Collaboration in Asia: Four Japanese Shakespearean Productions in the 1990s

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Abstract

The centennial history of Japanese Shakespearean reception epitomizes new readings and new onstage representations of Shakespeare, which each age has offered according to its need. In the last two decades, the Japanese theatre witnessed increasingly radical reinvention of Shakespeare. In the 1980s, the rediscovery of Shakespeare took the form of bold adaptations, and in the 1990s, intercultural productions among Asian artists have proved their potentiality. As far as Shakespearean productions are concerned, the Japanese theatre has continuously sought its model in the West; however, it at last begins to question its identity in relation to other Asian partners. At their best, intercultural productions can reflect contemporary Asian conditions in Shakespeare, and also, check further appropriation of Asia, which is almost a customary Western theatrical practice. Since intercultural dramaturgy itself has not fully developed yet, this paper aims to consider its possibilities and limits provisionally by examining four productions staged in Tokyo in 1997 and 1998.

In Shakespearean productions in the West, Asia has been a constant supplier of myths. Looking for inspiration, directors there can turn to the Orient and resort to exotic commonplaces which embellish and enliven their productions. Apart from the renowned production of Mnouchkine, the exploitation of the Orient has prevailed in Western Shakespeare productions. For example, in Adrian Noble's 1997 RSC production of Cymbeline, Noble adopted oriental costumes and a characteristic feature of traditional Japanese Kabuki theatre, hanamichi in emphasizing the outlandish fairy-tale quality of the narrative. The costumes and the props, in fact, are a shameless
mixture of Chinese, Korean and Japanese styles. Certainly, Noble has always been noted for eclecticism, and this production may just be another specimen of his typical style. He never hesitates to use anything which can effectively visualize his directorial design, and in this production an exotic flavour of Orient happens to glamorize Cymbeline's Britain. In any case, this production reconfirms the West's habitual plundering of the East on the stage. To the Westerner's eyes at least, Asia seems to exist collectively as a distant and mysterious land even today. Asia is to be plundered; always remains faceless, always ancient. From our point of view, however, no matter how successful the resulting productions may be, an indiscriminate borrowing from Asian theatres and traditions should not be overlooked for the following reasons. Firstly, this fixed image of Asia denies the distinct identity of each Asian country, and secondly, it is ever widening the gap between Asian realities and their onstage representation. Cultural dislocation through transmittable elements of theatre such as sets, costumes, and music is questionable in itself and it barely reflects Asia's present cultural, social and political situation.¹

To retrieve its identity on the stage, Asia should present its traditions and realities from Asian perspective. Of course, a notion that Asia is presentable as one united entity is illusory. For example, the diversity of cultural conditions among Asian nations is exemplified in the widely different processes of Shakespearean reception, which vitally concern the theatre history of each country.

For that matter, Japan in this century has been exceptionally compliant to the domineering influence of Western culture. Unlike India, for instance, Japan has not suffered the tyranny of cultural imperialism, and for that very reason, theatre practitioners in the Meiji period could so openly seek their cultural model in Shakespeare. In the decades that followed, Japan continued to be a passive recipient of Western culture, Shakespeare being its greatest icon.

The turning point in the history of Shakespearean reception came in the 1970s, when Suzuki Tadashi and Ninagawa Yukio staged their hybrid Shakespeare productions. By incorporating indigenous performance traditions such as Noh and Kabuki, they tried to find Shakespeare's relevance to Japanese society, and search for Japanese cultural identity. Though the productions of the two directors were totally different in style, or in approach to original texts, they shared the urge to exploit Shakespeare and explore cultural identity of Japan. This positive attempt to establish cultural
identity through Shakespeare was certainly a big step forward. They authorized the introduction of Japanese elements to Shakespearean productions and thereby encouraged localization as well as bold adaptation of Shakespeare in various theatre forms.

After two decades, Japanese Shakespearean production found a totally new way of searching for cultural identity. In productions such as Ong Keng Sen's Lear (1997) and Kuro Tento's The Comedy of Romeo and Juliet (1997), Japan's cultural identity was explored in relative relationship with other Asian cultures for the first time. These productions in the 1990s aimed to redefine the cultural situation of Japan in a fully intercultural context. An application of interculturalism to Shakespeare itself is not new (cf., Brook's La Tempeste), but intercultural Shakespearean production staged on Asian initiative is a totally different matter. In addition to the two productions mentioned above, this paper will discuss ITI (International Theatre Institute) production of King Lear (1997) and Nonon Padilla's Romeo and Juliet (1998). That the four Shakespearean productions with a definite Asian perspective were staged in Japan almost successively is by no means a coincidence. It proves that the time has ripened for Asian theatres to respond to the long history of Western appropriation on the stage.

