

THEATRE REVIEWS

Jovial Usurper in the Traditional *Kyogen* Style: *Kuninusubito* (based on *Richard III*) at the Setagaya Public Theatre, Tokyo

Reviewed by MANABU NODA

Kuninusubito (“The Usurper”) is a free adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Richard III* in the manner of *kyogen*, a Japanese traditional theatre form which has developed alongside *noh* theatre. Mansai Nomura, the director-cum-title role actor, is a household name in Japan not only through his *kyogen* and other stage performances, including *Oedipus* (dir. Yukio Ninagawa) and *Hamlet* (dir. Jonathan Kent), but also through his film and TV appearances. The production was thoroughly enjoyable and full of inventive touches, but not without some blemishes.

Kyogen’s primary goal is to draw laughs. *Kyogen* and *noh* are highly stylized traditions, but while *noh* is a solemn, austere, and tragic form of theatre, *kyogen* (literally meaning “mad words”) has always placed itself in a comic situation taken from everyday life. Though usually more subdued and obedient than the slave of Roman comedy or the *zanni* of *commedia dell’arte*, *kyogen*’s comic servant Tarokaja provides a more realist view of life than any *noh* character. Consequently, *kyogen* as a theatrical style is quite amenable to Shakespeare’s comedies as has been proven in two *kyogen* makeovers of Shakespeare: *Horazamurai* (“The Braggart Samurai”, based on *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 1991, written by Yasunari Takahashi and directed by Mansaku Nomura, Mansai’s mentor and father, who was designated a Living National Treasure this year) and *Machigai-no Kyogen* (“*Kyogen* of Errors” based on *The Comedy of Errors*, 2001, written by Takahashi and directed by Mansai). Both plays were performed by actors who were formally trained in *kyogen*, and the consistency of style contributed to the graceful fluency in staging.

In view of this track record, it was a natural choice for Mansai to interpret Richard as a comic villain, though much larger in scale than Tarokaja. Mansai’s

usurper is a wisecracking aristo who loves to confirm complicity with his audience. Clad in a black costume designed by Junko Koshino, he often limps forward to get in close touch with you. Just like the clownish Vice in the morality play, he likes to position himself in the borderline space between the platform stage and the pit. During the monologues he often sits on the stage-front steps and directly addresses the audience. He underscores his puns by reiteration, and his asides and jokes never go unaccompanied by a mischievous glance at the pit. In a hilarious scene Richard, willfully taking the silence of the audience for his subjects' tacit consent to his succession, checks public support by ordering his men to get off the stage and try to raise the front-row seats with a lever to see if "the public will not budge". When it becomes clear that he can really be the King, he even grabs a microphone and begins to sing of his joy with dancers in the back.

The audience loved all this, but at times Mansai's comic acting was rather overblown, removed from his *kyogen* discipline, which always demands restraint. Mansai appeared comfortably self-assured when playing against actors from the same background – especially Yukio Ishida, who created a wonderful Hisahide (Buckingham's counterpart) with his beautifully controlled theatrical language. However, with non-*kyogen* actors, he moved in and out of the framework of *kyogen* as a code of reference, and consequently looked somewhat off balance, teetering between broad comedy and more controlled theatrical idioms of *kyogen* language.

It was not only Mansai, though, but also all the other actors who, in spite of their commendable acting, seemed to be speaking in theatrical languages which were irreconcilably different. For the first time in Mansai's *kyogen* Shakespeare series, the company for *Kuninusubito* consisted of actors from diverse theatrical backgrounds, and only five of the twenty-strong cast had formal *kyogen* training. If *The Braggart Samurai* and *The Kyogen of Errors* were experiments on the applicability of *kyogen* technique to Shakespeare, *Kuninusubito* was a good testing ground for exploring the theatrical potential of *kyogen*, where it was placed in dialectical relationships with other acting styles. Unfortunately, it seems that the desired chemical reactions did not take place. The piece lacked stylistic harmonization and integration perhaps because Mansai was engaged in both directing and acting in spite of the obvious need for an objective eye during the rehearsal. It was good to see the actors performing without being intimidated by the cross-style casting, but the stylistic discord became most apparent when the actor Mansai had to modify or, if occasion required, step out of his *kyogen* style in cross-style scenes.

