

Pacific Overtures:
Performing Japan

John T. Dorsey

In performing Japan, how authentic can you get? This question of authenticity calls to mind the curious relationship between reality and realism in the nineteenth century novel. But since it seems to be the aim of a number of recent, successful revivals of plays and musicals in Japan and America, I think it is worthwhile examining what authenticity means and how it works in performance.¹ Of course, you can have Japanese actors perform a play about Japan, written and directed by a Japanese director for a Japanese audience. That may sound rather insular and confining, but of course most performances of American plays, even in our multicultural society, are basically like that. But imagine a play about America, written by a Japanese playwright and performed by Western actors in Japanese, that is, by actors of English, French, German, and American ancestry who live in Japan and generally do not speak American English. That would approximate the undertaking of Stephen Sondheim, John Weidman, and Harold Prince in the production of *Pacific Overtures* (1976). According to Sondheim, they imagined a musical written from the point of view of a Japanese who had visited Broadway and decided to write a play about the beginning of Japanese-American relations some one hundred and twenty years previously with another visit, that of Commodore Matthew

Perry to Japan in 1853 with four gunboats (Zadan 210). But, as we shall see, in performance, the idea of a Japanese point of view was quickly transformed into a view of Japan, first in the Kabuki atmosphere created by Harold Prince in America and then in the more Noh-flavored production of Miyamoto Amon in Japan.

The mutual visits and mutual scrutiny between Japan and America continue in performance, all in search of some sort of authenticity. That is, what was originally conceived of as a corrective view of America in an age of historical revisionism actually posits or assumes the existence of an authentic Japan. For example, in order to prepare for the original production of *Pacific Overtures*, Sondheim and Prince visited Japan for a few weeks (!) in order to find out about the country, its theater, and its music. Later, a videotaped version of their production came to Japan, where it was broadcast on NHK and seen by a young Japanese named Miyamoto Amon, who fell in love, not with its depiction of Japan, but with Broadway—one of his books is entitled something like “A Deep Kiss for Broadway Musicals”—and of course he repeatedly visited Broadway to find out about the real thing (Miyamoto). After producing a number of Broadway-style shows in Japan, he undertook the production of an actual, if not typical, Broadway show, *Pacific Overtures*, in Japanese, in Tokyo with Japanese actors (2001). Then this production visited New York, Washington, and London, still performed in Japanese by Japanese actors (2001/2), and then, he revisited New York with a new production of *Pacific Overtures* with a basically Asian-American cast, and he was welcomed as the first Japanese director of a Broadway musical on Broadway (2005), in a curious sense, performing the role of the Japanese visitor imagined by Sondheim, Weidman, and Prince as the premise for their musical drama. Then Miyamoto took the play back further into its roots, in a sense, with a Japanese production in Kanagawa, the scene of key events in the musical, including the meeting between Commodore Perry and representatives of the Shogunate (2013).

From its inception, then, *Pacific Overtures* has posed a number of historical, cultural, and aesthetic challenges for performance in changing contexts of both time and place. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon notes: “An adaptation, like the work it adapts, is always framed in a context—a time and a place, a society and a culture; it does not exist in a vacuum” (142). Let us take a look

at some of those contextual factors. Originally performed on Broadway in 1976, the year of the American bicentennial, *Pacific Overtures* reflected both revisionist trends in American history and a growing anxiety about a perceived economic and cultural threat from Japan. The title of the musical, which is taken from the diary of Commodore Matthew Perry, is ironic, for it refers not to the Pacific Ocean, but to “peaceful” entreaties, offers, or propositions made by the United States to Japan—at gunpoint.² In the 1970s, there were a number of films and plays that took other, similarly ironic looks at the ways in which African Americans, Native Americans, women, and laborers, in other words the vast majority of Americans, were silenced, misrepresented, marginalized, or simply ignored in the national narrative of exceptionalism and enlightened progress, a musty tale of American origins that was being revived in anticipation of the bicentennial. And yet, in each of these cases, it can be argued that the “outsider” view was essentialized—Africans, Women, Native Americans, Laborers—and the pursuit of the authentic portrayal of these essentialized outsiders led to increasingly self-righteous and complicated calls for “outsider” agency in writing, directing, and performing.

