

International Exchange in Heisei-era theatre

Spotlight on Ninagawa Yukio and Noda Hideki

Hasebe Hiroshi (Tokyo University of the Arts)

Abstract

The two figures who stood at the vanguard of the Japanese theatre world and maintained an international status during the 31 years of the Heisei era (1989-2018) are Ninagawa Yukio and Noda Hideki. Ninagawa Yukio was the most internationally successful of all the theatre directors who emerged during the post-war years. Ninagawa's productions were acclaimed not on account of their "Japonistic" and Orientalist tendencies, but precisely because of their lack of any clear national identity. The blend of heterogeneous cultures transcending differences between East and West introduced a universal dimension into the Shakespearean narrative. This was a deliberate strategy on Ninagawa's part aimed at creating a global production. Noda Hideki showed much interest in performing overseas from early on in his career. He determined to surmount cultural barriers by not incorporating the Japanese language into the drama at any stage from the writing of the script to the stage presentation, with everything being conducted through the medium of English language. The European understanding of contemporary Japanese culture is becoming dominated by the concept of "Cool Japan". This has brought the essence of Japanese culture as it was conceived prior to the introduction into Europe of animation and Japanese cuisine such as sushi back to the surface. By basing his work on the Nō theatre, with its origins in medieval times, Noda was striving to convey how the traditional Japanese aesthetic as typified by the concepts of *yūgen*, *wabi* and *sabi* has been handed down to present-day Japan.

Keywords: Japanese theatre, international exchange, Ninagawa Yukio, Noda Hideki, Cool Japan

Hasebe, Hiroshi. 2020. "International Exchange in Heisei-era theatre: Spotlight on Ninagawa Yukio and Noda Hideki", *MINIKOMI: Austrian Journal of Japanese Studies* 88, 74–80. DOI: 10.25365/ajj-2020-88-08.

In its March 2019 issue, the Japanese theatre magazine *Higeki Kigeki* [Tragedy/Comedy] carried a feature entitled "100-nengo ni nokosu Heisei no engeki" ["Theatre of the Heisei era to be remembered a hundred years from now"]. This feature included a detailed chronology listing the most important theatrical presentations and events in the theatrical world, books on theatre, award-winning works and important social events during the thirty years of the Heisei period. Reading through this chronology brings into clear relief all the events that occurred in this time span.

In this special issue of *Higeki Kigeki*, 37 critics and journalists shortlisted plays, productions, and performances that represent the Heisei era. In this critics' poll, Ninaga-

wa Yukio (1935-2016) and Noda Hideki (b. 1955) received 14 and 8 votes respectively. Playwright Inoue Hisashi received 11 votes, but he distinctively did not seek to actively perform overseas. Remarkably, no other playwright, director or actor received more than five votes (*Higeki Kigeki* editorial board 2019).

The Heisei era was one of rising importance of artistic directors within the theatrical world. They enjoyed the position of cultural leaders, often acting as conduits between the world of theatre and the Japanese government. Among the most important figures were Watanabe Hiroko and Kuriyama Tamiya at the New National Theatre, as well as the three directors central to this essay: Ninagawa Yukio was the artis-

tic director of Saitama Arts Theatre, Noda Hideki was active at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Theatre, and Miyagi Satoshi held this position at the Shizuoka Performing Arts Centre (Uchida 2019, 6).

As a theatre critic, I will focus primarily on the two above-mentioned, leading directors and playwrights of the Heisei era in this essay - Ninagawa Yukio and Noda Hideki. I will also briefly introduce the artist collective Dumb Type and Miyagi Satoshi (b. 1959), whom I consider to be the most representative example of Japanese theatre active overseas. Reading through the chronology of the theatre of the Heisei era reveals an overwhelming number of references to both Ninagawa and Noda. In this essay, I intend not to argue about the acclaim they received in Europe. Rather, I want to show why these two artists, who have gained an unquestionable and outstanding reputation in the world of Japanese theatre, insisted on performing in Europe.

