Tradition and Modernity in Mitsuya Mori's *Double Nora*

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Mitsuya Mori's remarkable experiment with Ibsen's *A Doll's House, Double Nora*, is uniquely suited to address a postmodern cosmopolitan audience positioned to view its performance strategies from multiple historical and aesthetic angles. For both Japanese and Western theatre, the first productions of *A Doll's House* heralded a modernist watershed in which a new style (psychological realism) and a new subject (the New Woman) entered into cultural practices within and beyond the theatre itself. Subsequently however, these early productions and the play itself became an historical artefact of its moment, canonized in the West—perhaps also within the Japanese context—but now "old-fashioned" or at least from another time: in a certain way, "traditional." By developing an adaptation of the text and a playing style that utilizes techniques from both Noh and realism, Mori's production evokes the shifting historicity of production and reception in a mobile new combination of forms, appropriate to our own time. In this essay, I am going to discuss the parallels in the earlier modernist moment of the play (1880s Europe and 1911 Japan), and then reposition it in relation to *Double Nora* as existing within tradition in light of a new (post) modernity.

To begin with the most well-known Western claim, the first productions of *A Doll's House* in Europe (England, Scandinavia, Germany and also the U.S.) were widely received as revolutionary on grounds of both subject-matter and dramaturgy. The play addressed "the woman question," as it was called, because it put forth Nora's case in language already familiar from feminist writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft or Margaret Fuller, and because it was taken up after the 1880s in public debates about feminism and women's roles throughout the West. As Alisa Solomon

confirms, the play initiated "a spate of articles ... in daily papers and highbrow weeklies, describing *A Doll's House* theme as 'the subjection of women by men.'"[1] At the same time, the innovative stylistic features of Ibsen's social dramas were equally challenging. His work entailed a new and precise acting style, staging conventions, and structural features of a dramaturgy that re-worked or re-modeled the French "well-made play" to serve serious and metaphorically dense purposes. Solomon underlines the connection between style and substance when she observes, "Ibsen's plays engaged the roiling controversy over gender through their self-scrutinizing dramatic actions, questioning the representation of women by questioning the means of representation itself."[2]

Something similar might be said about the initial production of *A Doll's House* in Japan in 1911, first at the leading training academy and two months later at the Imperial Theatre. Japan's first Nora, Matsui Sumako, was one of the first four females to be trained in the first class of the Theatre Institute of the Literary Society, and is often considered the first modern Japanese actress, and Nora, the first modern leading role played by a woman. Sumako was the leading actress of the theatre company, Geijutsuza (Art Theatre), founded by her director and lover Shimamura Hōgestsu, after she had been dismissed from the Theatre Institute because of their affair in 1913. Until his death in 1918, they toured Taiwan, Korea, Manchuria, and Vladivostok with plays such as *A Doll's House*, *Salome*, *Heimat*, *Carmen*, and *Resurrection*. Sumako's 1914 memoir, *Botanbake* (Peony Brush), sold 40,000 copies.[3]

Apart from the "new woman" behaviour of this young star, the play itself was well-known among young intellectuals and artists in Japan who were familiar with the play in Shimamura's 1906 translation. Feminist scholar Ayako Kano, whose major study *Acting Like a Woman in Modern Japan* has been a rich source for this essay, explains that a reading culture had risen up in Japan in which faithfulness to the text, in terms of translation, sound of the natural voice, and transparency to the

1) Alisa Solomon, "The New Drama and the New Woman: Reconstructing Ibsen's realism," in *Re-Dressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender* (London and New York), 50.

2) Solomon, 47.

3) Susan Mason, "Matsui Sumako (1886-1919)" unpublished manuscript courtesy of the author.