At the same time that the myth of American exceptionalism was being subjected to revisionist scrutiny in some quarters, however, there was renewed anxiety among many at the “rise” of Japan in contrast to the decline of the America power, and by extension at the threat posed by Asia. The Korean War had been fought to a stalemate with Korea and China, with skirmishes that continue to today, the Vietnamese had emerged as victors in what they referred to as the “American War,” the political existence of what had quaintly been called “Mainland” or “Red” China had been recognized, and Japan was soon to be held up to America as a model, not only for business acumen but also as a more advanced and successful society by the American scholar Ezra Vogel, indeed, as “Number One.” Paradoxically, the “ugly American” image—affluent, arrogant, aggressive, and amoral—was transferred to the caricature of the samurai salesmen of Japan, Inc. The actor Sab Shimono, who performed not only in the original Broadway production of *Pacific Overtures* but also nearly 30 years later in Miyamoto Amon’s revival in English at Studio 54, said that the ending of the play as performed in 1976, that is, the song “Next,” which will be examined below, suggested to him that another Pearl Harbor was imminent (Wong 25).³ The historical and political contexts of the original

production thus gave rise to various interpretations on both sides of the stage. Was *Pacific Overtures* primarily a critique of American imperialism? Or was it secretly a critique of Japanese economic expansion as a continuation of World War II imperialism?

But there were also a number of aesthetic challenges in performance due to the hybrid nature of the subject matter, a Japanese view of Japanese-American relations created by Americans: Sondheim for the lyrics and music, John Weidman for the book, and Harold Prince for the direction. One attempt at making this conflated view from/of Japan seem authentic was that from the original performance, productions of *Pacific Overtures* have incorporated various techniques of traditional Japanese theater, especially those of Kabuki in the original production, but also some from Noh and Bunraku: an all-male cast and consequently the use of *onnagata*, the *hanamichi*, puppets and puppet-like movements by the actors, a narrator or reciter, *kuroko*, and Japanese musical instruments, including the *shamisen*, the *shakuhachi*, and various percussive instruments. In particular, the use of male actors performing female roles, the reciter who introduces, comments on, and occasionally joins the action, and puppets and puppet-like movements by the actors emphasize the theatricality of the production by calling attention to the Japanese view/viewer, to the act of performance itself. What does it mean for a man—whether Asian, Asian-American, or White—to perform a woman, in particular, a Japanese or in a broader sense Asian woman? How does the reciter perform a role that is being acted out on stage and even take part in the action? How do puppets perform humans, and what is the effect of humans imitating the stylized movements of puppets? These are standard, though modified of course, features of traditional Japanese theater, but here in *Pacific Overtures* they are used not only to perform “Japanese” but also “Westerners” as perceived by Japanese.

Another attempt at authenticity in performing Japan and/or Asia involves the sensitive issue of racial or ethnic casting, that is, of casting Asians and Asian-Americans for plays and films about Asia. In a sense, this too is one of the techniques advocated recently by Diep Tran in the magazine *American Theater*: “What’s more important now is that there’s also new work that more authentically represents the Asian and Asian-American experience, created by Asian and Asian-American teams” (63). There are of course practical considerations for the artists

themselves, namely the paucity of roles for Asian-American actors in America, but there also seems to be a consensus that casting Asians or people of Asian descent “naturally” makes the performance more authentic.⁴ The original Broadway production of *Pacific Overtures* had an all-Asian but not specifically Japanese cast, at the insistence of Harold Prince and some of the actors involved in the production, but these actors also had the curious task of playing white Westerners as perceived by the Japanese—not only Americans, but in one central musical number British, Dutch, Russian, and French, as they arrived in Japan with their respective gunboats (“Please Hello”), and in another scene a number of British sailors who mistake a young woman in a kimono for a *geisha*/prostitute (“Pretty Lady”).

