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*Measure for Measure*

Presented by the **Sainokuni Shakespeare Company** at Saitama Arts Theatre, Japan.

May 25, 2016–June 11, 2016. Directed by Yukio Ninagawa and Sonsho Inoue.

Lighting by Jiro Katsushiba. Costumes by Lily Komine. Sound design by Shuichi

Tomobe. Music by Umitaro Abe. With Naohito Fujiki (Angelo), Mikako Tabe

(Isabella), Kazunaga Tsuji (The Duke), Shinya Matsuda (Claudio), Keita Oishi

(Lucio), Kenichi Ishii (Pompey), Erika Shumoto (Marianna), Escalus (Yasuyoshi

Hara).

TODD ANDREW BORLIK, *University of Huddersfield*

In addition to the quadricentennial of Shakespeare's death, 2016 also witnessed the passing of one of the greatest Shakespeareans of the past century. More than any other director in recent memory, Yukio Ninagawa—while acquiring his own international reputation—has bolstered Shakespeare's renown as an artist of truly global stature. His startling, Japanese-inflected adaptations have helped blow away the musty presumption that Shakespeare is the exclusive cultural property of England and the West. Since his legendary "Cherry-Blossom *Macbeth*" first toured the UK in the 1980s, Ninagawa and his company have been regular guests in the British theatre scene. His production of *Hamlet* at the Barbican last year was his third staging of the Danish play in London. In ailing health, Ninagawa did not accompany his cast on the trip. Though not entirely unexpected, his death on May 12, two weeks before the premiere of *Measure for Measure*, was a heavy loss to theatre-lovers around the world. Initially conceived as a review of this production, this piece has thus acquired the overtones of a eulogy. How could it not? The experience of watching the

performance was powerfully affected—as by a wistful melody in the background—by the awareness of his passing. Everyone seemed eager to savor the last outpouring of his theatrical genius.

Before detailing the specifics of the production, it might be worth sketching its context for three key reasons. First, location matters: attending a Ninagawa play in Japan without surtitles is a different experience from watching it in London or New York. So does the cultural subjectivity of the spectator: the perceptions of an American reviewer are bound to vary from that of a Japanese particularly when that reviewer (full disclosure) only has basic conversational proficiency with the language. Fortunately, my wife Ayami attended the production with me and her input was invaluable in preparing this review. Thirdly, it is also vital to situate the performance in the history of Ninagawa's career in Japan, as Western readers may not be so well apprised of the director's remarkable and prolific body of work in his home county. One of his most striking initiatives a decade ago was the creation of the "Saitama Gold Theatre" group — a company for actors 55 or older. The troupe recently staged an acclaimed production of *Richard II* in which the entire cast, several of whom were in their 80s, leapt out of wheelchairs and waltzed across the stage. Considering that Ninagawa himself was wheelchair-bound at the time, the scene seemed like a poignant assertion of the director's enduring vitality. Though Ninagawa has continued to champion many experimental works by modern Japanese and Western playwrights, Shakespeareans will be happy to hear that much of his attention had been devoted to the Sainokuni Shakespeare Company. He founded it in 1998 in his native prefecture of Saitama (on the northern fringes of Tokyo) with the aim of staging all thirty-seven canonical plays. Regrettably, he still had five unticked on his list at the time of his

death; the world will never see Ninagawa's *King John*, *Henry V*, *Henry VIII*, *Timon of Athens*, or *All's Well that Ends Well*. His final posthumous production turned out to be *Measure for Measure*. Much of it was directed from his hospital bed whilst Ninagawa was battling pneumonia. In fact, the responsibility for rehearsing the actors largely fell to his assistant director Sonsho Inoue. Ninagawa dictated the casting, concept, scenography, and stagecraft. The production did not have many of the Noh- or Kabuki-inspired elements that helped make him an international sensation. But it had in spades the meta-theatrical flair, intensity, and visual elegance that were the hallmarks of everything he did.