In 1989, the first year of the Heisei era, Ninagawa Yukio's *Chikamatsu shinjū monogatari* (*Suicide for Love*) has been staged beyond Japan's shores, in the UK and Belgium. It was also the year when the *onnagata* kabuki actor Bandō Tamasaburō (b. 1950) invited the famous Polish film and theatre director Andrzej Wajda to Tokyo to stage a performance of *Nastasja*, a play based on Dostoyevsky's novel *The Idiot*. This was around the end of the period of bubble economy, when the nation was basking in affluence and many large-scale performances by artists from overseas were taking place in Japan. In the thirtieth and final year of the Heisei era, the art event "Japonismes 2018", showcasing Japanese culture, took place in Paris. As the extended period of economic stagnation continued, it had become increasingly difficult on a financial level to engage in large-scale overseas exchanges in contexts other than festivals and government-sponsored events. In terms of Japanese theatre, that season saw the premiere of Noda Hideki's *Gansaku Sakura no mori no mankai no shita* (*In the Forest, Under Cherries in Full Bloom*) at the Chaillot National Theatre; and of *Umibe no Kafuka* (*Kafka on the Shore*), based on the

novel by Murakami Haruki and originally directed by Ninagawa Yukio, at La Colline National Theatre. Perhaps most symbolic of the changes that had occurred during these years was the presentation of *Sailor Moon: The Super Live*, a musical adaptation of the popular manga, at the Palais des Congrès in Paris.

Looking back at the above-mentioned overview of Japanese theatre of the Heisei era, the number of times Ninagawa Yukio and Noda Hideki have appeared in award-winning theatrical productions is remarkably high. Not only that, they also performed abroad far more often than other Japanese theatre artists. They have stood at the vanguard of the Japanese theatre world and have maintained an international status during these 31 years.

Ninagawa Yukio's international success

Ninagawa Yukio was the most internationally successful of all theatre directors who emerged in Japan during the post-war years. He enjoyed a particularly high reputation in Great Britain, where he maintained close connections with the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC). His works were performed in London at the Barbican Theatre as well as at the home of the RSC, Stratford-upon-Avon. His enthusiasm for overseas productions showed no sign of waning over the course of the Heisei era. Unlike other, small theatre directors, Ninagawa focused on directing plays that Western audiences could relate to and feel familiar with, such as Shakespearean and Greek tragedies. As a Japanese director, Ninagawa had an outstanding reputation (Billington 1993, 249). The originality of his dynamic direction attracted broad audiences (Billington 1993, 286), and a glance at his personal record reveals that he had directed overseas every year from 1989 onwards.

How was it possible for Ninagawa to direct theatre plays abroad so frequently? The reasons are several. Firstly, as the artistic director of Theatre Cocoon and the Saitama Arts Theatre, he had control over the decision-making and budget. Secondly, Ninagawa had a lifelong professional rela-

tionship with producer Thelma Holt, who was influential in the choice of repertory at the Barbican Theatre in London. Thirdly, in the Heisei era, the well-funded production group Hori Productions took practical responsibility for overseas performances.

His most acclaimed productions were those of plays by Shakespeare. The three principal plays directed by Ninagawa in Europe during the Heisei era were *Natsu no yo no yume/Le songe d'une nuit d'été* (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2002; performed in Paris at the Maison de la Culture du Japon)¹, *Pericles* (2003; performed in London at the National Theatre), and *Titus Andronicus* (2006; also performed in London at the National Theatre). The most representative of Ninagawa's early works, however, is Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (first performed in 1980). Ninagawa transposed the setting to the Sengoku ("warring states") period in Japan and gave the production an exotic design that made the stage resemble a Japanese Buddhist temple. At the same time, it featured Gregorian chants. Visually, Ninagawa's *Macbeth* brings to mind an aesthetic of *Japonisme*, but in a broader sense, elements of Japan and the West clash within the performance. The fusion of disparate cultures that transcends the conventional dichotomy between East and West brings an aspect of universality to Shakespeare's story.