This paper aims to examine how each of these four productions, while acknowledging variance, has searched the new cultural links among Asian partners and staged a Shakespearean production which reflects Asia now. The major areas in discussing these productions will be the process of making performance, the formal and technical features of performance (choice of language, performance style, constitution of cast/staff members, type of interculturalism, degree of adaptation, etc.); and the social, political and artistic purposes of performance.

I. Lear. Presented by the Japan Foundation Asia Center and Bunkamura at the Theatre Cocoon, Tokyo, 9 to 15 September, 1997. Directed by Ong Keng Sen and script by Kishida Rio.

In 1994, the Japan Foundation Asia Center launched a project of intercultural production to question the nature of Asian theatre today. Not fully satisfied with the past experiences of inviting foreign productions, the Center this time decided to create a collaborative work among Asian artists from scratch and appointed Ong Keng Sen,
a director from a multicultural nation, Singapore.² In the course of repeated discussions starting from 1996, Ong, a scriptwriter Kishida Río and other staff members from Australia, Indonesia, Japan and Singapore, developed the basic idea of the production.

Firstly, the production will reinvent King Lear in view of Asian realities and traditions. Secondly, in order to reinterpret the play on female principles, the eldest daughter who exemplifies a woman trapped by patriarchy is to become as strong a character as Lear himself. Besides this male/female conflict, the production explores the conflict between the old and young generations as well as that between tradition and modernity.

Considering that highly stylized form of representation is necessary to amalgamate these conflicting issues, Ong chose actors from widely different fields such as Noh, Beijing Opera, Thai dance, and Indonesian dance. The multinational cast includes Chinese (1 actor), Indonesian (1), Japanese (2), Malaysian (2), Singaporean (11), and Thai (1) actors, who speak lines in their own languages. Despite the seeming disproportion, the major characters are equally distributed among actors of different nationalities.

The script adapted by Kishida Río strips the original play to the bare bones and focuses on the relationship between an old king (played by a Noh actor) and his eldest daughter (played by a Beijing Opera actor) who is to kill and supplant the former. The king has only two daughters, and the sub-plot of Gloucester and his sons is entirely absent. Serious questioning of motherhood in Kishida's earlier works leads to an introduction of a mother-figure, who forgives and heals all. The conflicts on the stage resolves magically when the mother appears in the final moment and holds the eldest daughter who stands motionless in a stupor, having killed her sister and father. Kishida's another invention is a woman who wonders about the stage and encounters all the characters, questioning who they are and who she herself is. She is a Fool and acts as an intermediary between the play's fictional world and audience.³ At the same time, this quest of identity is a key to dismantle and reconstruct Shakespeare's text.⁴

In spite of this radical reinvention, however, the production retains the essence of the original tragedy. For example, the conflicting elements within the play — the old vs. the young, good vs. evil, life vs. death — are appropriately expressed through the coexistence and tension between the different theatrical modes and languages. What Ong Keng Sen seeks in this production is the positive significance of discord. Here,
different cultures "exist as one but not in an amalgam which should reduce their difference." The production with its intensity of emotion, stylized acting, and abundant use of oriental music demonstrated that coexistence and tension between the different Asian cultures can offer a new Asian reading of the play, which has a striking universal appeal.\(^6\)


The production was planned to be staged in the 27th ITI World Congress held in Seoul in September 1997, and it then went on a tour in Japan and US. The ITI is a non-governmental international network of performing arts and organizations affiliated with UNESCO. Kim Jeong Ok, a leading director and drama professor in Korea and the former president of the ITI, was commissioned to direct an international production of *King Lear* for the first ITI congress held in Asia. Since 1996 he started auditioning the cast widely in Europe and in Asia and the multi-national cast gathered for a two-month rehearsal in Seoul in 1997. While most of the staff members are Korean and Japanese, the cast is truly multinational. The cast includes Korean (9 actors), American (3), German (3), Japanese (3), Bulgarian (1), and Mexican (1). The text is mostly unchanged; however, it is cut heavily and lines are spoken in the native language of each actor. According to the production notes, the play unfolds in a primitive Asian society, where various languages co-exist in a chaotic condition.\(^7\)

Besides the choice of cast, the production attempts to emphasize its internationalism with various ethnic performances which demonstrate both diversity and unity of the cast. For instance, the actors in turn impersonate a cock and enumerate the variations of onomatopoeia in different cultures, or show their oneness in a well-trained Japanese drum ensemble or Korean funeral procession.

Kim's intention was to stage an international production with an Asian perspective. Although he has greatly admired Peter Brook's work, he has always felt frustrated with the Western dominance in international theatrical projects.\(^8\) And yet whether he can realize his original intention is doubtful because the overall impression of the productions remains decisively Korean due to the imbalance of the cast. The major characters are played by Koreans, and the tension which stimulates an intercultural
production is totally lacking. As far as the production's official educational objective is concerned, it has accomplished its mission to promote friendship among the participating nations but it sadly remains a mere juxtaposition of cultures.


