Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei

Alluring Ambiguity: Gender and Cultural Politics in Modern Japanese Performance

In contrast to most studies of cultural nationalism, which tend to focus on literary style, narrative devices, or the static visual arts, in this article Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei analyzes the ways that Japanese actors deploy physical and vocal techniques in portraying gender and ethnic ambiguity. Expanding on her recent work on actor-dancer Itō Michio (1893–1961), she uses the concept of J-centrism (Japancentrism) to demonstrate how modern Japanese performing bodies (in both traditional and contemporary genres) imply political meaning – her title being a riff on Susan Sontag's famous essay 'Fascinating Fascism'. While not suggesting that the artists under consideration promulgate fascism, Sorgenfrei maintains that the Japanese aesthetic preference for gender and ethnic ambiguity fuels the politics of Japanese cultural nationalism, even when the performers or directors adamantly disavow rightist, nationalistic ideologies. Through a focus on analysis of selected performances by Bando Tamasaburō and theoretical writings by Suzuki Tadashi, Sorgenfrei suggests that the performance of ambiguity by a single actor implies the 'universality' and cultural superiority of the Japanese body. Professor Emerita of Theatre at UCLA, Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei is a specialist in Japanese theatre and intercultural performance, and was recently a Research Fellow at the International Research Institute in Interweaving Performance Cultures at the Free University, Berlin, where she researched the work of Japanese dancer Itō Michio. She is the author of *Unspeakable Acts: the Avant-Garde Theatre of Terayama Shūji and Postwar Japan* (University of Hawaii, 2005) and co-author of *Theatre Histories: an Introduction* (Routledge, third edition 2015).

Key terms: J-centrism, Bando Tamasaburō V, Suzuki Tadashi, performing ethnicity.

IN THRALL to the Western concept of binarism – a concept that even extends to the digital age, with its language composed solely of zeros and ones – acting theorists and theatre scholars continue to focus on 'the actor's doubleness'. This idea usually refers to the simultaneous awareness of self and character on the part of both the actor and the audience. In Japan, however, this duet-for-one actor is often multiplied to a trio, quartet, or even a chorus-for-one, due to the cultural preference for ambiguity and multiplicity. For example, many nō actors portray a character who is revealed in the second part to be a ghost in disguise, or sometimes another person or entity entirely, creating a simultaneous trio.

Similarly, opposite-gender portrayal in kabuki or Takarazuka ensures at least three simultaneous selves in one body: the actor, his character, and the opposite gender. In kabuki plays such as *Sukeroku* or *Chūshingura*, the multiplication of selves is due to the political need (actual and/or in the world of the play) for disguise and/or *mitate*, that is, substituting character names and/or a known mythical or historical past (*sekai*, or world). In these plays, the actor plus the historical characters are tripled by disguise and quadrupled by historical transformation.

Even more populous are the bodies of those kabuki actors who portray multiple and/or transformative roles in a single play, for example, the ten characters (male and female) played by a single actor in the kabuki *Date no jūyaku* (*Ten Roles of the Date Clan*). With the aid of a double, the lead actor in this play sometimes even performs together with himself in the same scene. Such confusion creates a special pleasure for the audience, who thrill at the actor's versatility as they struggle to determine which is the 'real' actor and which is the double. Or consider the multiplicity of female roles embodied in a

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single *onnagata* (male performer specializing in female roles) in the kabuki dance *Musume Dōjōji* (*The Maiden at Dōjō Temple*), who changes costumes (and characters) nine times in the course of the dance.

How does this penchant for multiplicity within a single actor translate when classically trained performers venture into non-traditional roles? In what ways are actors who are trained in non-traditional, modern techniques repositories of such traditions? In this article, I will offer some examples and suggest that, regardless of conscious intent, the aesthetic preference for multiplicity and ambiguity harbours deep-seated political/cultural implications.