Ninagawa believed that *Japonisme* could be weaponized in order to strengthen his recognition in Europe (Billington 1993, 249). In the Heisei era, he intensified his strategy of cultural clash in bringing three parties together instead of the two traditional poles of "Japan" and "the West", now also making references to cultural elements from Central Asia. For example, in *Oedipus Rex* (premiered 2002), Ninagawa forgoes the chorus of Greek tragedy and makes Oedipus wear Tibetan-influenced costumes; the character swirls around like Tibetan monks during prayer. This bodily movement is accompanied by *gagaku*, the ancient music of the Japanese imperial court. Thus, on Ninagawa's stage, a stateless world impossible to identify with any single country or culture appears.

In Great Britain, however, Ninagawa did not achieve his high acclaim solely with his blending of cultures. One of the main features of Ninagawa's productions are his unique staging techniques, on full display in his dynamic opening scenes, in which he utilizes loud music and evocative sound effects. Before even the first lines of the play are spoken, Ninagawa would use visual and auditory elements to confront the audience with his artistic direction. As a result, the audience is transported from the reality outside of the theatre to a different world.

Another important aspect of Ninagawa's unique approach is his tendency to highlight the perspective of the lower social classes in tales otherwise predominantly concerned with royalty. Ninagawa was deeply involved in the anti-establishment movement of the 1960s, which instilled in him the conflicting impulses of hatred of and, at the same time, an adoration of royalty, aristocracy, and other privileged classes. Conversely, he harboured a strong sympathy for the lowly and nameless (Ninagawa/Hasebe 2002, 281). For example, at the end of *Hamlet*, Fortinbras reigns at the top of the stairs as a violent young man. In the last scene of Ninagawa's adaptation of this play, Fortinbras is both the ruler of the kingdom and the representative of the younger generation. He is dressed in street fashion and appears to despise the older man. The aristocrats crawl up the stairs, attempting to approach and take in the new powers that be.

Ninagawa Yukio and the cruel century

Once the 21st century had begun and Ninagawa had acquired a solid reputation in Britain, he began to explore new avenues for his productions. After seeing a performance of *Pericles* presented at the Olivier Theatre stage of the London National Theatre, I thought drastic changes in world affairs could clarify the essential meaning of productions of the classics. Yukio Ninagawa's production of Shakespeare's *Pericles* was performed in London just one month after its first performance at the Sainokuni Saitama Arts Theatre.

Ninagawa has added bold scenes at the opening and close of this romantic drama.

Holes have been torn by bullets into the towering walls, and skulls are lying amidst the debris. A searchlight is beaming down and reflecting on a watercourse. A stream of water is flowing from a tap towards a bucket. Men and women holding heavy loads, supporting themselves with walking sticks, grasping knives and with their bodies twisted are attempting to relieve their thirst with recourse to the flow of water. People experiencing pain and suffering then align themselves in a horizontal row and bow towards the audience, indicating that the evening's presentation will involve *Pericles* being performed by a group of itinerant entertainers.

I wonder if the sight of figures covered in blood-soaked bandages transported the London audience into the minds of their own wounded and fallen soldiers, or if perhaps they thought of the Iraqi civilians killed in the bombing of their country by American and British forces. The tale of *Pericles* does not involve a chain of retribution. By choosing to stage this play, Ninagawa advocates for his audience to not give up if we can detect so much as a single shaft of light; in doing so, he provides a beacon of hope for life in the 21st century with its overcast skies. At the time, I thought that the drastic changes and developments in the world could lead to a new, more complex conceptualization and interpretation of the stage and theater writ large. The fact that Ninagawa's productions have been recorded and archived also holds the promise of new interpretations by future generations of theatre critics.

The 20th century was a century of war, and Ninagawa Yukio consequently saw it through this prism. His plays do not only allude to the bombing of Iraq by the US in March 2003; for example, he also revisited his early masterpiece – Shakespeare's *Macbeth* – in 2001 and gave it a completely new interpretation: This new production was set against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. The stage is covered by lotus leaves, withered by chemical weapons as the play begins, while sounds of helicopters, blasts and machineguns echo through the space.

Noda Hideki and his joint productions

Noda Hideki, the second theatre director who shall be discussed here regarding his international success, showed much interest in overseas productions from early on in his career. It could be said that Ninagawa and Noda were fortunate in their opportunities. However, the 1980s were a decade of many international productions, ranging from small theatrical shows to large-scale Kabuki performances; until the burst of Japan's bubble economy in 1991, the country's economic power could provide an impetus for a large variety of intercultural exchange. This was partly thanks to improvements in subsidies.