"original" were valued, so that according to Kitami Harukazu, theatre goers would "perceive the performance as if tracing the printed words on stage. There would even be students alternating between looking at the stage and looking up the text of the play in the original language."[4] Kano sets the "New Theatre" in reaction to a rejected Kabuki not only because of its supposed nature over artifice stylistics, but also because after the Meiji Restoration (1868), a period of nation-building brought forward a utilization of certain Western styles and ideas as part of an effort to make Japan an imperial power capable of maintaining relations of parity or superiority with nations in the West and elsewhere in Asia. This modernization also meant a certain masculinization, as *onnagata* (male actors portraying idealized femininity) became marginalized as "backward, decadent, even perverse."[5] The rejection of Kabuki in favour of what would become Shingeki thus involved complex notions of national identity as well as of gender-appropriate behaviour and aesthetic judgments of artistic value.[6]

In terms of the subject matter, the situation was similar to that in the West: the play gave rise to passionate public discussions and was related to concepts of the "New Woman" in Japan at the time. The women's journal *Seitō* brought out a bibliography of writings on *A Doll's House* in November 1911 (the same month as the performance at the Imperial Theatre (Teikoku Gekijō)), and later published a special issue about the play. The attitudes were not all positive, especially addressing the controversy over whether or not Nora should have left her husband and children, the main concern of many Japanese women on the subject. The charge that Nora might be selfish, a selfish emancipated woman, gave several writers pause, including Ueno Yōko, who thought it selfish that Nora "can sacrifice everyone else in order to attain her own individual goal."[7] Other essays however emphasized sympathy with her

4) Quoted in Ayako Kano, *Acting Like a Woman in Modern Japan: Theatre, Gender, and Nationalism* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 160.

5) Kano, 8.

6) For example, since Kabuki involved nothing like "fidelity to the text" and thrived on improvisation and embellishing of well-known plots, it was the antithesis of the transparent word-perfect renditions of the new theatre's productions.

7) Quoted in Kano, 196.

situation and compassion for her predicament. Several of the essays talk about her coming to self-awareness, and the revelation of her interior state, a concept in line with the ideology of the New Theatre's attempts at transparency. Following publication, the Seitō group was satirized as the "Japanese Nora Training Institute," and the range of positions taken by its members were collapsed into a charge of self-centered behaviour: the "atarashii onna" (new woman) was called "Nora."[8]

The novel form and radical content of *A Doll's House* in both cultural contexts examined here gave way by the 1960s and 1970s to new movements that rejected the old in the name of both theatrical and feminist critiques. In the West, Roland Barthes, among others, mounted the attack on the ideological closed circuit of realism with its "pictorial code" and its assumptions about a privileged centered subject.[9] Feminist theatre scholars praised early aspects of realism only to damn it as ideologically conservative, reinscribing essentialist gender dynamics and denying the possibility of change through the seeming inevitability of its constructions. Typical of these views is Elin Diamond's on William Archer's defense of Ibsen as making a truthful mirror of real life: "The hackneyed 'mirror of life' conceit erases agency and ideology—the point of view in the angle of the mirror, in the holder of it, and in the life it reflects."[10]

Within the Japanese context, Shingeki gave way in time to a new avant-garde of Japanese writers who attempted to move beyond the rigid realism and leftist ideology of much of the "New Theatre" movement. Profoundly disillusioned after the Second World War with nationalism and also with initial ideas of modernization that had come to mean commodification, and what Mishima called "false affluence," writers such as Kara Jūrō, Betsuyaku Minoru, and Shimizu Kunio strove to recover some of the focus on the performing body and its gestures as a way to capture a more authentic inner state of experience. Re-worked traditional forms such as Noh and Ka-

8) Kano, 197.

9) For an excellent discussion of Barthes' critique in the context of the larger structuralist movement, see Matthew Potolsky, *Mimesis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 107-111.

10) Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 29.

buki were seen as ways of restoring Japanese qualities to what had become sterile western forms. Tatsumi Hijikata's *butō* and Tadashi Suzuki's experimental productions led the way in the recovery and expansion of traditional forms. And in much of the new drama, the problematics of cultural and individual memory were foremost. Characteristic of these changes of valuation is J. Thomas Rimer's comment on the period:

> In nō and kabuki, which shingeki despised as premodern and irrational and from which it had completely severed itself, the actor is far more than simply the medium through which the author communicates his message [as in the New Theatre paradigm]. Instead his body is accorded a privileged importance as the site where this social pariah called 'actor' exposed to the humiliating regard of the audience, turns himself into a fascinating presence, where the audience watches an epiphanic manifestation of deepest desires, of the actor as well as of themselves.[11]

Thus the pendulum swings back toward alternative styles of representation, although the emphasis throughout remains on attempts to accurately represent Japanese identities, now as citizen-subjects rather than imperial subjects.

