experts of the dramatic genre should help regular literary teachers to improve their classroom performances. In this sense, the seminar as a whole and the round table, in particular, were fruitful in marking one of the constructive steps to further extend dialogue between literature faculty and theater/film faculty, as well as between researchers and performing artists.*

(summarized by E. S.)