

Figure and Ground : An Essay on Interculturalism in Theatre

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Let me start with two episodes. A few years ago we had an international conference in Tokyo on the traditional theatre of East Asia. After the two day conference, we had a bus excursion to a small village outside Tokyo to see a ritual for a good harvest of crops performed in the precincts of the village shrine. It was a specially arranged performance for us, as it took place out of season for that ritual¹⁾.

It was a strange type of ritual. The village performers first made a procession through the village and we spectators followed them to the shrine, which is located in the center of the village. But in the precincts of the shrine, the performers put up a big curtain walls around themselves and began to enact their ritual performance inside the curtain walls, that

This is the paper I presented a keynote speech at the annual conference of the International Federation for Theatre Research in Puebla, Mexico, in June 1997. I was also invited to read this paper at Roehampton Institute London in London, Samuel Beckett Centre of Trinity College in Dublin and Ateneo de Manila University in Manila, in a slightly amended form on each occasion. Each time I supplemented my presentation with the demonstration of the video clips of the performances I mentioned. But since none of them can be shown here, I have described the performances more in detail than I originally did. I have also amended some parts of the paper for this publication and added notes to the places where they are needed.

is to say, it was completely hidden from us. We made a long bus trip from Tokyo only to attend a ritual we could not see! There was one American professor among us. He was visibly irritated and tried to peep inside through some holes on the curtain. But none of us Japanese dared to do that. The performance lasted about one hour, being completely out of our sight.

After the performance, the village people invited us to ask questions. The American professor raised his hand and asked, "Did the Crop God descend onto the ground during the performance today?" It was understandable that he asked this question, for if the God had not descended, the performance we saw would not have been a genuine ritual. If so, why did it have to be hidden from us? And if the God had descended, it would be meaningless for the village people to have that ritual on the specific day of the year that they do. This was clearly implied in his question and it implies a very rational way of thinking. But we Japanese felt a little embarrassed. Perhaps the American professor had in mind God with a capital G, but for us the crop god is only one of the elements in the performance. Its meaning does not derive from the either/or type of thinking, but rather the both/and type. So, I told him, "The God descended and yet did not." But the point is that my answer is also a kind of rationalization. The village people did not even understand the question when it was translated. This kind of question would never occur to them. God may have descended or may not ; it does not matter. But this does not mean that they do not believe in gods. They take the ritual performance seriously and just as it is.

Another episode. In March 1997 we had a small international colloquium of theatre studies in Tokyo and a professor from Canada presented in her lecture a video clip of Ariane Mnouchkine's well-known production of *Richard II* as an example of intercultural theatre. She said that the performance had been called "A Japanese Shakespeare" or "Shakespeare

in Kimono” in French reviews. When a short clip of this *Richard II* was shown, however, most Japanese participants, myself included, became confused, for it hardly looked Japanese to us. Actors wear kimono-like garments, which, however, are not Japanese kimonos. The king has a sword, which is indeed a Japanese one, but he girds it on his body in so peculiar a way that it cannot be anything but a parody for us. The actress’ movements and pauses are nothing like noh or kabuki. However, most Western and other Asian participants agreed that it looked Japanese. If this same production were called “A Chinese or Korean Shakespeare,” I might not disagree, for it does look Oriental in some fashion. This fact raised interesting questions among us. What is Japanese? To whom does it look Japanese? And what degree of Japaneseness in a Western production gives it the right to be authentically called Japanese-like and thus intercultural?

Interculturalism in theatre is no easy subject to handle, particularly for us Asians. The concept is Western, and even cautioning against eurocentrism or so-called orientalism is also a Western idea. But what is “Western”, then?

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Noh and kabuki are called theatre today, but there was no general term to be applied to both of them in pre-modern times. Noh was noh and kabuki was kabuki. The word “shibai” had a connotation similar to that of the Western word “theatre” but this term was only used for kabuki and puppet theatre (ningyo-joruri), never for noh. The Western concept of theatre was new to us, therefore, when it was brought into Japan in the late 19th century. A new Japanese word “engeki” was established as the translation of “theatre,” and soon came to include all kinds of theatrical

performances, traditional or modern. But still today a nuance of formality has not been entirely eliminated from the word, "engeki," and whenever theatre people pretend to be humble about their own profession, they say "shibai" instead of "engeki²⁾." A university has the department of "engeki," never department of "shibai."