Turning to Japanese feminism in the 1970s, what we might consider Japan's "second wave" was similar to its Western counterpart of the same era. Japanese women organized around abortion, bioethics, ecology, and other similar issues. Mitsu Tanaka established Japan's first women's liberation center at Shinjuku in 1972. In the debates about women's right to abortion, she thought abortion was necessary but not a "right" since it involved destroying life while Chupiren, another women's liberation group from the same period, argued it was a "right" and the foetus was a part of the woman's body. It is not too far a stretch to see the ambivalence about Nora's responsibility to her children still continuing in these more modern problematics.[12]

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11) J. Thomas Rimer, "Foreward," to *Alternative Japanese Drama*, eds. Robert T. Rolf and John K. Gillespie (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), 5.

12) See http://www.lifestudies.org/feminism01.html

The role of gender in national identity was an especially interesting topic. Here the essentialism of an earlier period became a subject for serious discussion and debate. Just as we saw that the emancipated "new woman" was nevertheless circumscribed by a view of gender differentiation determined by biology (whereas ironically the earlier period celebrates an ambiguous gender assignment in phenomena such as the *onnagata*), the argumentation in the 70s and 80s in Japanese feminism often focused on issues of whether or not femininity was an appropriate value, whether it should be repudiated as spurious and in any case male-defined, or whether there was an appeal to feminine ethics and behaviours that could critique and improve the nation precisely because it came from women. In the "Aoki and Ueno debate" in the mid-1980s, these questions came to a head as Aoki Yayoi advocated a "feminine principle" as part of an articulation of eco-feminism.[13]

Furthermore, although many women controlled the household finances, the discussion of power relationships between men and women in the home and their status in the workplace became a locus for serious discussion and debate in terms of what balance or parity would consist of in Japanese postwar culture. As Vera Mackie points out in *Feminism in Modern Japan*, Japanese modernity, starting with the Meiji Restoration but continuing after the war, had ascribed to women "the role of 'good wives and wise mothers' whose primary role was in the reproduction and socialization of children, and as passive supporters of 'a wealthy country and a strong army (*fukoku kyōhei*)' .... Feminism was one [critical] response to the development of these gendered nationalist identities."[14]

What I have been sketching is the contextual background of the contemporary production of *Double Nora*, a history that has moved dialectically between perceptions of both Nora and her play as traditional or modern, revolutionary or recuperative, depending on the viewpoint of the spectator, his or her subject position, and moment in time—a context not so very different in its broad outlines in Japan and the West.

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13) Aoki Yayoi et al., *Broken Silence: Voices of Japanese Feminism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 2.

14) Vera Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3.

Mori's title goes to the heart of his production ideas: *Double Nora*. Elegantly referring to multiple registers of representation, Mori encompasses the fundamental double subjectivity of Nora as wife/mother on the one hand and independent subject on the other; the stylistic mix of traditional and modern, Noh and realism; the oscillation between seeing *A Doll's House* as an artefact from a former time(s) and as an enactment of contemporary predicaments. Through dialectically related opposites, the production enables a cosmopolitan audience aware of the context to experience the performance more as a "both/and" embodiment of these alternatives.

Mori chose to use the traditional Noh stage—not only in Tokyo, but on tour in Europe in a modified form that preserved the square central stage (*hon butai*) and the bridgeway (*hashigakari*). While my discussion is based on the DVD recording of a full Noh stage and I did not see the European touring productions, I am assuming that enough of the traditional stage was represented on tour to allow for the ability of the audience to see Nora "off-stage" in the space of waiting, the vestibule-like space that creates continuity between interior and exterior spaces important to the multiple metaphors of *Double Nora*. This space, as Susan Mason points out, suggests the metaphysical realm of the boundaries between different levels of reality, following traditional Buddhist and Shinto concepts, but can also hint at the domestic boundaries of Japanese architecture as well.[15] Thus the setting for the play determines the kind of oscillation I am suggesting is crucial to the "both/and" strategy of Mori's adaptation.