This production is an outcome of the close relationship between the two companies, which has been nurtured through the 20-year history of collaboration. Their collaboration is unique, considering the distinct nature and background of the two companies. PETA is a non-profit organization which was founded out of the Philippines' social needs to educate people in rural areas. On the other hand, Kuro-Tento is a radical private theatre group, which has been active since the little-theatre movement in the 1960s and noted for their choice of unusual venue, a big black tent (hence its name Kuro-Tento.) Tied with an interest for the present Asian condition, these two companies have searched what theatre can achieve across cultural boundaries.

For this particular production of *Romeo and Juliet*, they have had several workshops as well as repeated discussions from 1995, in the process of which directorial principles, set and costume design, and music have been decided. To achieve complete equality, the number of cast from the two companies is carefully balanced. The language again is balanced between Tagalog, Japanese, and English. While Philippine cast use Tagalog, and Japanese cast use Japanese basically, they switch languages or speak in English according to the need of actors in each scene. That is, actors are allowed the maximum freedom in their choice of language.

The production is bordering on parody in its bold adaptation: nothing is left intact except the ill-fated love between the young couple. First of all, the production has a framework of a nightclub show. Tragicomedy of Julietta, a Philippine barmaid who flees to Japan as a Japayuki-san and a young Japanese farmer Tamio is a part of the show performed in a Philippine nightclub. In this play-within-the-play, the lovers are thwarted not only by gangs who employ Julietta in a Filipino bar in Japan, but also by Tamio's family. The situation is complicated particularly because Tamio's grand-
father is still suffering from the haunted memory of the war in which he fought in the Philippines as a young soldier.

The confusion of their escape ends in the merry songs and dance on a glaring stage of the Filipino nightclub. Through the veneer of the slapstick comedy, we can see the production's serious intention to reflect and question the present relationship between the two countries. Japan and the Philippines are yet unable to establish equally inter-dependent relationship since the former is encroaching the latter economically long after the military invasion has become a thing of the past.

The production has successfully proved that the two cultures can co-exist on the stage without one dominating the other despite the gap of social situations between the two countries. There are certainly gratifying moments when difference of nationality among the actors becomes meaningless in an exchange and sharing of genuine emotions. Commending this emotional exchange, Odashima Yushi points out that this is the first multi-lingual production ever that makes the most of the energy derived from the collision of the two cultures.²


The production evolved out of the Theatre Cocoon's design to organize its programs under supervision of the Regular Directors Board. The Board consists of directors from Japan, Poland and the Philippines. To explore the possibility of multi-cultural collaboration, its member, Nonon Padilla, was appointed in 1997 to stage Romeo and Juliet with a Japanese cast. Padilla was an artistic director of PETA from 1973 and directed many original plays until he left the institution in 1975 in the hope of directing non-propagandistic plays. Since 1987 he has been an artistic director of CCP (Culture Center of the Philippines) and worked extensively abroad as well as inland.

The rehearsal period of the production was five weeks, and as a typical Shakespear-ean production today, the cast consists of actors with various backgrounds. Most uniquely, Romeo is played by a Kyogen actor Izumi Motoya, while other members of the cast are either from established Shingeki companies or small theatre groups. Izumi has devoted his theatrical career solely to traditional Kyogen theatre (he is the head of a prestigious Kyogen school in this country, Izumi-ryu) and this is his first
Shakespearean production. And yet he was not expected to perform in Kyogen style since Padilla has no wish to highlight the collision of modern and traditional theatre forms in this production. It seems that he was chosen chiefly because of his freshness and appeal to the young audience.

The staff members are all Japanese apart from a director and a set/costume designer. Choice of Padilla as a director itself is noteworthy, considering that almost all the foreign directors who have been appointed in the past Shakespearean productions are from the West. Padilla aims to refurbish this tragedy as a new Asian myth reflecting Asian realities. In other words, he intends to free Asia from its usual instrumental role in the West to recover Shakespearean tradition. Hence the play’s scene is relocated in a fictional modern Asian city corrupted by crimes, drugs and commercialism, which is represented impressively with a huge set of glass staircase, an iron bridge, and glaring neon lights.

The production follows the text closely except the adoption of a framework. The tragedy of the lovers in the end turns out to be a show of a newly-opened bar owned by the Prince (of gangs) and after their death, the young couple reappears, chained and whipped by the bodyguards of the Prince, who triumphs over another success of his show. In this production, Romeo and Juliet are scapegoats doubly: both in the show and in the garish world of the play encompassing that show. Their love has succumbed to the ruthless reality of violence and commercialism in the city.

