The Cherry Tree and the Lotus: Ninagawa Yukio's Two Macbeths

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English

Abstract

Over the last two decades, Ninagawa Yukio has enjoyed international successes with productions such as Ninagawa Macbeth, The Tempest, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Hamlet and King Lear, and become the foremost Shakespearean director in Japan. Among these productions, Ninagawa Macbeth is particularly significant, firstly because it was his first overseas success with Shakespeare, and secondly because he created the definitive Ninagawa style in that production. Bold localisation, visual splendours, excessive lyricism and, above all, inordinate eclecticism have continued to characterise the productions that followed this Macbeth. Although this renowned production itself has been repeatedly staged with some cast changes in subsequent years, Ninagawa directed Macbeth again with an entirely new directorial design in 2001.

This paper aims to examine these two productions of Macbeths in detail and assess the validity of Ninagawa's attempt to override his own legendary production with a new version. In this process, his unique strategy to appeal to the wide-ranging public both as a popularizer of Shakespeare and an agitator in the theatre will become clear.

要 旨

1980年以来、蜷川幸雄は日本を代表するシェイクスピア作品の演出家として世界的な成果をあげてきた。中でも、1980年の「マクベス」は、独特な蜷川スタイルを確立し、初めて海外公演を成功させた作品として特に注目に値する。2001年、蜷川は新たな演出スタイルで、再び「マクベス」上演を試みた。

本論では、この2つの上演作品を細かく分析し、両作品の共通点、相違点を明らかにした上で、世界的な演劇状況における、蜷川を含めた日本のシェイクスピアの可能性を検討する。
Twenty-one years after the internationally acclaimed production of *Ninagawa Macbeth* (1980), the Japanese director Ninagawa Yukio has directed the same play again. The 1980 production, which was his first intercultural Shakespeare production, has been often called the definitive Ninagawa Shakespeare. It has everything that characterizes his Shakespeare productions such as the bold juxtaposition of East and West, vivid stage pictures with colour and light, stylised and operatic performances, and a lavish use of lyrical music. Since then, Ninagawa has directed ten more Shakespeare productions including the extremely popular *The Tempest* (1987), *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1994), and *Hamlet* (1995); and yet none has surpassed *Ninagawa Macbeth*, the only Shakespeare production with an epithet “Ninagawa.” Precisely because of this, Ninagawa must have felt a need to demolish and outstrip his own renowned production. Never acknowledging himself to be a monument of theatre history, Ninagawa, at the age of 65, is still determined to move on.

The main aim of this paper is to assess how much Ninagawa succeeds in his intention, comparing the two productions in detail. Also, by referring to another of his Shakespeare productions, the Royal Shakespeare Company production of *King Lear* (1999-2000), which received mixed reviews in England, I would like to consider the validity of his cultural dislocation.

The level of shock experienced by Japanese audiences when they first saw *Ninagawa Macbeth* cannot be stressed enough. Out of his daring experimentalism nurtured during his underground theatre years, Ninagawa completely rejected our preconceived ideas of Shakespeare, a sacred text for understanding the West.

Of course, localization of Shakespeare itself was not new. In the Meiji era, nearly a hundred years before *Ninagawa Macbeth*, certain reformers of Japanese theatre such as Tsubouchi Shoyo dramatized Shakespeare in Kabuki style. However, although Tsubouchi’s productions were an attempt to renovate Japanese theatre by learning from the greatest playwright the West has to offer, Ninagawa’s intentions were entirely different. Firstly, Ninagawa aimed to knock Shakespeare off his pedestal and make him more relevant to the modern day audience. Secondly, he attempted to stage a universal Shakespeare production by taking advantage of being Japanese.