Ideology and the Japanese Body

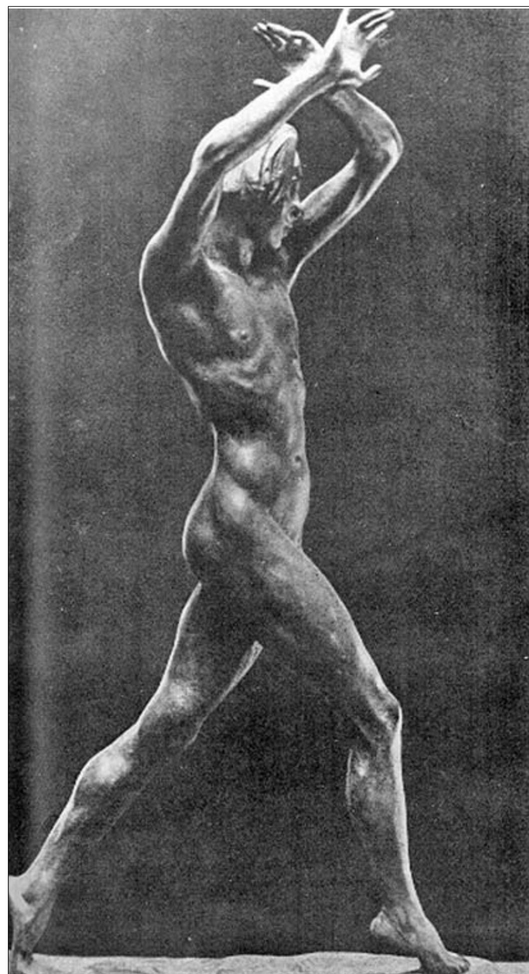
My title is an intentional riff on Susan Sontag's famous essay 'Fascinating Fascism', in which she states that fascism:

> also stands for an ideal or rather ideals that are persistent today under other banners: the ideal of life as art, the cult of beauty, the fetishism of courage, the dissolution of alienation in ecstatic feelings of community; the repudiation of the intellect; the family of man (under the parenthood of leaders). These ideals are vivid and moving to many people . . . because, among other reasons, their longings are still felt, because their content is a romantic ideal to which many continue to be attached.[1]

In my recent article 'Strategic Unweaving: Itō Michio and the Diasporic Dancing Body', I explored how a subtle transformation of pre-war nationalist ideologies could imply the 'universality' and cultural superiority of the Japanese body. In this article I wish to expand on that concept to demonstrate that such ideologies continue to flavour the corporeal language of twenty-first-century Japanese performance.

While I am not suggesting that fascism per se imbues contemporary performance, I do maintain that the Japanese aesthetic preference for gender and ethnic ambiguity continues to fuel the politics of Japanese cultural nationalism, even when the performers or directors adamantly disavow such concepts.

The persistence of this Japanese philosophical perspective fuels what I call Japan-centrism (hereafter called J-centrism), a term I coined for the Itō essay noted above. This is an attitude partly derived from the early twentieth-century writings of Okakura Kakuzō (aka Okakura Tenshin, 1863–1913), whose goal was to legitimate Japanese culture in relation to the West. His influential *The Ideals of the East with Special Reference to the Art of Japan* (1903) and *The Book of Tea* (1906) were written in English for Western readers. Okakura subtly shifted the concepts of his teacher Ernest Fenollosa, the American art historian and early translator of nō who had argued that Japanese art has value because it is part of a Greek-inflected, European-derived universalism. Okakura tweaked this argu-



The 'universal' beauty typical of idealized ancient Greek athletes, embodied by the Japanese dancer Itō Michio.

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ment, making Japan (not Greece) the centre of universal beauty. Itō, who worked primarily in Europe and the USA, demonstrated this in his performance and choreography.