Twenty-five years later, for very natural reasons, including language and culture, Miyamoto Amon cast Japanese actors, and they performed in Japanese in both Japan and the United States (2001/2002). Nevertheless, these Japanese actors faced the convoluted tasks of playing Japanese characters dreamed up by the Americans Weidman and Sondheim and of Western characters as the American authors saw themselves being seen from “outside.” In Miyamoto’s Tokyo production, the Japanese characters were, after all, performed very naturally if not to say authentically by Japanese actors, but the context was always that of a Broadway musical, and because of that no one in the Japanese audience would assume that they were depicting an authentic view of Japan, but perhaps quite the opposite—an American view of Japan, which is in a sense the direct opposite intention of the musical, to present a Japanese view of America in an age of historical revisionism in order to provide a more authentic idea of America. And the exaggerated foreignness of the foreigners, including brightly colored, wild hair, long noses, pale skin, and tall, imposing physiques, seemed as appropriate as the characterization of the American warships as “black” or “black dragons.” Then, Miyamoto’s Broadway production at Studio 54 in New York featured an Asian and Asian-American cast that performed in English, and Miyamoto took up the task of teaching them how to behave more authentically like Japanese. When he produced *Pacific Overtures* once again in Japanese with Japanese actors in Kanagawa, the context had shifted somewhat because of the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown in Fukushima (March 2011), which had overtones of disaster and of nuclear disaster in particular that he wished to explore.

Clearly, the central challenge to Miyamoto in adapting *Pacific Overtures* to its country of purported origin, was that this musical drama was originally intended to portray Japan's view of the West from the the late Edo period to the present. How could Miyamoto, a Japanese director, adapt such a play for performance in Japan, and how could he then adapt his own production for performance in English on Broadway? We might use as points of reference other attempts to adapt, update, modify, and otherwise "correct" plays and films on East-West confrontations in order to make them more authentic. Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* and Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, for all their enormous differences, present similar challenges as revivals in regard to the question of performing the authentic Japan: the question of whether or not to cast Asian or Asian-American performers, at least in the main roles, the use of authentic or authentic-looking costumes, staging, gestures, and movements, and various modifications or corrections in the performance text for historical, cultural, or aesthetic accuracy. More recently, Rogers and Hammerstein's *The King and I* was filmed a second time as *Anna and the King* (1999), and the production tried strenuously to be more authentic, but the adaptation was after all not acceptable in Thailand, where there were objections to what was perceived as an overall depiction of an unenlightened, cruel, and primitive country. B.D. Wong, who played the reciter in Miyamoto's Broadway production of *Pacific Overtures*, received a Tony Award for his portrayal of a male Chinese opera singer who was allegedly mistaken for a woman, for twenty years by a French diplomat in David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*. Then in 2002, the Chinese-American playwright David Henry Hwang thoroughly revised the book of the 1957 Rogers and Hammerstein *Flower Drum Song*, which had also been filmed in the 1950s, a musical about Chinese Americans in San Francisco, in the interest of making the Chinese-American characters seem both more authentically Chinese *and* American—just one of the problems he had to deal with was the sprightly musical number called "Chop Suey."⁵ From a different, but related perspective, Hwang also had to deal with the depiction of Asian-American women as happy airheads in the very popular song "I Enjoy Being a Girl," not only because of more enlightened views of women, but also because such fetishized women had been so often associated with the East in Western eyes. It should be noted, that in contrast to all of these works, *Pacific Overtures* does not focus on an East-West love story or

on a love story at all and that the original production had an all-male cast (except for the finale)—some have even suggested that this accounts for the relative box office failure of this Sondheim work, in the sense that a Broadway show essentially “shows” women, that is, subjects the female body to the male gaze.⁶