The concept of culture also was quite new for us Japanese. In this case we had had no similar concept at all. When it had to be rendered into Japanese, the word "bunka" was taken up³⁾. After the Second World War the word "bunka" became fashionable, as Japan was forced to be transformed from a military nation into a cultured nation by the Allied Forces (represented by Americans). "Cultured" here actually meant democratic and kabuki plays of feudalistic samurai stories were forbidden by General Headquarters of the Allied Forces; the best known revenge play, *The History of Royal Retainers* (Kanadehon Chushingura), was indeed regarded as anti-cultural and banned. People wished to add the word culture (bunka) to everything like a prefix: culture-town, culture-house, culture-clothes, culture-pan, culture-knife, etc. Especially respected intellectuals were called culture-men (bunka-jin). Here culture rather meant modern, that is, Western. Japan began to be rapidly westernized in the early 1960s, which was the beginning of the high economic growth period of Japan. Money dominated everything. The Olympic Games were held in Tokyo in 1964. Not only the way of thinking and living but also the bodies of Japanese people began to change, perhaps because we strongly wished to be shaped like Westerners, that is, to be tall and have long and slim legs. No wonder kabuki came to face a crisis in terms of the shape of actors' bodies.

A new type of theatre, so-called underground theatre, emerged in the 60s as an anti-establishment movement. They refused to be "engeki" people or "bunka" people and liked to be called outsiders. Without doubt this movement was a reflection of similar movements in Europe and America.

And some of the leaders of these groups, notably Suzuki, Terayama and Ninagawa, would become well known in the West in the 70s and the 80s because of their intercultural theatre productions, and enjoy their highly respected status.

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Interculturalism is very often a one way business. The interest in Chinese arts in 18th century Europe is called *Chinoiserie* and that in Japanese arts in the late 19th century *Japonaiserie* or *Japanism*. There are no equivalent expressions for Asian interest in Western arts. Mnouchkine said, quoting Artaud's remark, "The theatre is Oriental." Japanese said at the threshold of our modern times, "The theatre is Occidental," and tried to westernize our theatre to make it modern. But our modern and westernized theatres do not attract Westerners. When Suzuki or Ninagawa japanized the modern Japanese theatre again, however, they were much praised. They are called intercultural because they have the same attitude as Western avant-garde theatre such as Mnouchkine's "Greek tragedy in Japanese style" or "Shakespeare in Kimono." Like it or not, intercultural activity is based upon the hierarchy of cultures just as international activity is grounded upon the hierarchy of nations. The term intercultural is applied to the Western experiment of adopting eastern theatre, or the modern experiment of adapting traditional theatre. Not vice versa. Suzuki or Ninagawa do not take much care over the differences between Kabuki and Noh, like Mnouchkine.

It may be perfectly permissible for those directors not to differentiate between Kabuki and Noh, between Japanese and other Asian theatres. As long as they attract the audience, it may not matter whether they look Japanese or not. But for our understanding "other" cultures, which seems

to me to be an only *raison d'être* for our studying interculturalism in theatre after all, we should not ignore their indifference to the differences between various Asian theatres, particularly if we like to interpret and analyze intercultural meanings of their productions.

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Interculturalism in theatre has been one of the most discussed subjects among theatre scholars for the past ten years. Some have proposed methods to analyze or categorize various intercultural theatre performances. Various terms have been introduced and defined: multicultural, cross-cultural, trans-cultural, ultra-cultural, post-cultural, meta-cultural, intra-cultural, etc⁴). But since theatre is ephemeral and those who can see a certain performance are limited in number, what we need is a description of the production for further exploration and examination of the complicated cultural issues involved. For this purpose, the methodology of performance analysis would be useful to a certain extent. But we need not only a description of what happened on the stage but also of the entire production, that is, what happened in the whole theatre house and its relationship to the outer world. Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* would be just about the same anywhere it is performed in terms of performance analysis, but a description of the production would be very different in Edinburgh, Paris or Tokyo. In Tokyo it was performed in one of the finest theatres in town, but all the luxurious seats in the auditorium were taken away and replaced by wooden benches in order to create a rural atmosphere in the auditorium. Because of this, every ticket cost \$100. Theatre critics unanimously praised the performance, but of course they did not have to pay for their tickets.

This kind of description is not as trivial as it first looks, from the

cultural viewpoint. It is important to see what purpose the performance is intended for and whom it is aimed at.

Perhaps what is needed is a sort of "thick description," as Clifford Geertz paraphrases Gilbert Ryle's idea in his *Interpretation of Cultures*.