Besides mixed casting, *Kuninusubito* was also different from Mansai's previously comedy-dominated *kyogen* Shakespeare productions in the choice of genre. Mansai admits he worked on the script in tandem with the writer of the



Mansai (front) and Shiraishi (back), photograph by Katsu Miyauchi



Mansai (front) and Shiraishi (back), photograph by Katsu Miyauchi



Mansai (centre), photograph by Katsu Miyauchi

script Shoichiro Kawai, a Shakespearean scholar and translator, and they met the challenge by transposing the original to mediaeval Japan—in this case the Muromachi Period (1392–1573) to be exact, the period when *kyogen* and *noh* are supposed to have been inseminated. Just like the films *The Throne of Blood* (1957, based on *Macbeth*) and *Ran* (1985, based on *King Lear*, with Mansai at the age of seventeen in the role of the blind prince) by Akira Kurosawa, whom Mansai greatly admires, *Kuninusubito* borrows the *mugen-noh* (“dream *noh*”) structure in which the visitor of the site, often a priest, encounters the soul of the dead who is the subject of the play. The ghost in this form of *noh* play recounts his/her personal history by the middle of the play and then goes out, to reappear later for the emotionally charged dance at the finale.

Kuninusubito parenthesized the action of *Richard III* between the opening and ending scenes where a woman in a modern white dress – just sightseeing, perhaps – picks up a mask left on the main acting area, which looks like a deserted and charred open-air *noh* stage under a harsh white light. There she recites Basho’s *haiku*: “Summer grasses: / all that remains of great soldiers’ / imperial dreams” (Matsuo 51). Within this dream-play framework, the main action unravels itself as the story of dead warriors. A strong sense of Buddhist transience is evoked, which was also underpinned by the sound of cicadas’ chorus, reminding the audience of the insect’s life cycle (years of larval stage, followed by a very short adult stage at the height of summer) and the classical literary pun of *utsusemi* (meaning “man in this world” as well as “an empty cicada shell”).

All the female characters in *Kuninusubito* were played by Kayoko Shiraishi, a representative actress in Japanese contemporary drama, so the woman who looks back at the tumultuous period is also all the women from the past – the women who curse, love, protest, despair, and wail. It was an ambitious casting which would have been impossible without an actor of Shiraishi’s calibre. She worked with Tadashi Suzuki of Suzuki Method fame as his company’s leading actress until 1989 and, after going solo, has unchangingly been highly acclaimed in many performances including Shakespeare, most notably Ninagawa’s *Pericles*, which toured to the National Theatre in London in 2003 to receive rave reviews.

Shiraishi’s sheer physical presence, versatility, and emotional range were as impressive as ever. It is not surprising, though, that having one person play all the women was confusing to the audience, especially in the scene when all of them alternate in venting out their agony in front of the Tower gate. It blurred not only the storyline but also the individuality of the female characters, reducing them into a single abstract construct of the lamenting, cursing woman. I think this heavy polarization along the gender line between man as macho wrongdoer and woman as victimized object of male desire (and hate) was going

too far, admitting that the dichotomy is what the original *Richard III* by and large embraces.

Once on the throne, the usurper realizes it is time for serious worrying. *Kuninusubito* depicts Richard's transition from a jovial villain to an agonizing hero as that of a figure who, having long believed he had been confined in the shadow, begins to get frantic and restless once he is brought out into the light of day, desperately resolved to hold on to his newly acquired source of anxiety. The word "shadow" is a keyword emphasized in the adaptation text, and the Shadow (performed by Junjun, a skilled mime) accompanies Richard until the moment of his coronation. After that he momentarily retires, but then comes back to stab Richard in the final battle scene. It was a striking directorial touch – Richard killed by his own shadow – and quite effective in highlighting Richard's ego split due to the emergence of his conscience.

Works cited

Matsuo, B. *Narrow Road to the Interior*. Transl. Sam Hamill. Boston and London: Shambhala, 1991.

***King Lear* at the Cameri Theatre of Tel-Aviv**

Reviewed by TALI SILBERSTEIN

“But even the want of that for which I am richer –
A still-soliciting eye, *and such a tongue*
That I am glad I have not, though not to have it
Hath lost me in your liking.”

(Cordelia in *King Lear* 1.1.230–33)

The production of *King Lear* at the Cameri Theatre of Tel-Aviv for the theatre season 2007–2008 was directed by a Georgian director, a non-Hebrew speaker, the widely-known Robert Sturua. But this is not the main reason for choosing the above words of Cordelia as a motto for this review. Sturua's adaptation of the play, and its consequent translation into Hebrew by Dori Parness, omits large extracts from the play's dialogues. Actually, some of its most famous parts are removed. Instead, this production puts a strong emphasis on the play's physical aspects.