Ninagawa was fully aware of the disadvantages and advantages of being “foreign.” For instance, western style Shakespeare productions by the Japanese theatre companies in the 1960s—with doublets and hose, wigs and padded nose—invariably resulted in mere mimicry. On the other hand, free from the linguistic constraint, foreign productions can delve into the text for universal myth or fable, and give a distinct shape to it. Above all, the hybridization of eastern and western cultures not only renders Shakespeare immediately accessible to the audience but
also revives and radically transforms it. According to Ninagawa himself, he first got the idea from the two great directors, Kurosawa Akira and Peter Brook, for this cross-cultural directorial plan.7

The first scene in Ninagawa Shakespeare is almost always of the utmost importance. At the very beginning, a framework or a metatheatrical device is provided so that the audience can easily relate themselves to the distant world of Shakespeare. In certain productions, Ninagawa takes us by surprise and forces us to cut off from the familiar daily life outside the theatre in an instant.8

In the case of Ninagawa Macbeth, the framework was a huge butsudan or a home altar which enshrined the spirit of ancestors and the two old women beside the frame witnessed the entire production. When the two opened the sliding doors of the butsudan, the world of Macbeth in 16th century Japan unfolded on the stage. Sitting in front of the butsudan, we too were to observe the hurly-burly of our distant ancestors, which commenced with a dance by the beautiful but ominous-looking witches amidst a whirlwind of cherry petals. This clever framework at once worked as a time tunnel and afforded a sense of ritual. Ninagawa employed the visual rhetorical devices such as cherry blossom, witches played by Onnagata (female impersonators of Kabuki), and Buddhist statues to relate the play firmly to the audience. They were compelling stage pictures themselves but more importantly, they stirred up the collective memory of the Japanese.

The two main protagonists were originally played by the distinguished and commanding actors, Hira Mikijiro and Kurihara Komaki. With amazing intensity and range of emotions, Hira created a Samurai Macbeth who was masculine and fearless in action, and sensitive and poetic in passion. Kurihara’s Lady Macbeth was notable for her beauty and eroticism in her resolution, which marked a clear contrast with her pathetic nervous breakdown in her final appearance.

Overall, they acted in a highly stylised manner. This stylized acting with formalistic movement and declamatory delivery can magnify characters’ emotions but it has some disadvantages. It may be regarded as a pastiche of traditional Japanese theatre styles such as kabuki and noh, and also it tends to become over-melodramatic as in Taishuengeki, or the popular troupe ‘theatre which travels around cheap commercial theatres all over the country with sentimental Samurai plays. For instance, in this production, Macbeth fought his final, long battle with Macduff under a cherry tree and died, unexpectedly, to a burst of applause. The final sword fight between a hero and his rivals or opponents is the typical denouement of the popular troupe play, which always welcomes applause from the audience at any crucial moments such as the hero’s death. It so happened that some members of the audience at Ninagawa Macbeth dutifully
took the cue at Macbeth’s death and applauded him.

The stylization in *Ninagawa Macbeth* resulted from the deliberate choice to go beyond realism while simultaneously remaining true to the realistic emotion of the character. Apparently, a naturalistic mode of acting was not suited to the gigantic and exceptional passion that they had hoped to express. The emphasis thus being on scale and dynamism, the protagonists’ passion was further fortified with sound effects and sensational but incongruous music such as Faure’s Requiem.

What was eclipsed behind the bold conceptual framework and visual splendours, however, was the production’s political message. As a Japanese theatre critic Senda Akihiko points out, Ninagawa incorporated his disillusionment with the radical groups of the new left movement in the 1960s. The dead soldiers of these leftist groups that failed to materialize their political ideals and succumbed to infighting loomed up behind the butsudan framework in the shape of *Samurai* warriors. In other words, for Ninagawa who himself had headed the radical theatre groups, the production was a final valedictory for his avant-garde years. This political message faded away in the subsequent revivals as Ninagawa secured his status as a mainstream director of the commercial theatre, and the theatre itself increasingly ceased to be a vehicle of political propaganda.