J-centrism is related to the essentialism of classic *nihonjinron* (discourses on Japaneseness) but unlike *nihonjinron*, it is aimed primarily at a non-Japanese audience that is already enamoured of Japanese culture, and only secondarily at a Japanese audience. In my essay on Itō, I explained:

> Unlike Orientalism, which is a Western-created tool for dominating or possessing the desired and/or dangerous Other, J-centrism was created as a corrective to Western attitudes, and it was embraced equally by Japanese and Westerners. . . . In J-centrism, although Western admirers of Asian culture consume that culture, Asians themselves create and define that which is consumable and exportable. . . . Japan . . . acknowledges its superiority in the realms of culture, spirituality, and philosophy while deeming the West, though technologically fecund, to be culturally, philosophically, and spiritually sterile. Japan (or India, Indonesia, or even Asia overall, depending on the specific type of Western admiration) graciously condescends to teach the West values that the West needs. Western admirers willingly assent to the West's role as suppliant and student.
>
> Like Orientalism, J-centrism is infused with stereotypes and misunderstandings of the non-West, but unlike Orientalism, these misperceptions are universally positive and are embraced by both Asian and Western devotees. The result is an imagined universality that – despite Okakura's attempt to distance [his philosophy] from military might and the glorification of death – contains a whiff of fascist aesthetics, which (as Susan Sontag notes) can prosper even in politically anti-fascist environments. Alan Tansman points out that, in contrast to masculinist European fascism, 'the aesthetics of Japanese fascism manifest a melancholy tonality . . . revolving around the affective pull of a feminine figure' . . . and are characterized not only by 'a taste for transient beauty but also a sense of unresolved mourning for lost myths, including the myth of cultural priority'.[2]
>
> (Sorgenfrei, p. 209)

In considering the Japanese appreciation for ambiguity, the ideas of Okakura's protégé Kuki Shūzō (1888–1941) are especially revealing. Kuki was one of the major philosophers of the Kyoto School, all of whom continue to be exceedingly influential today. Like other key mid-century philosophers, Kuki expounded a brand of Japanese essentialism that helped fuel the nationalist and expansionist agenda that led to Japan's participation in the Second World War. Unlike the others, however, Kuki valorized the aesthetics of Edo culture, including kabuki.

As Okakura's protégé, we might say that Kuki was the aesthetic and spiritual grandchild of Okakura's own teacher, the American art historian Ernest Fennollosa, and thus that his ideology is part of a continuum of Japanese universalism. Parenthetically, while working as an assistant to Jean-Paul Sartre in Paris, it was Kuki who first introduced the future existentialist to Martin Heidegger's phenomenology.

Kuki's significance for kabuki lies in his 1930 book *The Structure of Iki*. The term *iki* refers to the peculiar emphasis in Edo culture, especially in what might be called 'decadent kabuki', on a style that has variously been translated as 'chic, dapper, coquettish, stylish, dandified, smart, refined, flippant, posh', and so on. After exhausting many French and English possibilities, the multilingual Kuki concluded that no translation is equivalent because *iki* also incorporates the sense of *shibumi*, a word that implies astringency and elegant restraint. He goes on to say:

> In short, there is no word among Western languages which has precisely the same meaning as *iki*. It is therefore justifiable to consider *iki* as an expression of the unique existential mode of Eastern, or rather Yamato (Japanese), culture. (p. 12)

Kuki asserts that the study of the concept of *iki* 'can only be constituted as the hermeneutics of ethnic being' (p. 120). Steve Odin, an American expert on comparative and Japanese aesthetics, notes that the apparently incompatible combination of chic, coquettish *iki* and restrained, elegant *shibumi* is precisely what defines 'the paradoxical structure of Japanese aesthetic taste' (p. 162). That the philosopher Kuki defines the study of *iki* as 'the hermeneutics of ethnic being' implies that Japanese ethnicity and aesthetics can only be read and interpreted in the manner of holy scripture – the function of hermeneutics. Japanese ethnicity is unique and sacred.

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For Japanese women, the ideal man is a woman. Misuzu Aki as Carlos in *La Esperanza*, a 2012 production of the all-female Takarazuka Revue

For Western men, the ideal woman is a Japanese woman. Kawakami Sadayakko in *Geisha to samurai* (*The Geisha and the Knight*), Paris, 1900.