Ryle's discussion of "thick description" appears in two recent essays of his [...] addressed to the general question of what, as he puts it, "Le Penseur" is doing: "Thinking and Reflecting" and "The Thinking of Thoughts." Consider, he says, two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes. In one, this is an involuntary twitch; in the other, a conspiratorial signal to a friend. The two movements are, as movements, identical; from an I-am-a-camera, "phenomenalistic" observation of them alone, one could not tell which was twitch and which was wink, or indeed whether both or either was twitch or wink. Yet the difference, however unphotographable, between a twitch and a wink is vast; as anyone unfortunate enough to have had the first taken for the second knows⁹.

Geertz advocates adopting the concept of "thick description" for ethnography that the practitioners of anthropology, or social anthropology, describe. He goes on to present as an example a part of his own record of the history he collected in Morocco. The description of theatre production for our purpose would not be the same, of course. It should contain not only ideological and sociological but also esthetical and historical viewpoints. But also, a comparative point of view would be of great help. Though I am not prepared for presenting a model myself, I will show a portion of my view taking up some intercultural performances as examples.

The thin description of Mnouchine's production as "a European drama in Eastern theatre style" may be the same as that of Suzuki's or Ninagawa's Shakespeare or Greek tragedy. All three did not merely imitate kabuki or noh style. They would claim that they only had had some inspiration from them⁶). Their characters do not look exactly like Japanese. Nonetheless, one is wink and the other two are twitches, so to speak. While Mnouchkine's *Richard II* clearly suggests social, historical aspects of Shakespeare, Ninagawa or Suzuki does not care much about social or historical meanings of the cultural elements in their productions. For example, Suzuki's *The Bacchae* is set in the environment of a bombed town, and the main character, played by a Noh actor, prepares his meal using a portable oven outdoors: a common picture in a Japanese town after the war. But one can immediately see that this has nothing to do with the after-war situation of Japan, or, for that matter, in any country at any time. Everything is only for the theatrical effect. In this respect, Brook's *Mahabharata* is undoubtedly on the side of Mnouchkine's attitude.

Here we can use the concept of "ground and figure" in psychology as tools of descriptions. In Mnouchkine's, Brook's or other similar intercultural Western productions, Asian elements are drawn as "figures" on the "ground" of European theatrical sensibility, which to us Asians seems to be based on textcentrism or rationalism. (The American professor's attitude to the ritual performance I talked about at the beginning of the present paper could also be called a kind of textcentrism.) Whether you like it or not, "figure" is tentative and do not affect the essential construction of "ground." It can easily be erased if you like. As I said, Suzuki's or Ninagawa's productions have similar structures on the surface, but what

is their "ground"? In fact there is no drama which can be regarded as the ground in their performances. They just borrow the frame of myths of Greek tragedy. The frame is sometimes mistaken as the "ground" but we soon realize that it is in fact a twitch, no wink. If we take Ninagawa's *King Oedipus*, produced in Tokyo in 1984, as an example, there several interesting features should be pointed out in the performance. It was performed in an open space in front of a Buddhist temple in Tokyo, Tsukiji-hongan-ji, whose huge entrance steps and door were used as those of Oedipus' castle, which clearly reminded us of the famous Reinhardt production of the play in 1910. Ninagawa transferred this Greek play to the 14th century Kyoto and made the costumes, music and actors' movements representative that time. This was also the time when noh was finally established as a theatre form, but Ninagawa's performance looked rather kabuki-like. The dialogues were poetic and a fairly faithful translation of the original Greek tragedy, but the role of Jocaste was played by a Greek actress, who spoke in modern Greek while the other characters spoke in Japanese. This fact implies that Ninagawa either presupposed the audience's knowledge of the story or did not care if the audience could follow the whole story or not. Before the play started, a huge red metal saucer was lifted high up to the level of the roof of the temple and kept there throughout the play, obviously symbolizing the Sun-god, Apollo, who was going to control everything in the play. But, was Ninagawa aware of the fact that while the Sun in Greek mythology is male, the Sun in Japanese mythology is female? The large group of suppliants, who gathered in the orchestra at the beginning of the play, stayed there as the chorus of suffering people, though the suppliants and the chorus are different in the original play. Does this symbolize the suffering situation in Japan today, or in any developing country in the world today?