In Miyamoto’s Japanese production, translation of the text, use of Japanese actors and traditional Japanese theater techniques in Japan, and use of Japanese actors in “Japanese” roles created by Americans—all of these required cultural adaptation for performance in Japan, no matter how well-intentioned the original had been, for even the least astute of the audience members would be sensitive to, if not irked by stereotypes and un-Japanese thought and behavior. And yet Miyamoto’s production was highly successful in Japan, where it was regarded naturally as a Broadway musical, not in any sense as a Japanese play. Beyond those concerns, there was the culturally and politically sensitive problem of how to deal with the Japanese Emperor and the rise and fall of the Japanese Empire in the 1930s and 1940s on the one hand, and on the other the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by Japan’s current ally and partner in peace, the United States. Both of these matters were largely glossed over in the American production by Harold Prince, but in Miyamoto’s production, both were considered essential to making the story of Japan more complete, accurate, and authentic, and yet of course highly controversial and perhaps inappropriate for a musical.⁷ Accordingly, Miyamoto’s revival of *Pacific Overtures* required various adjustments in the book and lyrics, particularly in the final number “Next,” which from the outset had the unenviable burden of dealing with some one hundred years of Japanese history, that is, from the beginnings of the Meiji Period the late 1860s through World War II to the “present” in 2001, 2005, and 2013—in less than ten minutes.

I will now confine my discussion of the attempts at performing the authentic Japan in *Pacific Overtures* to three musical numbers that are most closely concerned with the challenge of portraying the encounter between Japan and America, now in its 162nd year, if we count from Perry’s second visit in 1854, when the foreign treaty fever began in earnest: the opening number, “Advantages of Floating in the Middle of the Sea,” which presents the Japan of old to the audience; “Someone in a Tree,” which takes up the question of the possibility of objective or complete rep-

resentation in intercultural relations; and the closing number, mentioned above, “Next,” which was originally intended to close the frame of the musical, by depicting Japan “now” in contrast to the Japan of old in the opening number.

For Sondheim, the role of the opening number, “Advantages of Floating in the Middle of the Sea,” was to introduce Japan, the setting of the musical: “Here I’m trying to, in one song, establish an entire culture—for an audience that’s completely unfamiliar with that culture. Not just the culture that they may know from anti-Japanese movies of the war, but the culture that existed in 1852 when *things were in order*—before chaos arrived in 1853” (Horowitz 156). We should keep in mind that the fictional foundation of this opening to the musical’s frame is that it is intended as a self-introduction—here is how *we* Japanese lived before the arrival of *you* Americans:

RECITER

In the middle of the world we float,
 In the middle of the sea.
 The realities remain remote
 In the middle of the sea.
 Kings are burning somewhere,
 Wheels are turning somewhere,
 Trains are being run,
 Wars are being won,
 Things are being done
 Somewhere out there, not here.
 Here we paint screens. (4)

In the following discussion, we should also keep in mind how a Japanese director might have to adapt such material for performances in Japan or in America. Briefly, in the original Broadway production, the music first introduces us to Japan, or at least to somewhere quite different from a European-American setting, for there was the use of Japanese instruments, including the percussive wooden blocks (*hyoushigi*) used in Kabuki performances, which dramatically focused the

attention of the audience. The lyrics depict a familiar Western view of “Byzantium,” a society where nothing changes—a closed-off country in which routine, ritual, and tradition rule. We are told repeatedly that great and violent changes are occurring elsewhere, not here, on this island “floating in the middle of the sea,” perhaps an allusion to the “floating world” of the woodprints that became so popular in the West. This song is performed by the reciter, with illustrative actions by the cast—we Japanese view painted screens, we plant rice, and we bow to each other and to superiors—none of which is untrue, but all of which is likely to make a Japanese audience squirm or to puzzle them, unless of course they accept/dismiss it as a Broadway play, which seems to me most likely:

ALL

Here we paint screens,
 Plant the rice,
 Arrange the flowers,
 View the moon,
 Exchange the gifts,
 Plant the rice,
 Arrange tomorrow like today to float,
 Slide the screens,
 Exchange the poems,
 Stir the tea,
 Exchange the bows,
 Plant the rice,
 Arrange tomorrow to be like today,
 To float. (7-8)