The fact that Ninagawa waited until he was 80 to take on *Measure for Measure* might suggest the play itself did not appeal to him. In the program notes, the actor who played Angelo, Naohito Fujiki, confesses that most Japanese will probably find this comedy's premise hard to fathom. The Japanese might regard conceiving a child in pre-marital sex as shameful but not sinful in the way that appals Isabella. In order to imbue the performance with a more authentic feel, Ninagawa's company actually visited a Franciscan monastery in Tokyo, and met with a nun from a St. Clare's convent. The cast asked them questions whilst observing how they dressed and comported themselves during prayer. Such field research indicates that this production was much more in the *shingeki* tradition (that is, the "new drama" modelled on Western acting styles) than some of Ninagawa's other productions, such as his Kabuki *Twelfth Night*. Of course Japan has its own ancient tradition of Buddhist monasteries and nunneries, so renouncing the world to devote oneself to religious contemplation is hardly a foreign concept. Many Japanese audience members may also have spied a resemblance between Shakespeare's Duke and Mito Kōmon—a

legendary vice-shogun (and hero of a long-running TV series) who travelled in disguise throughout seventeenth-century Japan righting wrongs. In preparing for his role as Angelo, meanwhile, Fujiki came to see how *Measure for Measure* resonates powerfully with the Japanese notion of the contrast between *honne to tatemae*: one's true feelings vs. the social façade one must construct to disguise them. This tension was one that Ninagawa appeared to have woven into the production.

When the audience filtered into the auditorium at the Saitama Arts Theatre, the cast was already milling about on the bare stage. They stretched, chatted, performed vocal exercises, or practised their lines. Backstage had become center-stage. Ninagawa has long employed such Brechtian alienation techniques and employed them with purpose. Foregrounding the unreality of drama mitigates the alleged unnaturalness of Japanese actors and actresses performing Shakespeare. Before the play began, many of the cast were dressed in long dark skirts that looked vaguely like a kind of modernized *hakama*—traditional Japanese trousers. At what would have been curtain time, stagehands wheeled out the costumes on racks. A few of the actors and actresses donned luxurious Tudor-esque robes, designed by Lilly Komine in an eclectic fusion of Eastern and Western, Renaissance and contemporary. The moment was vintage Ninagawa. It seized on the Shakespearean theme of the disconnect between seeming and being as an analogy for the visible seams (no pun intended) between Japan's modern and traditional identities.

Before the first line of dialogue, the audience also witnessed the crew puzzle together the set. The backdrop for the play proved to be a twenty-foot high replica of Giotto's frescos from the Scrovegni chapel, depicting allegorical figures of seven vices. In the

middle, *Injusticia* towered over the action like the presiding spirit of Angelo's reign. In different scenes variations in lighting and music affected the mood, while different vices appeared to loom larger: Despair offered cold comfort to Claudio and the prisoners; Foolishness had disciples in Pompey and Elbow; Inconstancy was an apt companion for the jilted Mariana. Nevertheless, the fact that the background remained essentially the same imposed a unity on the production. The persistence of the vice figures suggested that no place in Vienna was immune from human corruption. Nunnery, brothel, courthouse, prison: the distinctions between them became almost irrelevant.

Doubtless a big reason for the popularity of Ninagawa's Shakespeare in Japan is his casting of celebrities from Japanese television and film. Yet Ninagawa possessed a knack for matching his actors and actresses with certain roles. His hand-picked choice for Angelo, Naohito Fujiki, did a superb job conveying the character's inner torment. He spoke the soliloquies with passion and discretion. Kazunaga Tsuji was a dignified and well-meaning Duke. It has to be said that his delivery of the "Be absolute for death" speech made it sound a bit sententious. But since morbid sermonizing does not sit well with modern theatre audiences in either Japan or the West, playing the Friar this way is a sensible choice. Mikako Tabe was stunningly good as Isabella. Looking even younger than her twenty-seven years, she believably captured Isabella's dewy-eyed innocence. One could, however, sense her personality thaw and mature as she discovered her own eloquence while her pleading for her brother. An especially charged moment in her appeal was her rumination on human vs. divine justice: "Could great men thunder / As Jove himself does, Jove would ne'er be quiet"

(2.2.117-19). When Angelo returned to the stage for his soliloquy, the sound of rumbling thunder could be heard, as if summoned by Isabella.