Performing Gender and Ethnic Ambiguity

Jennifer Robertson has demonstrated some of the ways that the all-female Takarazuka Revue's unstated (and vehemently disavowed) ideologies conform to this pattern, both in the pre-war era and in contemporary Japan. Similarly, Ayako Kano has clarified the uses of such ideologies by the Kawakami troupe's international tours at the turn of the twentieth century. Both scholars emphasize the power of the female Japanese body – in the case of Takarazuka, transformed into the idealized image of a never-possible male to be consumed by Japanese females, and in the case of Kawakami Sadayakko, into an equally unreal Orientalist fantasy of Japanese woman to be consumed by Western males.

While written on female bodies, both fantasies were composed by males in accordance with patriarchal or masculinist concepts. Both are deeply imbricated with the pre-war growth of a capitalist, militarist empire that needed to prove its equality with the West.[3] Like Itō Michio's dances, both also suggested the inherent superiority of the Japanese body, due to its ability to transform gender and ethnicity – that is, its imagined universality. In J-centrism, Japanese artists hijack the concept of 'universality' and transform it for their own needs.

Today, one of the most versatile of transformative actors is kabuki *onnagata* Bandō Tamasaburō V (b. 1950). Tamasaburō (many artists, actors and writers are referred to by their personal rather than family names) is not only acclaimed in Japan as a living national treasure, but has been the recipient of international honours including the 2011 Kyoto Prize (of 50 million yen, equivalent to about $620,000), awarded yearly in each of three fields: advanced technology, basic science, and arts and philosophy. Previous arts winners include Pierre Boulez, Pina Bausch, Issay Miyake, and Maurice Béjart. In 2013, the Ministry of Culture of

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The Takarazuka Revue in (above) the 1947 production of *A Fine Romance* and (below) the 2012 musical *Footloose*.

France named Tamasaburō a Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters.

In addition to performing in kabuki, Tamasaburō has starred in *shingeki* (Western-style) theatre and film, with key roles including Lady Macbeth and Blanche DuBois. In such productions, there is no transposition or adaptation of script or role into a 'Japanese' version; rather, the original locale and ethnicity are maintained, without the use of prosthetics or ethnicity-altering make-up.

Tamasaburō in Wajda's *Nastazja*

Despite his skill and believability portraying females, Tamasaburō's versatility is such that he can also convincingly enact males. A

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Tamasaburō, in wedding gown, as Nastazja in the opening scene of *Nastazja*. Photo: Renata Pajchel.

fascinating example is the 1994 film *Nastazja* (aka *Nastassya*), the renowned Polish director Andrzej Wajda's adaptation of Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*.[4] *Nastazja* is based on the final chapter, in which Prince Mishkin and Rogozin imaginatively return to the past in a conversation over the dead body of Nastazja, the woman they both loved. The film, originally a stage play written and directed by Wajda, has roles for only two actors, although the opening scene, in which Rogozin whisks Nastazja away from the church where she is about to marry Mishkin, features a number of non-speaking extras. Tamasaburō portrays both the delicate, epileptic Prince Mishkin and the *femme fatale* Nastazja. Nagashima Toshiyuki plays the uncultured, rough Rogozin.

Except for the 'realistic' opening scene, the entire film takes place in Rogozin's home, after he has killed Nastazja. During a long drunken night, Rogozin (dressed in black) insists that Mishkin (dressed in white) and the dead Nastazja are essentially the same person; he offers his former rival the dead woman's dangling earrings. Mishkin puts them on, removes his glasses, and wraps himself in Nastazja's shawl. When he turns around, he has become her. Using only these props and variations in facial expression, body language, and voice, Tamasaburō shifts back and forth between the characters of Mishkin and Nastazja, re-enacting the past and clarifying the present. Tamasaburō's saintly, male Mishkin is far more delicate, reserved and 'feminine' in manner and speech than his boisterous, seductive, and dangerous Nastazja; the two opposites are clearly meant to be complementary halves of a single being.

On his website, Wajda tells about the origin of the film, and its relation to his earlier stage adaptation. (The variations in spelling below are printed as on the website.)