British director Frank Dunlop visited Japan in 1985 as chairman of the Edinburgh International Festival committee on the purpose of inviting young theatre artists to the festival. On this occasion, I had the good fortune of meeting Noda Hideki, at the time 30 years old, and Noda was able to start his international trajectory. In 1987, at the young age of 32, he took part in the Edinburgh Festival with *Nokemono kitarite* (*Here Comes the Wild Beast*), and the following year performed *Susei no Jikufurito* (*Comet Messenger Siegfried*) at the Majestic Theatre in New York. In 1990, the second year of the Heisei era, he took part in the Edinburgh Festival once again with a production of *Hanshin* (*Half Gods*). Both productions were presented in almost the same form as they had been earlier in Japan. With financial support provided by companies and government grants, Noda was able to accept invitations from overseas arts festivals and stage large-scale productions, but nevertheless he felt that there were limits to what could be achieved in such productions “transplanted” overseas (Hasebe 2014, 216). In an interview I conducted with him in 2014, Noda made the following statement:

Economic conditions in Japan at the time were good. It wasn't hard to find sponsors, but I had the impression that money was getting the upper hand. I began to wonder whether activities carried out in this manner could really be thought of as cultural exchange. (Hasebe 2014, 214)

Noda disbanded his troupe *Yume no Yūminsha* [Dreaming Bohemian] after seventeen years of activity in 1992 and travelled to Britain to study there for two years. During this time, he participated in acting workshops given by actor, director and playwright Simon McBurney, founder and artistic director of the London-based company Complicité (originally called Théâtre de Complicité). Here, Noda became acquainted with Michael Maloney, Kathryn Hunter and other acclaimed stage actors active in the company.

Noda subsequently conducted his own workshops that gathered together actors from London. Following the success of *Aka-oni* (*Red Demon*) at the Young Vic Theatre in 2003, Noda started regularly directing productions with British cast and staff, in which he participated as an actor too. Since the production of *The Bee* at the Soho Theatre in 2006, Noda has been writing his plays in English rather than writing them first in Japanese and having them translated subsequently. He has also been working with the dramatist Colin Teevan on creating collaborative play scripts and commented on this process in the following way: “The layout and structure get simplified. When I was working on *Aka-oni* (*Red Demon*), it wasn’t possible conversely to employ English plays on words, and I was concerned that this would prevent me from injecting my own creative input” (Hasebe 2014, 221).

Noda continued his collaboration with Colin Teevan in *The Diver* (2008). While *The Bee* was based on the novel *Mushiriai* (*Plucking at Each Other*) by the contemporary Japanese novelist Tsutsui Yasutaka (b. 1934) and was set in the modern era, *The Diver* was sourced from the Nō play *Ama*. The plot of this play, written after Zeami codified the theatre form in the early 15th century, is based on an ancient legend about pearl divers. Here, Noda adapts the source material to create an interplay between the original story and a violent tale of revenge set in the Heisei era, alternating back and forth between the present era and medieval times in a manner that highlights the features emblematic to Noda’s dramatic style. Ninagawa Yukio had prac-

tically always worked with a Japanese cast and stage crew. The few exceptions were, among others, *Tango at the end of winter* (based on Shimizu Kunio’s play *Tango, fuyu no owari ni*) starring Alan Rickman, or *King Lear* starring Nigel Hawthorne. Ninagawa’s London productions were staged in Japanese with English subtitles; in contrast, Noda Hideki’s works in London incorporated local cast and crew, such as the designer Vicki Mortimer, who worked on the London production of *Aka-oni*. Noda was the only member on the team not to be based in London. All of his plays were performed in English with no subtitles.