The beauty of the visual metaphors, the dynamism of the stylised acting, and the almost excessive lyricism of *Ninagawa Macbeth* are truly memorable. And yet the most notable and perhaps the most controversial aspect of this production is its eclecticism. As Michael Billington aptly puts it, Ninagawa is “nature’s great synthesizer.” His production never falls apart despite the relentless mixing of modes. From a hodgepodge of eastern and western theatre conventions, music, and visual metaphors, Ninagawa miraculously weaves a coherent production. His eclecticism was a shrewd strategy to please and surprise the audience as well as defiance against sophistication, for he made plain that he wished to create a powerful and kaleidoscopic production out of pastiches.

Much credit is due for his achievement in revitalizing the text and reshaping our image of Shakespeare. However, unlike foreign reviewers who openhandedly applauded the beauty or originality of his production, the Japanese critics were more reserved. They implied that his arbitrary orientalism could be perceived as obsequiousness to the international market. He opted for the overtly Japanese stage pictures which are easily recognizable by the non-Japanese. Besides, apart from the fact that he is Japanese, nothing differentiates his appropriation of indigenous theatre conventions from that of other foreign directors such as Mnouchkine who in the past was subjected to severe criticisms for directing orientalist Shakespeare.
Ninagawa's interculturalism is certainly different from that of another prestigious Japanese director Suzuki Tadashi although the two have often been grouped together as radical reformists with an intercultural doctrine. For Suzuki, interculturalism is not a mere convenience but an avenue for expressing universal themes in texts. He utilises noh to create a strict, formal acting style because this ritualized enactment most expressively communicates his ideas in a form corresponding to today's sociopolitical situation. In other words, the ethos of noh is unmistakably at the core of his dramaturgy, and its stoicism limits the range of the audience to a certain extent. On the other hand, Ninagawa is happy to be called a popularizer or opportunist rather than an elitist like Suzuki. He has always adhered to the paradigm of his judgment in directing, which is a very personal one i.e. to please and surprise the audience.

Having its origin in Ninagawa's resolution to demolish his legendary production, the foremost concern of the 2001 production of Macbeth was to be different. Taking this opportunity, Ninagawa tried to revitalize the play as well as his directorial method. Behind this unchanging fighting spirit lurks a stratagem to exploit his own consumability as a subversive agitator. Whatever his intention, for the audience, it was a thrilling theatrical event allowing them to both enjoy the production in its own right and to compare and contrast it with the earlier Macbeth.

Let us now see what characterised this new production. First, the framework of the production was subtler and less restrictive. Before the opening, the stage was walled with mirrors which reflected the audience in their seats. As soon as the production opened, the characters took the place of the audience, reflected in that mirrored wall. Through sharing the experience of being reflected in that same mirror, the audience could easily identify themselves with the characters. Hence the mirror worked as a kind of framework for connecting the audience with the play's world.

The localization of this production, again, was less obvious. The constant buzz of helicopters and soldiers with camouflage battle dress in a field of tall dried lotus stalks were reminiscent of the Vietnam War. The play was thus set in some part of modern Asia, but we were not sure where and when it exactly was. When we saw Macbeth's castle at the end of Act 1, it was an empty space walled by mirrors. The only things there were a huge white lotus flower, a Buddhist symbol of paradise and hence innocence, and ten red ropes hanging from above. This minimalistic set as well as the simple long frocks of the characters—the gowns of the Macbeths' were embroidered again with lotus flowers—suggested a pan-Asian setting, which was not necessarily Japanese.

Shakespearean productions with no Japanese framework or visual metaphors have been
directed by Ninagawa before. For example, the 1994 production of Othello, the 1998 production of Romeo and Juliet, and the 1999 production of Richard III made no use of the Japanese set, costume, and theatre conventions that have been the mark of Ninagawa Shakespeare. Instead of a descriptive and decorative set, a simple and abstract set dominated the stage in these productions as in the new Macbeth. This reflects the change in Ninagawa’s directorial style. In an interview, his assistant director Inoue Sonsho pointed out that Ninagawa's insistence on concept and visual images relaxed after he began working with British actors for whom the text was of the vital importance, and also after he began using the new translations by Matsuoka Kazuko, which are noted for their fresh and concise wordings. Instead of imposing a preconceived concept or framework onto a production, it seems that Ninagawa has come to rely more on actors and to enjoy the cooperative process a rehearsal can produce.