In this production, the "ground" was painted with "figures" all over so

that one can make no distinction between “figure” and “ground” there. If you erase the “figures” comprising Japanese elements, nothing will remain. This is also the case with Suzuki from the outset. In his *Around the Dramatic II*, for example, what is primarily sought for is the dramatic incongruity between the text and its enactment. One clearly senses parodies here, and the relationship between “figure” and “ground” is easily turned around. In the scene of Yushima Shrine, taken from the adaptation of Izumi Kyoka's *Onna-keizu*, (*Women's Pedigree*), Kayoko Shiraishi, the main actress of Suzuki's company, bites a huge Japanese radish and beats her lover, who is cutting vegetables on a board. This is in sharp contrast to the original scene, which develops very sentimentally. We watch Shiraishi instead of the character she is playing. This is nothing unusual in traditional theatre, kabuki or noh, in which an actor and a character are not entirely identical as in the realistic Western theatre. Usually the actor is the “ground” on which the character is drawn as the “figure,” but they easily switch their roles. The audience enjoys watching the actor on the “ground” of the character.

Nevertheless, in the cases of Suzuki and Ninagawa, particularly the former, we cannot but feel a distinct flavor of the Western rational way of thinking. It is manifest in his actor training method, severe and precise, and the fact that his actors are completely under the director's control. This means that their productions have the almost invisible “ground” under the seemingly identical “ground” and “figure.” So, Suzuki is winking after all, we should say, and that may be the reason that his productions appeal to Westerners. This will become clear if we compare Suzuki's Shakespeare with, for example, a kabuki adaptation of *Hamlet*, one of the earliest “intercultural” Shakespeare performances in Japan, which was staged for the first time at Japan Festival in London in 1990 and revived in Tokyo in 1994⁷). A kabuki actor, Matsumoto Somegoro, successfully played the double roles of Hamlet and Ophelia in the nunnery

scene. But what is the meaning of this? Kabuki often shows one actor's quick transformation on the stage simply to surprise the audience. Is *Hamlet* a play using that kind of theatrical gimmick?

Maurice Bejart's dance productions based on kabuki plays may be regarded as the reversed image of the *Kabuki Hamlet*. In his dance production, *The Kabuki*, based on Royal Retainers but only fragmentally, Bejart deforms and transforms kabuki techniques and patterns of movements with a distinctly European sensibility. Girls wear genuine Japanese kimonos but in a very peculiar way. In one scene a pair of girls wear one kimono together. He directed and choreographed this production for a Japanese ballet company. The members of the company had been trained for Western ballet and practically never wore kimonos in everyday life. So, first they had to learn how to wear kimonos, and then how to walk or jump in ballet shoes in kimonos, which is never seen in reality. But a characteristic feature in Bejart seems to me to be an almost total lack of social and historical verisimilitude. It is particularly distinct in Bejart's production taken from Japanese dance, *Dojoji*. Bejart let the kabuki onnagata actor, Bando Tamasaburo, and the late star dancer of his company, Jorge Don, dance together, and the story of female passion devouring her male counterpart is reversed. The stage is a simple board of approximately 5 meters square with no scenery. On it Tamasaburo dances the kabuki dance, *Kyokanoko musume dojoji*, fairly faithfully in full kabuki costume, whereas Jorge Don, his upper half naked, watches and imitates Tamasaburo's movements beside him. The music is Japanese for this dance, but at the very last moment, when Don chases Tamasaburo, who is trying to run away to the backstage, it is switched to Wagner's music.

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Suzuki and Ninagawa, together with the late Terayama, may be the best known Japanese directors in the West today. But the most influential leader of the underground theatre movement in the late 60s and the early 70s in Japan was, without doubt, Kara Juro and his group, Theatre of Situation (Jokyo-gekijo). They performed in a huge red tent, which was set up on a vacant lot in Tokyo. Their red tent became a symbol for a new and dangerous young culture. Kara is a dramatist-actor-director and if not intercultural, definitely intracultural.

Another important group was Theatre of Transformation (Tenkei-gekijo), led by Shogo Ota. Ota's silent drama, *The Water Station*, would immediately remind you of Robert Wilson's slow motion performance because actors walk and make movements very slowly. But Ota is quite unique and absolutely one of the best directors of that time.

Productions by Kara and Ota may be put into the same category as those of Ninagawa and Suzuki when recorded as "a thin description." But as "a thick description" they are quite contrary. Ota's *Water Station* has no story; people only come and go, stopping for a while in a sort of empty park, where a water tap is standing and water is actually running off.

Here again, we see no clear distinction between "figure" and "ground." But unlike Suzuki's or Ninagawa's productions, which have a underlying Western, rationalistic way of thinking, Ota's *Water Station* is undoubtedly based on a truly Japanese sensibility, by which I mean something like what a Zen-Buddhist philosopher, Daisetsu Suzuki, calls Japanese spirituality: an attitude of seeing a thing as it is. You remember the first episode about the village people.