The radically different structure of the Japanese language, which utilizes ideograms instead of the alphabet to convey meaning – as many European languages do – gives the Japanese theatre different paradigms of expression. In this way, no matter how big the influence of European theatre, the theatre of Japan exists in its own, somewhat isolated position. To be sure, theatre is not just about the language in which the plays are written. But it is also true that the language in which a play is brought to the stage limits the audience, as well as the cast and crew who participate in it. In many ways, plays written in languages other than English are at a disadvantage in the global theatre market. Noda Hideki has chosen to write in English rather than translate his plays in order to increase his level of prominence in London. Personally, I do not know if that is a good choice, or a capitulation to the globalism of English. After all, I myself am publishing this manuscript in English instead of Japanese.

Noda determined to surmount this barrier by not incorporating the Japanese language into the theatre plays at any stage from the writing of the script to the stage presentation, with everything conducted through the medium of the English language. Why is it that Noda Hideki and Ninagawa Yukio gravitated towards London and other parts of the world outside Japan for recognition? It does not make much sense economically, as they have to be subsidised by Japanese companies and the government, yet make no profit at all. Could we, then, say that

this desire for touring abroad comes from a certain feeling of inferiority to Western theatre? I would argue, on the contrary, that their desire is to prove that theatre created in Japan is not a mere imitation of that of the West, but rather an original form of expression which can resonate with European and Japanese audiences alike.

Secondly, the European understanding of contemporary Japanese culture has gradually become dominated by the concept of “Cool Japan”. An artist such as Noda Hideki may feel some discomfort with that term, striving for an intellectual and artistic rather than commercial or diplomatic exchange (Hasebe 2014, 116).

In his international productions, Noda brings to the forefront more traditional aspects of Japanese culture than the usual trendy imports such as manga, anime or videogames. As mentioned above, Noda based *The Diver* (premiered 2008 in London) on the traditional Nō play *Ama*. He has used the theatrical form of medieval Nō performances as a motif before, for example in *Taboo* (first performed in 1996). However, it is unusual for him to base a play on an existing Nō play in such a clear-cut manner. Japanese dramatists usually approach Nō in a canonical manner, and few have the determination to make significant changes to the original work. Noda, on the other hand, tried to convey a traditional Japanese aesthetic by using elements of classical Japanese theatre, trying to present a different look from that of *manga* and *anime*.

Noda Hideki's hitherto unprecedented venture relies largely on his abilities as a man of the theatre. The title of an artistic director, of course, does not guarantee said director will always produce “good” or artistically valuable plays; in fact, the position of artistic direction or a professorship has arguably prevented other directors from achieving precisely that. What remains certain is that in Japan's economic climate, the position of artistic director provides a considerable advantage in opportunities for touring overseas.

Noda's path to success was partly opened up by his fortuitous encounter with the celebrated actress Kathryn Hunter, who lat-

er became his star performer. Among the most successful plays written and directed by Noda that Hunter starred in were *The Bee* and *The Diver*. But it was Noda himself who had visibly succeeded in expanding methods of international cultural exchange in being able to show stage works originally created in Japan overseas.

Theatre companies active primarily in French-speaking countries

The most successful theatre companies active in French-speaking countries and other regions of Europe during the Heisei era were Dumb Type and Ku Na'uka. Dumb Type was formed in 1984 by a group of graduates from Kyoto City University's Faculty of Fine Arts. The group distinguished itself by performances conceived as art installations rather than theatre. Dumb Type's most renowned work is *S/N* from 1994, primarily conceived by Furuhashi Teiji (1960-1995). Furuhashi left his mark on Japanese theatre in his pioneering use of computer technology and video on stage; he also shocked the conservative theatre community in Japan by coming out as both gay and HIV positive. Dumb Type went on an international tour in 1995, traveling to five European countries (Luxembourg, Germany, France, Belgium and Switzerland), as well as to Brazil. After Furuhashi's own passing away from AIDS, he achieved an international reputation as a director and actor along with his Dumb Type collaborators, director Takatani Shirō and contemporary composer and artist Ikeda Ryōji. Their next piece, *OR*, premiered in 1997 at Maubeuge in France and subsequently was shown at the Ars Electronica festival in Linz, Austria.

In Japan, there is a strong tendency for artists active in the theatre and on the stage to congregate in Tokyo. Dumb Type is an exception to this rule, in that it is based in Kyoto and has continued to perform on a tie-up basis with international creative groups not bound by genre.