> The film was born of a theatrical production of *Nastassya Filipovna*, first staged in 1977 at the Stary Teatr in Cracow. . . . For years I was tormented by apprehension, and later, by certainty that there exists some better solution for a stage version of *The Idiot*. Finally chance came to my aid. When in 1981 I visited Kyoto, I saw a performance of *La Dame aux Camélias* [starring] Tamasaburo Bando, one of the greatest Japanese performers of female roles. . . . I had no difficulty to view him as my ideal Nastassya. Strangely, I also thought at the time that this young man would also be an excellent choice for Mishkin. Thus, the audience was able to witness the miraculous transformation of a man into a woman, and so experience the deep mysterious mental link between Mishkin and Nastasja. . . . Tamasaburo played the film rich in the experience, gained from almost a hundred performances of Nastasja [on stage in Tokyo and Osaka]. In the presence of the camera, his acting became detached and exceptionally film-like – particularly in the interpretation of the character of Mishkin.
>
> The female parts created by Tamasaburo Bando are especially dear to me because of the idealization of women, also present in our Polish tradition. This is exactly how he views Nastassya, revealing everything about her, making her worthy of the love of both men (Mishkin and Rogozin). What's more, he has been able . . . to inspire admiration even for her faults.
>
> The creation of this amazing artist is not a female type, but rather an image of eternal femininity born of masculine admiration, never an act of imitation or mimicry. It is this creative form which is for us as Europeans the most striking feature of Japanese art. <www.wajda.pl>

Of course, Western admiration for the transformative skills of Japanese actors – as well

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as for their apparently uncanny emotionality combined with detachment – is not new, nor is Wajda's idolizing of the 'eternal feminine'. Such ideas are often tempered with confusion, and sometimes fear, due to Western inability – or unwillingness – to accept something that seems totally natural in Japanese thought: the existence of paradox, in which mutually incompatible opposites co-exist in a single entity. This paradox is evident in the performance of corporeal, gender, and ethnic ambiguity.

The Co-existence of Opposites

In *Nastazja*, Tamasaburō is simultaneously (and paradoxically) male and female, Japanese and Russian, dead and alive. Like Itō Michio's own gender and ethnic mutability, such portrayals were (and continue to be) effective weapons against the Western habit of seeing Japan as inherently pre-modern or Other. By embracing the 'both/and', these Japanese performers make the Western 'either/or' impossible. In this way, the pre-war agenda of 'overcoming modernity' continues to be played out as both Japanese artists and non-Japanese viewers expound the ineffable and traditional aesthetic preference for ambiguity and multiplicity.

Tamasaburō, like Itō and Takarazuka performers, relishes the versatility inherent in performing various international styles as well as genders and ethnicities. In addition to acting female roles in Euro-American classics, he has portrayed Queen Elizabeth I as a male transvestite in *Contradanza* (also called *Elizabeth*) by Spanish playwright Francisco Ors, danced the role of the Shinto goddess Amaterasu with the Kodo drumming troupe, and starred as the female lead in the classic Chinese *kunqu* opera *Mudang ting* (*The Peony Pavilion*, 1598), performed in China in the Chinese language.

Tamasaburō first studied Chinese opera performance in the 1980s, under the tutelage of Mei Baojiu, the son of the legendary Chinese actor Mei Lanfang (1894–1961). He subsequently spent several years learning and performing portions of *The Peony Pavilion*. Chinese theatre scholars who saw his 2008 *Peony Pavilion* in China told me that, in their opinion, his performance equalled that of Mei Lanfang, a truly extraordinary comparison, and the Chinese media duly dubbed him 'the Japanese Mei Lanfang'.

As great an actor of female roles as Mei was, he never mastered, or even attempted, kabuki. In an interview with *The Japan Times*, Tamasaburō stated that one reason he wanted to do this role in China was to help the Chinese revive the *nandan* tradition – that is, female roles enacted by males. Why would a Japanese actor care about China's current preference for female actors playing female roles? Why would he think they need his 'help'?