The characterization of the protagonists in this new version of Macbeth again differed drastically from that of their predecessors. Here, the couple were young, contemporary and downsized. In this production, their murder of Duncan coincided with the end of their youth, and hence Ninagawa chose Karasawa Toshiaki and Otake Shinobu who are both gifted and highly sought-after actors in their thirties. With less stylization and more speed, they acted out a life-sized man and wife who happened to murder a king. They were portrayed like Bonnie and Clyde, who suffered because of their crime but had no choice but to go on killing.

They looked totally modern, which was largely due to their naturalistic and unsentimental acting helped by Matsuoka’s new translation. In addition, the Scottish court in this production was the mirror image of today’s society in that it was plagued with modern illnesses such as insomnia, neurosis and schizophrenia. The guilt-driven pair spent sleepless nights, while even during the daytime Macbeth was annoyed with visions which he had to wave away constantly until his death. Moreover, the reflection on the mirror wall reminded us of the precariousness of each character’s identity in that claustrophobic space.

The naturalistic mode of their acting also contributed to gaining the audience’s sympathy for their despair and deep sense of loss. For instance, in the famous soliloquy in Act 5, scene 5, Karasawa spoke his lines in a restrained and matter-of-fact tone. Unlike Hira who had ecstatically poured out his emotion in the earlier production, Karasawa remained totally calm, while swaying the beautifully lit, magnificent chandelier in the dark, empty stage. Its huge swinging shadow became a telling visual metaphor of Macbeth’s shadowy existence. This scene which was moving and memorable in itself convinced us of Ninagawa’s mastery of a subtler, Chekhovian directorial style. Without melodramatic outburst, the characters were able to delicately convey the poignancy of their emotion. However, this emotional candour was insufficient to
convey the grandeur or the scale characteristic of Shakespearean heroes. Macbeth and his lady lacked the authority and power of sovereigns, all the more so because Ninagawa made Macbeth one of a trio. In the long England scene, he highlighted Macduff and Malcolm extravagantly as counterparts to Macbeth, giving them a chance to relate their desperation and dreams with as much passion as Macbeth.

As a result of this characterization of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, the production suffered seriously. The chaos within their mind remained personal and never reached out as it should have. Enclosed claustrophobically within their mind, it did not spread so widely as to cause the disorder of the whole nation nor of the universe. Moreover, a lack of interest in the play’s supernatural qualities such as the power of evil and fortune, made the entire tragedy small scale and somewhat trivial.20

With its simplicity and modernity, the 2001 production looked entirely different from the 1980 version. However, the question remains as to how far that difference goes. In fact, beneath the seemingly great difference, the basic directorial stance has changed surprisingly little. First of all, the new production retained the framing device to invite the audience into the play’s world. Also, the emphasis on visual aspects was unwavering, however different the stage pictures were that each production presented. Finally, the most distinct Ninagawa characteristic, the eclectic mixture of visual metaphors persisted. The soldiers suggestive of the Vietnam War, the lotus flowers, the red ropes, and the candle-lit chandelier were all arbitrarily chosen according to his personal, almost opportunist standard. Appropriation of the orient was unmistakably there, though this time the production had a wider Asian context.