The reciter is an amalgam of roles from Kabuki, Noh, Bunraku, and Bertolt Brecht, and so the tone of the number depends very much on the actor/director collaboration. For example, in 1976, the Japanese-born American actor Mako (岩松マコ, 1933-2006) played the role in a straightforward and serious manner, with more of a poker face and scowls than smiles. Sondheim gives us his impression of the original Broadway production: “The reciter is outraged at what happened to

the country, and particularly as played by Mako who is such a fierce personality. I think it's less in the score than in the attitude of the show. This is a man who is telling us without ever saying it: 'We were raped.' And they were, though it was highly controlled and ritualized" (Horowitz 164). On the other hand, in Miyamoto's 2004 Broadway production, the Chinese-American actor B.D. Wong, who as noted above had played the smoothly ironic *M. Butterfly*, played the role ironically, as if to say, this is what *you* Westerners think of *us* (Japanese and Orientals in general), but also, this is a country trapped in the past, that has to change. Ambivalence seems to be built into this song, so that any performance may include nostalgia for a simpler, purer way of life in "the real" Japan before the arrival of the Americans, a nostalgia that reemerges briefly in a scene at the end of the closing number, "Next." But there is also implicit criticism of the authoritarian code and of the unreality of the Byzantium-like world, particularly from the point of view of America, where the best things are perennially new and improved.

Sondheim claimed repeatedly that the second song to be considered here, "Someone in a Tree," was one of his favorite compositions, even as he credits John Weidman with its witty content and structure (Horowitz 67). Briefly, the song tries and tellingly fails to tell what actually happened when East met West, when Japan met America, when the representative of the Shogun met Commodore Perry behind the closed doors of an isolated building constructed for that purpose. There are two witnesses to the scene: an old man who claims as a child to have *seen everything* that happened from his perch in a tree, and a warrior who claims to have *heard everything* that happened from his position as a guard stationed beneath the building. As the old man tries to tell his tale to the reciter and to us, he runs into both physical and mental difficulties, and at the height of a crescendo in Sondheim's intentionally monotonous accompaniment, a younger version of himself, a ten-year-old boy appears, and the two of them try to tell the tale (Horowitz 160). But, as we gradually realize, both of them are unreliable in different ways. The boy in the tree can see but not hear, and since he is only ten years old, his characterizations of people and events are doubtful. On the other hand, the old man naturally has trouble remembering the details of what occurred some fifty years previously. Judging by the old man's age, we are to assume that

this telling takes place sometime around the beginning of the twentieth century. Then, just as it seems that their tale is not going to yield any reliable information, it is interrupted by the voice of the warrior, who appears beneath the building, from where he claims that he can hear “everything,” so the others entreat him to tell them what happened. Of course, from beneath, he cannot see anything, and his first reports mostly consist of random sounds from above because his duty there is to listen for a distress signal at which he will come up through the floor and cut down the treacherous Americans. He eventually hears snippets of dialogue, which amount to little more than requests, refusals, demands, threats, and acceptances. The attempts by these eye and ear witnesses to depict what actually happened are humorous but also intriguingly indeterminate in a sense made familiar to Western audiences by Kurosawa Akira’s film *Rashomon*, and yet in the refrain of this number, the point is made clear, that while the whole is not apprehensible, some small parts suggest the whole, and this conclusion is suitably sung by all of the characters on stage, including the Reciter:

ALL

It’s the fragment, not the day.
 It’s the pebble, not the stream.
 It’s the ripple, not the sea
 That is happening.
 Not the building but the beam,
 Not the garden but the stone,
 Only cups of tea
 And history
 And someone in a tree. (63-64)

That is to say, it isn’t that we cannot know anything about Japan or America, but that we cannot know everything, and what we can know is more of a process, a dialogue than a thesis or conclusion. How authentic can this Japan be made in performance?

The final musical number, “Next,” has always been a challenge in performance

because it purports to depict Japan as it is at present. First of all, since this is the final number, there is some expectation of closure, perhaps of a conclusion—after all, what have we seen, what have we learned from all of this? Which is the real Japan, that of the late Edo period or those of the late 20th and early 21st centuries? This expectation may be reinforced by the title “Next” itself, which suggests a chain of events that may be the consequence of what occurred previously. Then there is the question of what has happened between the Meiji Period and the present, that is 1976, in Japan, a present that already has forty years of history to it. Here are some examples from the lyrics of the original Broadway production in 1976—who would recognize/remember this Japan, which threatened American power and prosperity?