The most memorable tableau from this production was probably Angelo and Isabella's second meeting, which took place behind a white gauze curtain suspended from the ceiling. As the two argued they circled each other, weaving before and behind the curtain. After Angelo propositioned her, Isabella darted in front of it and yanked it down with fierce indignation. The moment was a striking pantomime of the play's exposé of human "seeming."

The prison scenes were also haunting. Bars were lowered down from the ceiling, and a dozen rag-clad and emaciated prisoners paced about behind them in an eerie glow. This was one of many examples of the outstanding lighting design by Jiro Katsushiba, whose work was particularly critical considering that the backdrop rarely changed. One exception to the static set was the moated grange scene. When the audience returned from the interval, the Giotto frescos were parted temporarily and the stage—now a hundred yards deep—bespangled with hundreds of white lilies. A young boy intoned "Take, O, take those lips away" to a Marianna in black mourning dress.

Given the difficulty of duplicating Shakespeare's wordplay in a foreign language, it is no surprise that the comic scenes relied more on slapstick than banter. An altercation between Pompey and the outraged Elbow in the courtroom unfolded in slow-motion, a technique from Kabuki that Ninagawa has utilized with great effect throughout his career. In *Measure for Measure*, however, the characters seemed to deliberately fall out of sync during the slow-motion brawl. When it concluded, Pompey made a quip that could be roughly translated, "we weren't altogether there,

were we?” Was this a playful improvisation, or was Ninagawa poking fun at one of his trademark gimmicks?

Though the machinations of the Duke drive the plot, it was Tabe’s Isabella whose glowing presence dominated this production. Surprisingly, the scene between her and Claudio in prison provoked the most laughter from the audience. With awkward pauses and sarcastic intonations, Shinya Matsuda made Claudio’s reluctance to die obvious while Isabella’s protestations came across—perhaps even more so in Japan—as absurdly righteous. In the course of the play, however, Tabe’s Isabella bloomed into a more confident and worldlier woman. When she and Marianna accosted Angelo in this final scene, they approached the stage from the aisles, heightening the sense of rapport between the wronged women and the spectators. Isabella’s self-assurance in this case may have been abetted by the translation of Kazuko Matsuoka, as she is known for making Shakespeare’s female characters far more outspoken than they have been in prior Japanese translations by men. Even a feminist translator, however, can only do so much when confronted with silences like the notorious one at the end of *Measure for Measure*. In this staging, the Duke’s marriage proposal did not come as a shock or rudely presumptive command. Though Tabe moved not to embrace him but to celebrate with her pardoned brother and Juliet, her face beamed. One felt she had earned a happier ending than a cell in a convent. Despite the grimness of the prison scenes, this *Measure for Measure* seemed more like a comedy than a problem play. This impression was reinforced by an interpolated epilogue in which Isabella appeared and released a mechanical dove that fluttered above the stage and vanished into a sky-blue backdrop. Though the imagery might be a bit hackneyed, the gesture did convey her sense of psychological liberation: a letting



go of innocence. Or was it a “good night, sweet prince” tribute to Ninagawa-san, like the flower-strewn table outside in the lobby?

When the actors returned for a second ovation, the curtain lifted to reveal a giant portrait of Ninagawa suspended from the ceiling where the dove had ascended. The audience rose to their feet in a moving posthumous tribute. Though Ninagawa was never designated a *Ningen Kokuho* (Living National Treasure)—an honorific bestowed on those who embody Japan’s great cultural traditions—with his passing it has become abundantly clear that he was one, and an International Treasure at that.