Padilla introduces many gimmicks to make the play alive and speak directly to the audience. For example, the lovers communicate with e-mails, and Romeo tries to eternalize moments of their lives together with a camera — the photos are shown in a huge screen at the back. The production’s design to present trans-cultural situation of modern Asian realities in a Shakespearean production is exciting in itself. Unfortunately, the bold design on the part of the director has not been effectively materialized by the actors who seem to be at a loss with unauthentic style of the production.

The emergence of these Shakespearean productions in conjunction with Asian artists naturally reflects the change in Japanese theatrical condition in the 1980s and 1990s. Firstly, Japanese theatre at last has overtaken other fields of art in its interest to Asia. In the post-war period, when modernization meant westernization, cultural model for Japanese theatre had always been either Europe or America, and it did not
recognize Asian theatres as its equal partners until the 1980s. Behind this new interest lies the economic growth of Asian countries which has promoted close relationships among Asian neighbours.

Secondly, Japanese Shakespearean productions in the 1980s changed remarkably both in terms of quality and quantity, which in effect invited inauthentic Shakespearean productions. The unprecedented boost of Japanese economy did not leave the theatre untouched. Due to the increase of commercial theatre venues, the number of productions multiplied, and Shakespearean productions again were in great demand. In catering for a variety of audience in various venues, Shakespearean productions inevitably underwent diversification. For example, one could see Kabuki Shakespeare, Noh Shakespeare, Bunraku Shakespeare, or musical version of Shakespeare as well as Shakespearean productions from all over the world. Having enjoyed Shakespeare in such a variety, audiences also became ready for a radical experiment.

Thirdly, theatre became increasingly subjected to global economic system in that same period. Theatre too cannot escape being involved in the procedures of capitalist commerce, since, like all other commodities, theatrical productions can circulate globally. The global theatre market welcomed intercultural theatrical projects that can make money across the border. Sponsors from various countries expect productions that can be staged, say, in a popular theatre festival around the world, and for such a production they are willing to share its huge cost. In short, the arrival of global distribution system has made intercultural productions the most advantageous and promising business venture.

It is still too premature to assess the potency of intercultural Shakespearean production in Asia. The observation of these four productions, however, let us clarify certain possibilities and limits of intercultural dramaturgy. Basically, as a form of foreign Shakespeare, an intercultural production can offer a new reading of Shakespeare or enliven it with radical means. Entirely uninhibited by logo-centric, realistic approach to Shakespeare, Asian countries can stage an intercultural production which recaptures something that has lost in persistent attention to Shakespeare's language — the essence or mythic aspects of Shakespeare. In Ong Keng Sen's Lear, for example, an electric collision between Asian theatrical forms highlighted the layers of conflicting relationships and ideas in the play as intensely and vividly as no other productions have ever done. Moreover, the issues that have been raised by foreign
Shakespearean productions in the past, such as legitimacy of Shakespeare's ownership by English-speaking people, will be questioned further by intercultural productions which employ multiple languages.

Likewise, intercultural productions can contribute toward freeing Asia from chronic Western appropriations on stage. What we witness, for example, in the two versions of *Romeo and Juliet* discussed in this paper is Asian realities — a jumble of old and new, or Asian and Western — a widely different picture from the Western version of the East.¹⁴

On the other hand, these four productions have convinced us of the extreme difficulty in staging an intercultural production, particularly, a successful one. Besides the enormous cost, negotiation among actors/staff members is time-consuming as well as energy-consuming. Balanced cast does not necessarily ensure a success, for there is always a danger of ending up in a mere juxtaposition of cultures as in the case of Kim Jeong Ok's *King Lear*. A choice of language needs careful consideration and, furthermore, marginalization of language itself may make an intercultural production an extravaganza, or a mere visual spectacle. Worst of all, an intercultural production is likely to become another form of appropriation if economic power relations of the participants control its artistic choices. We are yet to see how intercultural productions in Asia will overcome these issues and develop their possibility in future.

Notes

This paper is based on a report presented in a seminar "Shakespeare in the Non-English-speaking Sphere" at the 37th annual meeting of the Shakespeare Society of Japan held at Tokyo University, Komaba, in October 1998.


2 Hata Yuki, "Creating Lear," The Theatre Program of Lear, 14.

3 The original production of *Lear* had two Fools (Woman and Man) but the revised version which was staged in 1999 retained only one Fool (Woman) as a mediator.

4 Kishida Rio, "Lear: An Ending and a Beginning," The Theatre Program of Lear, 6.

5 Ong Keng Sen, "Lear: Linking Night and Day," The Theatre Program of Lear, 5.

6 With some revision, the production of *Lear* was staged in Hong Kong and Singapore in January 1999, and subsequently in Indonesia and Australia in February 1999.
7 The Theatre Program of *King Lear*, 7.
8 The Theatre Program of *King Lear*, 8.
11 Suematsu, 100–101.
13 Kennedy, 16.