Led by the director Miyagi Satoshi (b. 1959) and founded in 1990, Ku Na'uka stands out in its particular use of different performers in speaking and acting

roles, respectively. The actors on stage do not speak and only express themselves physically, while the narrator on stage delivers the characters' lines. In this way, Ku Na'uka translates the traditional Japanese puppet theatre, *bunraku*, into modern performance art. Their first full-scale European tour took place in 2001 with a bold reconstruction of Euripides' *Medea*, which drew attention especially on account of its live musical performances featuring percussion instruments, played by the actors themselves. The company toured Russia, Morocco, Italy and France, and in 2002 again toured France, giving performances in Nantes, Lorient, Brétigny-sur-Orge, Caen and Paris. A major turning point for Ku Na'uka came with a 2006 performance of *Mahabharata* at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris: here, the company worked with daring combinations of uniquely designed stage props erected not in an existing theatre, but rather in the museum space.

Miyagi Satoshi was appointed artistic director of the Shizuoka Prefecture Stage Arts Centre, located at the foot of Mount Fuji, in 2007. Ku Na'uka was invited to appear at the Avignon Festival in 2014 and staged a performance of *Mahabharata* at the Boulbon Quarry. In 2017 they went on to inaugurate the Avignon Festival with a rendition of *Antigone*, performed in the courtyard of the Palais des Papes. In both *Mahabharata* and *Antigone*, directed by Miyagi Satoshi, the roles of physical performers and the speaking actors are kept separate. In addition to this unique style of performance, Miyagi

utilized the architecture of the space. He chose it instead of relying on a classical theatrical structure with a proscenium.

Most of the theatre professionals mentioned here were active as artistic directors of both public and private theatres in Japan during the Heisei era. They were also able to receive generous subsidies for international exchange that in turn helped establish their reputations. As people blessed with special talents, who were able to succeed through their extraordinary efforts, they were considered special three decades ago and still are today.

Ninagawa Yukio passed away in 2016, at the age of 80; Noda Hideki and Miyagi Satoshi are now both in their 60s. In order to build up a truly contemporary Japanese theatre, rapid generational change needs to happen among the theatre professionals engaged in international exchange. Such generational change would also affect artistic directors, who enjoy great authority and employ dedicated staff. A possible harbinger of the future in this respect is Ogawa Eriko, artistic director of the New National Theatre, who is still in her 40s. Another example of a generational shift in Japanese theatre is the novel and original activity of the Chelfitsch company, led by Okada Toshiki (b. 1973), which has attracted particular notice and praise abroad. Okada and Chelfitsch were scheduled to appear in Vienna for the third time in June 2020, but their plans had to be cancelled due to the coronavirus crisis, which has unfortunately brought international cultural exchange to a halt for the time being.

Bibliography

Billington, Michael. 1993. *One Night Stands: A Critic's View of Modern British Theatre*. London: Nick Hern Books.

Hasebe, Hiroshi 長谷部浩. 2014. *Noda Hideki no engeki 野田秀樹の演劇* [The Theatre of Noda Hideki]. Tōkyō: Kawaide Shobō Shinsha 河出書房新社.

Higeki Kigeki editorial board 悲劇喜劇編集部編. 2019. "Watashi ga erabu Heisei no kono ippon" 私が選ぶ平成のこの一本 [My choice of Heisei theatre play]. *Higeki Kigeki* 悲劇喜劇 [Tragedy/Comedy] 72 (2): 60-63.

Ninagawa Yukio 蜷川幸雄 / Hasebe, Hiroshi 長谷部浩. 2002. *Enshutsu-jutsu* 演出術 [Directing Techniques]. Tōkyō: Kinokuniya Shoten 紀伊國屋書店.

Uchida, Yōichi 内田洋一. 2019. "Katasutorofu to makoto no kotoba" カタストロフとまことの言葉 [Words of Catastrophe and Truth]. *Higeki Kigeki* 悲劇喜劇 [Tragedy/Comedy] 72 (2): 6-8.

Endnotes

1 In France, the plays were shown under both Japanese and French titles.