A VOICE

There are 223 Japan Airline ticket offices in 153 cities through the world.

ALL

Next!

ANOTHER VOICE

There are 8 Toyota dealerships in the city of Detroit,
and Seiko watch is the third best selling watch in Switzerland.

ALL

Next! (105-106)

As mentioned previously, the first performance took place during the American bicentennial, when an increasing number of people were taking a second and third look at the tendentious stories that had passed for American history, so “Next” suggested that the Japanese power politics and imperialism were really lessons learned from the gunboat diplomacy of the Americans and other Westerners. Moreover, in the 1970s Japan was perceived as a growing economic threat, so the original Broadway performance of “Next” presented an active, energetic, and even frenetic Japan moving ever forward toward an Americanized future with con-

comitant American problems ranging from pollution to the arrogance of power. As mentioned previously, the Japanese born American actor Sab Shimono said the performance of this song seemed to signal an impending second attack on America, an impression that curiously resonates with Miyamoto Amon's comparison of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to a second catastrophic arrival of the Americans.

When Miyamoto staged the musical number "Next" in Japan twenty-five years later in 2001, he had to adjust to the fact that the economic miracle, the so-called bubble economy, had burst, and that the nation had been in an economic slump, if not precisely a recession for almost twenty years. But a bigger problem for him was the gap in the play between the Meiji Period and post-industrial Japan, namely the rise of the Japanese Empire, fourteen years of war including the Pacific War, and in particular the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, all the way up to Japan in Heisei 12 or the twenty-first century according to the Western calendar. When he brought this Japanese-language production to America and later directed an English-language production, they arrived in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, so, culturally speaking, the treatment of the American flag as a symbol of imperialism and any suggestion that America's military threats cause others to take up arms were highly unwelcome. The lyrics were modified, but Miyamoto concentrated on completing the history of modern Japan more by staging the rise of militarism, the defeat, and the dropping of atomic bombs. The latter events, as noted above, are depicted as the second coming of Commodore Perry—at the height of Japan's military advance downstage toward the audience, a gigantic, monstrous figure like that of Commodore Perry appears on the *hanamichi*, and with a single gesture, it destroys all in a flash of light and a resounding boom, corresponding to the colloquial Japanese name for the new weapon, *pika-don* (flash-bang), the Japanese onomatopoeic expression used by survivors of the atomic bomb. Then survivors rise up and perform the postwar economic development with pop-rock music culture, seeming both exciting and energetic, and yet somehow unauthentic. At this point there is a short interlude, and the reappearance of the samurai Kayama and his wife in an idyllic, pastoral setting near the end of the Edo period, as they appeared early in the musical drama is ambivalent, for it represents nostalgia for a prelapsarian world, roughly equivalent

to nostalgic images of pre-Civil War America. And Miyamoto's production was faced with questions about whether the ending was positive or negative, about whether he was criticizing American imperialism or Japanese imperialism, and his answer, in the most recent production of *Pacific Overtures* is unambiguously both, for the present state of Japan under American influence is both positive and negative, imperialism by either country can hardly be considered "better" than that of the other, and certainly recognition of one does not mitigate or excuse the other.

Thus, striving for authenticity, whether in the search for a more accurate understanding of American history or the essential or absolute Japan, was not limited to the creative collaboration of Sondheim and Weidman. Both Harold Prince and Miyamoto Amon adapted the musical to various Japans and Americas. To many, the search for authenticity in performance may seem chimerical, for there is no "real" Japan that can serve as a touchstone or corrective to be used in search of the "real" America. And, after all, revisionist history did not result in a corrected history of America, but in a series of stories about America, closer to simulacra than to monuments to American exceptionalism. Nevertheless, confronted by the inauthentic, the mistaken, the tendentious, the prejudiced, and the Orientalist views, it seems appropriate and worth while to pursue this search for authenticity in performance more as a process of dialogue between the viewer and the viewed.