The text for the Mori production is about a third the length of the original, and Mori did the translation himself.[16] The production lasted something more than an hour, due to the slow delivery of the passages chanted in the Noh style and the details of Noh staging such as the initial entrance and set-up of the musicians and chorus[17]. Like Western opera, then, this form needs to distil and compress the narrative

15) Susan Mason, "Ma and the (Meta) Physics of Noh," paper delivered at the Japan Studies Association Conference, San Diego, January 4, 2007.

16) Quotations from the play are taken from the English version of Mori's Japanese adaptation provided by the adaptor.

17) Mori calculates the performance time at 70 minutes. "Notes on the Performance of *Double Nora*," courtesy of Mitsuya Mori.

details to keep only the most important passages in the "libretto"/script.

Four principle actors enact the performance: two appear in the formal Noh style with full costume while two play in modern style and dress (Nora's simple dark dress evoked both a previous century and simple contemporaneous designs simultaneously.) Nora is doubled—once as the *Shite* of Noh theatre, played by a man in mask and wig; once as a psychologically realistic (actual) woman. Torvald, the *Waki*, is a male in traditional dress throughout while the fourth male actor plays both Krogstad and Dr. Rank in modern dress. Thus the casting decisions also contribute to the layering of meanings: on one level, the *Shite* and *Waki* are caught in traditional marriage patterns of behaviour, speech, and sentiment while challenged by modern aspects of character and predicament in the personages of the "threat" to the family (Krogstad) and the threat of death or fate (Rank) accompanied by the repressed aspects of Nora which won't be silenced or permanently displaced. In this reading, the modern threatens the traditional, but it is only one way of perceiving the interaction.

Across the two realms falls a connecting shadow in the form of a stage prop. It might be described as "the law," "the script," or perhaps following Derrida, the "logos". One of the few elements Mori keeps in his simple, stripped-back staging is the document, the white piece of paper which represents Nora's forgery and Krogstad's accusation and finally his confession. In this image lies what Branislav Jakovljevic has identified as "performative writing"—that contractual performative act (I swear, I promise, I do etc.) in J.L. Austin's theory of the force of such performative actions that binds the one who executes the document to the letter of the law.[18] In *Double Nora*, the force of the performative crosses over between the two worlds and refuses to allow tradition and modernity to remain separate realms. For equally in the premodern world as in the modern, such concepts of legality can miss the mark of the true human relationships and experiences they are expected to codify. That this aspect is within Mori's design is clear from his own description of what he designates as the crucial scene:

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18) Branislav Jakovljevic, "Shattered Back Wall: Performative Utterance of *A Doll's House*," *Theatre Journal* 54.3 (October 2002): 431-448.

> The scene between Nora and Krogstad is of a completely modern type, and this is the scene in which the whole story starts. Here Nora utters important lines: "A daughter hasn't a right to protect her dying father from anxiety and care? A wife hasn't a right to save her husband's life? I don't know much about laws, but I'm sure that somewhere in the books these things are allowed."(13) But Krogstad says, "Laws don't inquire into motives." Then Nora gives her reply, of crucial significance: "Then they must be very poor laws." This shows Nora's hidden wish to insist on women's law, which Ibsen suggested in his "Notes on Modern Tragedy." In my production, this line was chanted by the chorus in the noh chanting style, so as to emphasize it.[19]

What I would add to Mori's description is that the mixture of Noh and modern underscores the continuity across the periods of the problem of Law and law—women's law or other human principles of justice that do not fit within received national/patriarchial codes and practices. The striking prop of the white piece of paper connects the two realms as firmly as the other conventions seem to distinguish them.

The chorus (*Jiutai*) chants dialogue belonging to both Nora and Torvald, giving a communal witnessing to their expressions—in effect creating both reinforcement of the lines but also a sense of them being uttered in public. From one point of view the chorus participates in its medieval function as sacred community; from another point of view the psychological accents of the characters' subjectivities are heightened by repetition. When Torvald says, and the *Jiutai* repeat, "Nora, Nora! Just like a woman!" there is an effect of ceremonial repetition of the weight of traditional presumptions about gender and also a kind of confirmation of the chorus as community. However by the end of the play, the *Jiutai* leads the *Shite* in expressing the change that has come over her: When the *Shite* says, "You never loved me, never!" the *Jiutai* continues:

> Saying, "I love you", you just enjoyed yourself.

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19) Mori, ibid.