From a political and historical perspective, this desire sounds deeply suspicious; it is resonant of the paternalistic, ethnic superiority that justified Japanese imperialistic expansion in Asia during the first half of the twentieth century. At that time Japan maintained that it was saving Asia from the clutches of Western colonialism – a position reminiscent of Okakura's, who insisted that the lost treasures of Asian art had been saved in Japan, the only non-colonized nation. He wrote:

> The unique blessing of unbroken sovereignty, the proud self-reliance of an unconquered race, and the insular isolation which protected ancestral ideas and instincts at the cost of expansion, made Japan the real repository of the trust of Asiatic thought and culture. . . . It is in Japan alone that the historic wealth of Asiatic culture can be consecutively studied through its treasured specimens.
>
> (Okakura, *Ideals*, p. 5–6)

Is Tamasaburō suggesting that the tradition of female impersonation in theatre, which remains alive in Japan but has withered in China, is one of those lost traditions, and that China needs Japan to revive it? Oddly, Chinese theatre critics and scholars did not bristle at the implication; rather, in a manner similar to Western devotees of Asian culture such as W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound in the pre-war world, the post-war Beat poets, or contemporary *anime* fanatics, they humbly acceded to sit at the feet of the Master.

Tamasaburō's versatility has also been crucial in reviving interest in *shimpa*, the so-

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called 'transitional' theatre genre popular at the turn of the twentieth century. He is especially fond of performing the female leads in the highly melodramatic, often fantastical plays of Izumi Kyōka (1873–1939) such as *Nihonbashi* and *Demon Pond* (*Yasha-gaike*). Cody Poulton notes that:

> Contemporary performances of these plays have ranged from brilliant to appallingly kitsch. . . . However we regard these plays . . . they reveal, in an often unmitigated manner, the writer's central concerns: his romanticism; his belief in the moral purity of acting in accord with personal inclinations based on the emotions and not on rationality; his faith in occult forces that influence our daily lives; his aversion to contemporary society and the social inequalities created by modernization; and his idiosyncratic but powerful aesthetic ideals. (p. 11)

This description is striking in its relation to Sontag's discussion of fascist aesthetics. And Poulton continues:

> What particularly concerns me is . . . a dialectic between reason and imagination, nature and 'supernature', men and women, and the voices of tradition (or at least Kyōka's take on it) against those of modernity. (p. 11)

I suggest it is the combination of these elements that helps explain Tamasaburō's passion for Kyōka's plays. However, I take exception to the use of the term 'dialectic'. Unlike classical Hegelian dialectics, Kyōka's lacks a culminating synthesis of opposites into something new. Rather, in my reading, what we see is the balancing – or ambiguity – of multiple, paradoxical elements that exist simultaneously.

Transformation, Gender, and J-centrism

Jennifer Robertson has noted that the actor's transformation into a different gender (and I would add all other differences, including different characters and ethnicities) is related to the Buddhist concept of *henshin* (bodily transformation or metamorphosis) 'whereby deities assumed human form. . . . Related to *henshin* is the process . . . whereby a female body becomes transformed, or metamorphoses, into a male body'. Because female bodies were seen as polluted and incapable of enlightenment, a female could only reach Buddhahood after being cleansed of her sex – that is, after several reincarnations in physically male bodies (p. 53–4).

Robertson makes it clear that opposite-gender acting specialists are not androgynes; there can be no trace of female sex in the male actor's body, nor of male sex in the female actor's body. Rather, the ideal actor embodies the 'essence' of the gender portrayed. Similarly, Kuki's emphasis on the uniqueness of *iki* – that this untranslatable, existential ethnic trait is available exclusively to Japanese artists, and most typically to (male) kabuki actors – clearly suggests cultural and corporeal superiority. Only the ethnically Japanese possess this trait, and only they can perform it. Kuki seems to imply, but does not actually state, that a non-Japanese cannot possess *iki* without some magical, ethnic *henshin*.