Being based on this sensibility, one can freely make use of anything, any foreign elements, as one likes, and yet nothing is foreign. Everything is

natural, a part of oneself. That there is no distinction between "figure" and "ground" in Ota's *Water Station* is no result of any deliberate rationalization like Suzuki or Ninagawa. The silence, the slow motion, comes out as it naturally does. It is rather difficult to explain this in a rational way, and we need a special methodology even for a thick description of this. But the complex and yet simple characteristic of Ota's production may be understood if you see Kazuo Ono's butoh and Garyark Amagasaki's street dance.

Ono, together with Tatsumi Hijikata, is regarded as an originator of butoh, and today, though he is more than 90 years old, is still dancing. He retains traditional Japanese sensibility even though he was first trained in Western dance. So, he uses any elements, Japanese or Western, freely in his own way. We sometimes wonder whether he is only improvising his movements or following his own choreography. His dancing sometimes looks so amateurish that we think it would be possible for anyone to dance like that. But he is completely free and natural on the stage, which is the most difficult thing for any artist, and this is what Zeami mentioned as the final state for a noh actor to attain, the state of no mind⁸⁾.

Amagasaki's street dance, on the other hand, is apparently improvisational. He dances in an empty place in a small town, or, once in a while, in a tiny space between the skyscrapers in downtown Tokyo. If Ono is for intellectuals, Amagasaki is for common people, based on the folkloric dance and melody for soothing the dead souls in the Tsugaru area, the northernmost part of the main island of Japan. He runs around half naked and breaks into the circle of the gathering audience, from whom he collects money afterward. I do not know if we can say he is as free as Ono, but he is, without doubt, following his own feelings to soothe the dead he used to know. In this sense Amagasaki's street dance is downright Japanese. If compared with this, Ninagawa's spectacular outdoor production of *King Oedipus* would simply look phony.

Notes

- 1) The ritual is called Amatsu-tsukasa-no-mai, and is held on the 19th of July each year in Oze-machi, Kofu City, Japan. The conference was held in November 1994.
- 2) I made a survey of the usage of the word “engeki” (演劇) in the early history of modern Japanese theater in my Japanese article, “Ipusen izen . . . meiji-ki engeki kindai-ka wo meguru mondai(1) . . .” (Before Ibsen: Problems in the Modernization of Theatre in Meiji Era), *Bigaku bijutsu-shi ronshu* Nr. 6, Seijo University, Graduate School of Literature, 1987. The topic of “engeki” was also mentioned in my keynote lecture, “Thinking and Feeling,” presented at the International Conference of Japanese Theatre in Munich in June 1998. This lecture was eventually printed in *Japanese Theatre & the International Stage* (ed. Stanca Scholz-Cionca and Samuel L. Leiter, Brill: Leiden, 2001).
- 3) It seems that the word “bunka” (文化) was originally the translation of “enlightenment” or the abbreviation of “bunmei-kaika” (文明開化), which meant civilization, in the early Meiji era. “Bunka” was also used as the name of one of the periods in the Edo era, the Bunka period (1804-1818). This was taken from Chinese books, *Ikyo* and *Gokanjo*. Cf. Shogakkan’s *The Grand Dictionary of Japanese*.
- 4) Cf. Patrice Pavis, “Introduction,” in *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, Routledge: London and New York, 1996.
- 5) Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 6.
- 6) In her paper presented at the International Colloquium of Theatre Studies 1997 in Tokyo, Josette Feral categorized intercultural artists in two groups. One includes those who think it is mandatory to get deeper in foreign cultures before using them for their own purposes. The other comprises those who think that art has always had the privilege of being completely free in its borrowings of “other” cultures. Feral thinks that Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine belong to the second category.
- 7) This “Kabuki Hamlet” is *Hamuretto yamato nishikie*, adapted by Kanagaki Robun and published serially in the newspaper, *Tokyo Illustrated*, in October and November 1886. It had never been performed until the production for the Japan Festival in London in 1990.
- 8) In the above-mentioned paper of mine, “Thinking and Feeling,” I pointed out the similarity of Ono to the former Inoue Yachiyo. I argued that her

Japanese dance, ji-uta-mai, is free of rationalization, in contrast to the ji-uta-mai of the late Takehara Han, who seems to me to have danced relying on her minute pre-calculation. Both Inoue Yachiyo and Takehara Han continued to dance in their 90s and enjoyed the greatest admiration of dance-lovers.