Our house has never been anything but a play-room.
I thought it was fun when you came and played with me.
It's your fault that I've never made
Anything of my life.

Alternating speeches in the final scene, Nora, the *Shite* and the *Jiutai* have become one voice, united in their perspective and their collective decision that Nora must leave. The two styles of acting, Noh and realist, are co-present and reconciled in this moment. Contemporary reality blurs tradition and modernity; the reality is a complex composite of both. It is a real blow to both to rupture the codes and leave the house/stage. And for something to get better, for couples to redeem their relationships, would take "the greatest miracle of all." The *Jiutai* have the last words of the play.

The beauty and grace of the performance are not only to be found in the Noh elements. The simplicity and elegance of the modern scenes in Mori's production ensure that no easy aesthetic judgment can separate its parts. Of particular interest in this regard is the relationship between the *Shite* and modern Nora. There are many effective images of their relationship in the staging, but I will focus on two—the (Christmas) tree decorations and the tarantella dance.

At the beginning of the play, an abstract wooden tree is the only set decoration. In the Western context, this is a Christmas tree, but in the Japanese context it is perhaps closer to the pine tree of Shinto shrines, Buddhist temples, and sacred instruments made of pine wood. The *Shite* brings in three "ornaments," disguised in the folds of her costume, and drops them on the floor. It is only when the modern Nora picks them up and hangs them on the tree that we see they resemble dolls while serving as tree ornaments, activating the metaphoric associations between dolls, ornaments, (and for contemporary Western viewers like me, the current phrase, "the trophy wife"). Thus the artefacts refer both to the ideal playhouse of the masculine imaginary and the actual doll-women who actually attempt to realize it. When the *Shite* replaces Nora and is alone on stage before her next scene with Torvald, she brings forth another ornament that appears to consist of birds on a wreath and hangs it on the tree while chanting, "And I'll do anything you want me to, Torvald. I'll sing for you, dance for you..." These objects function relationally between the two Noras as

well as figuring the ideal world that will be cast off at the play's end.

The tarantella forms a second powerful illustration of Mori's staging because it provides a rich multi-layered sequence of movement and dance. The *Shite* and Nora are spatially proximate in the early parts of the play, but only one "acts" at a time. When they are about to exchange, they line up, one behind the other, and shift the outer robe from one to the other. The first transformation comes at the end of the first scene between *Shite*-Nora and *Waki*-Torvald and the scene between Nora and Krogstad. Nora replaces the *Shite* in an image that looks as if she slips into the *Shite*'s skin. Nora returns the robe to the *Shite* when Krogstad leaves and withdraws to the bridge once more. This embodiment of the role through the costume underscores the shared identity of the two aspects of Nora and also stages the transformation of style that represents the complex historical reality invoked in the production. The robe designates the active voice but both actors designate the character. When Nora dances the tarantella with a shawl tied around her waist, she dances in her own way and style, and this is repeated but differently by the *Shite* without the shawl, who also dances later. The tarantella was a shamanistic dance that Italians performed for tourists during the period of time Ibsen lived in Italy, and Noh also retains some of its shamanistic origins. In addition, the tarantella is highly theatrical. Alisa Solomon comments on Ibsen's use of the tarantella to critique and transform an aspect of a previous melodramatic dramaturgy: "Nora's frenetic dance is not merely an outward manifestation of inner desperation—stagey effect-hunting, indeed. Rather, it announces itself as a remnant of that old staginess, and then goes it one better. Not a *concession* to the old effect-hunting, Nora's tarantella is an *appropriation* of it" [Emphasis in the original].[20] Rather than viewing Nora's dance in *Double Nora* in relation only to dance conventions of melodrama, this performance invites us to see Nora's tarantella as an appropriation of Noh's manner and method of dancing—both aspects of the character employ the dance figure, but they execute it differently. The relationship and the tension between tradition and modernity are figured through the dance itself.