Ninagawa held back from employing apparently Japanese theatre conventions and stage pictures this time, after being severely criticized for an inordinate mixture of East and West in the RSC production of King Lear. In King Lear, his hybridization of cultures was driven to extremes. With the introduction of British actors into the customary fusion of Shakespeare and Japanese design, the production looked out of place both in Japan and in the UK. Although some applauded this artistic venture, the blending of East and West itself was mostly greeted with unfavourable response.21

Apart from this unsuccessful intercultural attempt, Ninagawa has discerned a change in the sensibility of the audience. For the younger, experienced audience who have enjoyed numerous, different Shakespearean productions, interpolation of indigenous theatre conventions or stage pictures that once increased immediacy, are no longer necessary. In the worst case, they may get bored with or distanced from Japanese commonplaces if they appear routinely. To cater for this
audience, Ninagawa brought in more fashionable Asian stage pictures, which can be both familiar and exotic. Ironically, this persistent and fearless eclecticism, and not the adoption of the Japanese framework or visual metaphors, makes Ninagawa the definitive Japanese theatre director. In a sense, he is representing the Japanese cultural climate which has a long tradition of borrowing from other cultures such as China, Korea and the West.

To conclude, although Ninagawa's new version of Macbeth has a sparcity and delicacy which render it with a subtle beauty, on the whole, his challenge to surpass the legendary Ninagawa Macbeth seems to have ended unsuccessfully. Despite its fresh interpretation, the new production adhered to the accustomed dramaturgy, failing to objectify or criticize its predecessor. Ninagawa Macbeth will continue to be more important in terms of theatre history as it was a revolutionary production that revitalized Shakespeare with a bold localization.

Notes

This paper was originally presented at SCAENA, an international conference held at Cambridge University in August 2001.

1 The production was first staged in Tokyo in 1980, and subsequently toured in Holland, Britain (1985), Britain again (1987) and the US (1990). In Japan, it was restaged six times up to 1998. The new version was staged at Saitama Geijutsu-gekijou and Theatre Cocoon in 2001, and revived in 2002.

2 The first partial intercultural attempt was Hamlet (1978), where he incorporated a stage picture of Hina-matsuri, or the Japanese girls' festival, in the scene of the play-within-the-play.

3 Ninagawa's Shakespeare productions include:

1974 Romeo and Juliet
1975 King Lear
1978 Hamlet
1979 Romeo and Juliet
1980 Ninagawa Macbeth
1987 The Tempest
1988 Hamlet
1991 King Lear
1994 A Midsummer Night's Dream
1994 Othello
1995 Hamlet
1998 Romeo and Juliet
1998 Twelfth Night
1999 Richard III, King Lear
2001 Macbeth
Earlier this year, he revised another of his legendary productions, the 1969 production of Shimzu Kunio's *Shinjo Afunari Keikaku-sa (Sincere Frivolity).*

In the 1960s and the 1970s, he directed numerous radical and political plays with his own theatre groups *Gendaijin Gekijou* (The Theatre of Moderns) and *Sakurasha* (The Cherry Blossom Company).


In the 1999 production of *Richard III*, the audience in the opening moments was totally dumbfounded to see miscellaneous objects such as horses (fake), baskets, logs, and foods falling from above with thuds (they reportedly symbolized the aftermath of war).


For the necessity of incongruous elements in Ninagawa's production, see "Interview with Ninagawa Yukio," Minami, Carruthers and Gillies 213.

Sasayama, Mulryne and Shewring 24.


Lotus flowers were also employed in abundance in his recent production of *The Greeks* (2000).

An interview with the translator and theatre critic Matsuoka Kazuko on the occasion of the Shakespeare Festival (22 April 2000) arranged by the Shakespeare Society of Japan.

See Ninagawa's interview on this production in *Rotonda* 18 (Saitama : Saitama Arts Foundation, 2001) 62.

In contrast with Matsuoka's new translation (1996), that of Odashima Yushi which was used in the 1980 production sounds wordy and outworn.


The role of the witches in this production was as unimpressive as their attire. The three hags appeared in rags, creeping among the dead bodies scattered in the lotus field.

For example, Charles Spencer says, "The combination of Western actors and oriental costumes and a Noh theatre style design lands the play in an uneasy no man's land that proves distracting rather than atmospheric." *Daily Telegraph* 29 October 1999.