These concepts help explain how a *kabuki* actor who brazenly displays his skill at transformation might use that skill to suggest J-centrism – one of its smug assumptions being that transformative versatility is ingrained in Japanese actors because all genres of traditional theatre continue to be practised. Actors (whether or not trained in traditional performance) and audiences (whether or not they are fans of traditional performance) accept that versatility and transformation are something Japanese actors naturally do.

This perception coincides with Okakura's conceit that Japan is the 'repository' of Asia's (and by implication, the world's) lost arts. In contrast, in the West no one knows exactly what traditional all-male theatre genres such as Ancient Greek or Elizabethan theatre were like; the traditional genres are lost and recovery of past practices requires intensive research and informed guesswork. Modern Western actors who master gender or other transformations are considered unusual and especially skilful.

Since women and men began to perform together in the West, gender transformation (in contrast to recent, serious portrayals of transvestites, transsexuals, or characters who cross-dress for other reasons) has primarily

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A training workshop in the Suzuki method.

been used in comedies, opera, gay and lesbian performance, and single-sex troupes. Exceptions – that is, serious gender transformations – have generally been limited to females in male roles. Examples include Sarah Bernhardt as Hamlet, Linda Hunt as Billy Kwan in *The Year of Living Dangerously*, Tilda Swinton as Orlando, or Cate Blanchett performing the Bob Dylan-like Jude Quinn in *I'm Not There*. There are also rare males who play non-camp female roles, such as Quentin Crisp as Elizabeth I in *Orlando.* However, Crisp was a well-known, outspoken, and outrageous gay performer, and various novels and plays question Elizabeth's actual gender (and identity) – even Tamasaburō has portrayed the Virgin Queen as a male in drag (in *Contradanza*, or *Elizabeth*).[5]

Marjorie Garber and other gender theorists would suggest that in the West female-to-male transformation is less sexually threatening than male-to-female. In Japan, such distinctions are moot. No one questions the actress Shiraishi Kayoko's right to portray both the male, Eastern god Dionysus and the female Greek mortal Agave in Suzuki Tadashi's version of *The Bacchae*. Rather, critics throughout the world marvel at her otherworldly intensity and her powerful, gravelly, male-female voice. Similarly, when an all-male *shingeki* troupe performs Mishima Yukio's all-female play *Madame de Sade* in historical drag, no one suggests that the embodiment of French aristocratic females by Japanese males is meant as camp. Rather, it is regarded as a serious interpretation by serious actors.

Implications of the 'Suzuki Method'

I conclude this essay with a key example of how contemporary Japanese acting utilizes these concepts by briefly considering the J-centric, universalizing theories of director Suzuki Tadashi (b. 1939), an artist who clearly identifies with leftist thought and international goodwill. Suzuki trains and works with actors all over the world, his

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performances often featuring deeply revisionist versions of Greek tragedy, Chekhov, or Shakespeare. He has established BeSeTo (the first letters of Beijing, Seoul, and Tokyo) to help improve relations between China, Korea, and Japan.

Yet it is telling that the title of one of his most recent publications is *Culture is the Body*. The title essay, subtitled 'The Grammar of the Feet', is essentially a shorter version of the similarly named chapter in his 1986 *The Way of Acting*. Suzuki tries to have it both ways when he writes:

> It is often said that the concept behind my exercises is somehow very Japanese, but I don't believe this is so. Even the classical ballet dancer who attempts to leave the ground behind altogether principally senses an intimate connection with the earth. . . . The traditional Japanese performing arts share this balance between height and depth, sky and earth. In the Japanese case, however, the equilibrium, the source of strength, emanates in all directions from the pelvic area, which radiates energy into horizontal space. (p. 41–2)

Note that important word 'however'. Suzuki makes clear that this equilibrium is the simultaneous existence of apparent opposites. He continues by suggesting that some actors feel that Americans can't do the exercises because their legs are too long or they lack stamina. Suzuki denies these assertions, stating: 'A Japanese actor has no special claim to success, or to developing those skills in his own body, any more than anyone else' (p. 43). Nevertheless, he continually cites elements of 'traditional' Japanese daily life, including language and breathing, squat toilets, house architecture, as well as traditional performance as justifications for his method.