Mori calls for the scene between Nora and Rank to be separated out from the

20) Solomon, 55.

other scenes of the play, and names it an "interlude." He is following traditional Noh procedures here as the *Shite* goes off the stage in the middle of the play and reappears "transformed" in new costumes and/or masks. What is created in this interlude is a scene in which modern Nora experiments with her new freedom and learns a hard lesson: when you do not have your narrow role of wife/mother to protect you, you may stumble into compromising situations without realizing it. Nora expresses her freedom by delighting Dr. Rank with the silk stockings, beautifully choreographed by Mori to resemble both a flirtation and a kind of aesthetic ceremony as she lifts the stockings up to the light. Rank responds by going further beyond the strict limits of the approved relationship by indicating he loves her. She has a moment of ethical crisis as she struggles to handle the uncharted situation: she realizes she cannot ask for his help now and she must withdraw into a propriety that belongs to the Nora that has left the stage. This interlude models the new kinds of negotiations of feelings and relations that a transformed Nora will experience in the world outside after she leaves. It is, in this sense, a figure of the future, all the more ironic and melancholy in that Dr. Rank is also the harbinger of death. Nora will live; Rank will die. She will play such scenes with other human beings in her new life, perhaps, but not with him.

When the *Shite* comes back on stage, everything will have changed, not only her/his costume. In the final sequence, *Shite*, Nora and the chorus are united in the new discovery of self and the decision to leave. Thus the change of costume for the *Shite* here represents the movement of the doubles closer to each other, a closer integration of the split subject. Perhaps the courage and energy to leave comes from this combination of experimentation (the scene with Rank) and transformation (the *Shite*'s changed appearance). As the *Shite* and Nora exit the stage, they act together for the first time as one figure, yet they are still two. The split subject remains in spite of this moment of alignment between them. This is an appropriate representation of the probable future for Nora as well—the traditional codes and practices will remain embedded in the memory and psyche even as the character explores a "modern" reality. The duality is not resolved, even at the climax.

The last moment of the performance ends with the reminder of what it might take to satisfactorily resolve the situation and allow husband and wife to reconcile: "the

greatest miracle of all" says Torvald, repeated by the chorus. As he leaves by the same bridgeway as Nora and the *Shite*, there is a sense of travelling the same "life's highway" and that the story is perhaps not totally concluded.[21)]

For anyone who has lived through a period of social change, the vestiges of the former time remain in memories, habits, behavioural traces, layered into our experiences like a palimpsest. This is the true multivalenced experience of human time. *Double Nora* captures this complex syncopation in theatrical staging that marks the main transitions of the twentieth century, recalling what is past and suggesting what is with us still. This stylistic hybrid addresses a contemporary moment when the issue of gender definition and relationships between the sexes continues to vex us, regardless of our home culture, through postmodern pastiche, one of our most successful methods of addressing different but co-present layers of history and experience.

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21) For an essay stressing the open-ended nature of the play see H. Neville Davies, "*A Doll's House* is Inconclusive," in *Readings on A Doll's House*, ed. Hayley R. Mitchell (San Diego: Greenhaven Press Inc., 1999), 48-54; also Branislav Jakovljevic's essay on the attempts to create epilogues or sequels to Nora's story in the years following its premiere.

figure 1. The two Noras gaze at each other. (Courtesy of Theatre Office Natori in Tokyo)

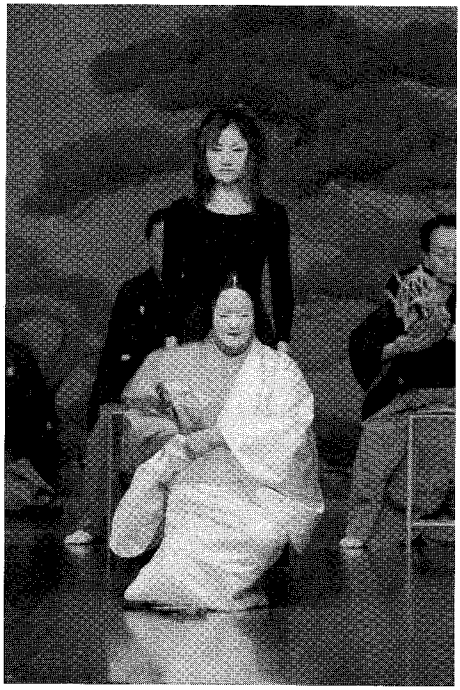

figure 2. Yu MIZUNO as the Nora double and Reijiro TSUMURA as the Nora *shite*. (Courtesy of Theatre Office Natori in Tokyo)