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Identity Politics in Women's Performance in Japan

NOBUKO ANAN

In Japan, it was in the mid-1970s when women artists started to create their own professional theatre companies. This period also saw the development of the women's liberation movement in Japan, but there was no exchange between women theatre artists and activists. While the women artists explored a variety of issues in their work, with some few exceptions feminism was not their primary concern. This trend continues to this day, and accounts for why Tadashi Uchino argues that there has been no feminist theatre in Japan.¹

While it is certainly possible to see (unconscious) feminist politics in women's performance in Japan, from a contemporary feminist perspective such as my own it is difficult to discuss identity politics in this context. Nonetheless, there is one contemporary lesbian company that consciously plays with a concept of identity and problematizes identity politics. Founded in 2000 by female playwright/director/actor Emoto Junko,² Kegawa-zoku (meaning 'fur tribe') disturbs the symbolic system by means of their performances devised as 'nonsensical' and narrativeless parodies of cultures from different time periods. For example, *DEEP Kirisuto-kyō* (DEEP Christ/insanity) (2004) is set in 'Korea Boob Town' in a country called 'Aberica' with central characters such as the Japanese American 'Marilyn Monroe Watanabe' and 'No Christ', who goes by the name Michael (and wears clothes and dances like Michael Jackson) and occasionally transforms into 'Yes Christ'.³

In one sense, this play may appear to raise issues such as religion, idol worship and matters pertaining to race and ethnicity. However, not only this play but also Kegawa-zoku's works in general are not straightforwardly political; instead *DEEP Christ/insanity* parodies a variety of other sources such as the 1996 American horror film *Scream*, and *8ji dayo! Zen'in shūgō* (It's 8 o'clock! Everyone Get Together), which is a Japanese television comedy show aired from the 1960s to the 1980s. With its campy *mise en scène* and parodic content, Kegawa-zoku creates a decontextualized stage space, where signifiers float among multiple signifieds. Rather than arguing for or against any political positions, in this space Kegawa-zoku nullifies identity politics that presumes or forces self-identification into a single, coherent identity category. As such, while the company's performance evokes lesbianism (with Emoto playing male or butch characters) and my writing here frames the company as lesbian, the group does not label itself lesbian. Rather, it plays with revelation and concealment, exposing the politics inherent in the act of naming. On Kegawa-zoku's stage, filled with floating signifiers, there is no single way of being a woman, and from my perspective I see this as articulating a feminist position.⁴

Interestingly, the performances of Kegawa-zoku, which emerged in the 2000s, recall that of an amateur, grass-roots feminist theatre company, Dotekabo-ichiza (meaning 'a theatre company of ugly women like pumpkins'), formed in 1974. Although there is no direct connection between the two, Dotekabo-ichiza also staged parodies in its only production (musical comedy, or 'muse-cal', as they called it), entitled *Onna no Kaihō* (Emancipation of Women), which the company toured around Japan from 1974 to 1980.⁵ The company was formed by members of the Lib Shinjuku Centre, a collective opened in 1972.⁶ Scripted and directed by company member Tanaka Mitsu, a standard-bearer of the women's liberation movement in Japan, the 'muse-cal' was a rare example of theatre used as a tool for feminist activism. It wittily critiqued masculinist constructions of ideal Japanese womanhood and the gendered/sexualized geographical power relationship at work in Japan's economic invasion of neighbouring Asian nations, primarily through parodies of a novel, a fairy tale, and songs. For example, the scene titled 'Omiya Kan'ichi' is a parody of the novel *Konjiki Yasha* (The Golden Demon, 1897–1902) by male novelist Ozaki Kōyō. The most famous scene of this novel is where Kan'ichi kicks his fiancée Omiya to the ground because she betrays him by marrying another, wealthier man. In Dotekabo-ichiza's parody, Omiya has decided not to marry Kan'ichi because he does not understand fundamental gender inequality even though he reads Marx and critiques the class system. In the end, Kan'ichi kneels down and begs Omiya not to leave him. The scene not only inverts the famous tableau in the original (in which Kan'ichi is about to leave, while Omiya is on the ground after the assault) but also makes fun of the typical male leftists' sexism. (It was not unusual, for instance, during the period of 1960s and 1970s activism, for male activists to be out in the demonstrations and in confrontation with the Police, while women were expected to take care of the chores such as making rice balls to feed the male activists. Hence many women liberationists were actually marginalized within the leftist movement.)

Compared to Kegawa-zoku's nonsensical work, which resists claiming any identity, Dotekabo-ichiza's performance is motivated by identity politics: aims to reclaim the muffled voices and marginalized experiences of women, as the title, *Emancipation of Women*, clearly suggests. However, what they meant by 'women' was not necessarily conceived as a monolithic category. As Senda Yuki maintains, in women's liberation in Japan, the category of 'women' was employed to problematize the fact that 'women, who should be essentially equal to each other, were torn apart from each other due to economic reasons and other conditions'.⁷ The liberationists' idea that 'women should be essentially equal to each other' is problematic, as while I agree that every woman should have equal social rights, 'essential equality' also risks homogenizing differences – cultural, sexual, etc. – among women. However, at least the liberationists were aware of the hierarchy operating between women. That *Emancipation of Women* shared this awareness is illustrated in one further scene: 'Economic Animal'. As the title signals, the status of Japanese women is revealed as problematic: they are both the victims of gender hierarchy in Japan and victimizers of gendered/sexualized, economic power relationships within Asia.

Through parody as a means to deconstruct existing social and cultural structures, Dotekabo-ichiza laid claim to identity but with an awareness of differences, and

Kegawa-zoku's work subverts the very concept of identity and identity politics. In other words, Kegawa-zoku pushes the boundaries of what Dotekabo-ichiza began thirty years ago. While Dotekabo-ichiza's approach risked falling into the trap of seeing identity in monolithic terms, Kegawa-zoku's 'nonsensical' performance style successfully avoids that danger. Kegawa-zoku may not actively promote itself as a political theatre group, but their aesthetic proves effective for political activism – activism in the 'company' of women theatre artists finally secures a place on the Japanese stage.

NOTES

- 1 Tadashi Uchino, *Crucible Bodies: Postwar Japanese Performance from Brecht to the New Millennium* (London, New York and Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2009), p. 14.
- 2 In Japanese, family names come before given names. I will follow this convention except for those who publish in English.
- 3 In Japanese, 'Jesus' is pronounced 'yesu', and this is the same with the Japanized pronunciation of the English term 'yes'. Thus 'No Christ' and 'Yes Christ' are puns.
- 4 For an in-depth discussion of Kegawa-zoku's work see my article, 'Two-Dimensional Imagination in Contemporary Japanese Women's Performance', forthcoming in *TDR* (T212).
- 5 Dotekabo-ichiza no bideo o mitai kai (Group of/for People Who Want to Watch a Video of Dotekabo-ichiza), *Video/DVD Handbook: Dotekabo-ichiza Myūzokaru onna no kaihō 1975* (Dotekabo-ichiza Muse-cal *Emancipation of Women 1975*) (Tokyo, 2005), p. 1.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Yuki Senda, 'Aidentiti to pojishonariti' (Identity and Positionality), in Chizuko Ueno, ed., *Datsu aidentiti* (De-identity) (Tokyo: Keisō shobō, 2005), pp. 267–87, here p. 277, my translation. What she means by 'other conditions' include race, ethnicity and issues of disability, conditions that often cause economic inequality among women (p. 273).

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