In short, the Japanese way is the natural, universal way. Despite Suzuki's avowed wish to expand his actor training all over the globe, the implication is that if non-Japanese actors fail to live up to his standards, it is because they lack a shared cultural background. Even an American, he insists, can learn to be a great actor if he or she conforms to Suzuki's training and imaginatively learns to become Japanese. The fuzzy logic ultimately suggests an unconscious J-centrism.

In a 2002 speech at New York's Columbia University that appears in the same volume Suzuki discusses how the Japanese body, physical gestures, and vocal patterns derive from traditional architecture, toilets, and language. His method uses special breathing techniques related to the specificity of the Japanese language. While maintaining that all traditions of all nations are good, and that all are in flux as they meet other traditions, he notes that

> while respecting one another's differences, often times a completely new element emerges in the work that is of neither tradition. Tradition is something that provides a step toward something new. Tradition is not something to be protected; it is something to provide a springboard for creation. (p. 68)

While seeming here to deny the value of tradition, on the next page he states: 'The Suzuki Method of Actor Training was created in order to try to find ways for these Japanese traditional elements to be utilized in a more global sense in contemporary theatre. It was one attempt to try to transform and continue tradition' (p. 69). Suzuki's confused rhetoric conforms to Yumiko Iida's discussion of nationalism as aesthetics. Iida notes, following Terry Eagleton, that

> In modern Japanese history, [the] anti-modern revolt ['of the senses against the tyranny of the theoretical'] has most often been expressed in calls for Japanese identity in which the aesthetic desire cultivated by the inscriptional violence of the modern is confused with the desire for national identity. (p. 6)

She suggests that the concept of 'Japan' was one that 'came to be defined, first by foreigners (mostly Western), and later by the Japanese themselves, as a cultural entity lacking the modern notion of the autonomous subject' (p. 7).

The suggestion that the Japanese lack interiority or personal subjectivity, that they are primarily defined by exteriority or surface imagery, appears in both Western and Japanese aesthetic theories. The flippant version of this assertion is Oscar Wilde's dictum in 'The Decay of Lying' that

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the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people. . . . The Japanese people are, as I have said, simply a mode of style, an exquisite fancy of art. (p. 988)

More serious considerations, such as those of the Japanese philosopher Sakabe Megumi, suggest that the Japanese emphasis on the surface means that they are, and have always been, ineffably post-modern and transmutable. In the following, Sakabe uses the term *omote*, which in Japanese means both the face and the mask. He states:

In traditional Japanese thought there is neither the category of Cartesian substance nor any kind of rigid or fixed dualism between soul and body, exterior and interior, seen and unseen. . . . In short, in Japanese traditional thought there is nothing but surfaces – or, to say it differently, there is nothing but grids of surfaces that are, at least in principle, strictly reversible, the one into the other. . . . Nothing exists but surfaces, grids of surfaces. Nothing but '*omote*'. Nothing but reflections. Nothing but shades. Therefore, there are no substantial beings, no being that has been fixed in its sameness.

Nothing exists but a world of diverse and infinite metamorphoses. (p. 247)

Transformation (or metamorphosis) is a crucial aspect of Japanese performance. It exists in acting, dramaturgy, and staging. For actors, theorists, and philosophers alike, an alluring ambiguity appears to be the key to understanding what it means to be Japanese. The concept seems to suggest that Japan is the treasure house of humanity's lost cross-gender performing traditions.

Notes

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1. Sontag, p. 91.
2. Tansman, p. 15.
3. Although *Rose of Versailles* is a post-war play that may superficially seem to suggest feminist empowerment, its ultimate message, like that of all Takarazuka products, corresponds closely to pre-war ideology. See Robertson and Kano.
4. Wajda was awarded the Palme d'Or at the 1981 Cannes Film Festival. Four of his films were nominated for the Academy Award (Oscar) as Best Foreign Language film. In 2000, he received an honorary Oscar.
5. For a discussion of *Contradanza/Elizabeth*, see Bowers, p. 270–4.

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