Notes

- ¹ For example, in a recent issue of the magazine *American Theater*, Diep Tran argues that with recent productions such as *Allegiance* by Jay Kuo, Lorenzo Thione, and Marc Acito, with an Asian-American director, writers, and cast, Broadway is gradually healing itself of what he calls "Yellow Fever," the Orientalist depiction of Asians by white Americans.
- ² Actually, the Japanese title is something like "Pacific Ocean Overture" 『太平洋序曲』, but the irony of the situation—a purportedly friendly visit by foreign warships—was highlighted by Miyamoto, who associated the cannon fire that punctuates the early scenes of the play with the atomic bombing of Japan in the "second coming" of Perry as America in World War II.

- ³ Many years later, Pearl Harbor was to be invoked repeatedly in the threat from a very different, but not distinguished, “East” after September 11, 2001.
- ⁴ Actually both the original production of *Pacific Overtures* and that of *Miss Saigon* had difficulties in finding qualified, bona-fide Asian actors, and the idea of Asian was taken in a broad sense. After all, this tendency may end up further isolating Asian actors, excluding them from playing “white” roles.
- ⁵ Sondheim strongly objected to the revision of classic American musicals in order to make them more acceptable to contemporary ideas of race and ethnicity, something regarded and condemned in some quarters as political correctness.
- ⁶ As a reverse-case background, there is a fifty-year production history of Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* in Japan, and in China a production overseen and commented on by the author in *Salesman in Beijing*. Both of these cases involved moving and speaking like Americans, actually like Brooklynites, while suggesting that this is a Japanese story, a Chinese story. And of course there is Jean Genet’s *Les Blancs*, played by black actors in whiteface, with the stipulation that there be at least one white person in the audience or one black in whiteface.
- ⁷ Sondheim, Weidman and company were to encounter a similar reaction in America when they mounted the musical *Assassins*, especially in regard to the depiction of the Kennedy assassination in which Lee Harvey Oswald appears on stage.

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Abstract

In performing Japan, how authentic can you get? Since it seems to be the aim of a number of recent, successful revivals of plays and musicals in Japan and America, I think it is worthwhile examining what authenticity means and how it works in performance. As a case study, I focus on the undertaking of Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman in the musical drama *Pacific Overtures* (1976). According to Sondheim, they originally imagined a musical written from the point of view of a Japanese who had visited Broadway and decided to write a play about the beginning of Japanese-American relations some one hundred and twenty years previously with another visit, that of Commodore Matthew Perry to Japan in 1853 with four gunboats. However, in performance, the idea of a Japanese point of view was quickly transformed into a view of Japan, first in the Kabuki atmosphere created by Harold Prince in America and then in the more Noh-flavored production of Miyamoto Amon in Japan.

The mutual visits and mutual scrutiny between Japan and America continue in the performance history of *Pacific Overtures*, all in search of some sort of authen-

ticity—that is, what was originally conceived of as a corrective view of America in an age of historical revisionism actually posits or assumes the existence of an authentic Japan. From its inception, then, *Pacific Overtures* has posed a number of historical, cultural, and aesthetic challenges for performance in changing contexts of both time and place. In this case study, we see that striving for authenticity, whether in the search for a more accurate understanding of American history or the essential or absolute Japan, was not limited to the creative collaboration of Sondheim and Weidman. Both Harold Prince and Miyamoto Amon adapted the musical to various Japans and Americas.

To many, the search for authenticity in performance may seem chimerical, for there is no “real” Japan that can serve as a touchstone or corrective to be used in search of the “real” America. And, after all, revisionist history did not result in a corrected history of America, but in a series of stories about America, closer to simulacra than to monuments to American exceptionalism. Nevertheless, confronted by the inauthentic, the mistaken, the tendentious, the prejudiced, and the Orientalist views, it seems appropriate and worthwhile to pursue this search for authenticity in performance more as a process of dialogue between the viewer and the viewed.