Jovial Usurper in the Traditional Kyogen Style: Kuninusubito (based on Richard III) at the Setagaya Public Theatre, Tokyo

Reviewed by MANABU NODA

Kuninusubito (“The Usurper”) is a free adaptation of Shakespeare’s Richard III in the manner of kyogen, a Japanese traditional theatre form which has developed alongside noh theatre. Mansai Nomura, the director-cum-title role actor, is a household name in Japan not only through his kyogen and other stage performances, including Oedipus (dir. Yukio Ninagawa) and Hamlet (dir. Jonathan Kent), but also through his film and TV appearances. The production was thoroughly enjoyable and full of inventive touches, but not without some blemishes.

Kyogen’s primary goal is to draw laughs. Kyogen and noh are highly stylized traditions, but while noh is a solemn, austere, and tragic form of theatre, kyogen (literally meaning “mad words”) has always placed itself in a comic situation taken from everyday life. Though usually more subdued and obedient than the slave of Roman comedy or the zanni of commedia dell’arte, kyogen’s comic servant Tarokaja provides a more realistic view of life than any noh character. Consequently, kyogen as a theatrical style is quite amenable to Shakespeare’s comedies as has been proven in two kyogen makeovers of Shakespeare: Horazamurai (“The Braggart Samurai”, based on The Merry Wives of Windsor, 1991, written by Yasunari Takahashi and directed by Mansaku Nomura, Mansai’s mentor and father, who was designated a Living National Treasure this year) and Machigai-no Kyogen (“Kyogen of Errors” based on The Comedy of Errors, 2001, written by Takahashi and directed by Mansai). Both plays were performed by actors who were formally trained in kyogen, and the consistency of style contributed to the graceful fluency in staging.

In view of this track record, it was a natural choice for Mansai to interpret Richard as a comic villain, though much larger in scale than Tarokaja. Mansai’s
usurper is a wisecracking aristo who loves to confirm complicity with his audience. Clad in a black costume designed by Junko Koshino, he often limps forward to get in close touch with you. Just like the clownish Vice in the morality play, he likes to position himself in the borderline space between the platform stage and the pit. During the monologues he often sits on the stage-front steps and directly addresses the audience. He underscores his puns by reiteration, and his asides and jokes never go unaccompanied by a mischievous glance at the pit. In a hilarious scene Richard, willfully taking the silence of the audience for his subjects’ tacit consent to his succession, checks public support by ordering his men to get off the stage and try to raise the front-row seats with a lever to see if “the public will not budge”. When it becomes clear that he can really be the King, he even grabs a microphone and begins to sing of his joy with dancers in the back.

The audience loved all this, but at times Mansai’s comic acting was rather overblown, removed from his kyogen discipline, which always demands restraint. Mansai appeared comfortably self-assured when playing against actors from the same background – especially Yukio Ishida, who created a wonderful Hisahide (Buckingham’s counterpart) with his beautifully controlled theatrical language. However, with non-kyogen actors, he moved in and out of the framework of kyogen as a code of reference, and consequently looked somewhat off balance, teetering between broad comedy and more controlled theatrical idioms of kyogen language.

It was not only Mansai, though, but also all the other actors who, in spite of their commendable acting, seemed to be speaking in theatrical languages which were irreconcilably different. For the first time in Mansai’s kyogen Shakespeare series, the company for Kuninusubito consisted of actors from diverse theatrical backgrounds, and only five of the twenty-strong cast had formal kyogen training. If The Braggart Samurai and The Kyogen of Errors were experiments on the applicability of kyogen technique to Shakespeare, Kuninusubito was a good testing ground for exploring the theatrical potential of kyogen, where it was placed in dialectical relationships with other acting styles. Unfortunately, it seems that the desired chemical reactions did not take place. The piece lacked stylistic harmonization and integration perhaps because Mansai was engaged in both directing and acting in spite of the obvious need for an objective eye during the rehearsal. It was good to see the actors performing without being intimidated by the cross-style casting, but the stylistic discord became most apparent when the actor Mansai had to modify or, if occasion required, step out of his kyogen style in cross-style scenes.

Besides mixed casting, Kuninusubito was also different from Mansai’s previously comedy-dominated kyogen Shakespeare productions in the choice of genre. Mansai admits he worked on the script in tandem with the writer of the
Mansai (front) and Shiraishi (back), photograph by Katsu Miyauchi
Mansai (front) and Shiraishi (back), photograph by Katsu Miyauchi

Mansai (centre), photograph by Katsu Miyauchi
script Shoichiro Kawai, a Shakespearean scholar and translator, and they met the challenge by transposing the original to mediaeval Japan—in this case the Muromachi Period (1392–1573) to be exact, the period when kyogen and noh are supposed to have been inseminated. Just like the films The Throne of Blood (1957, based on Macbeth) and Ran (1985, based on King Lear, with Mansai at the age of seventeen in the role of the blind prince) by Akira Kurosawa, whom Mansai greatly admires, Kuninusubito borrows the mugen-noh (“dream noh”) structure in which the visitor of the site, often a priest, encounters the soul of the dead who is the subject of the play. The ghost in this form of noh play recounts his/her personal history by the middle of the play and then goes out, to reappear later for the emotionally charged dance at the finale.

Kuninusubito parenthesized the action of Richard III between the opening and ending scenes where a woman in a modern white dress—just sightseeing, perhaps—picks up a mask left on the main acting area, which looks like a deserted and charred open-air noh stage under a harsh white light. There she recites Basho’s haiku: “Summer grasses: / all that remains of great soldiers’ / imperial dreams” (Matsuo 51). Within this dream-play framework, the main action unravels itself as the story of dead warriors. A strong sense of Buddhist transience is evoked, which was also underpinned by the sound of cicadas’ chorus, reminding the audience of the insect’s life cycle (years of larval stage, followed by a very short adult stage at the height of summer) and the classical literary pun of utusemi (meaning “man in this world” as well as “an empty cicada shell”).

All the female characters in Kuninusubito were played by Kayoko Shiraishi, a representative actress in Japanese contemporary drama, so the woman who looks back at the tumultuous period is also all the women from the past—the women who curse, love, protest, despair, and wail. It was an ambitious casting which would have been impossible without an actor of Shiraishi’s calibre. She worked with Tadashi Suzuki of Suzuki Method fame as his company’s leading actress until 1989 and, after going solo, has unchangingly been highly acclaimed in many performances including Shakespeare, most notably Ninagawa’s Pericles, which toured to the National Theatre in London in 2003 to receive rave reviews.

Shiraishi’s sheer physical presence, versatility, and emotional range were as impressive as ever. It is not surprising, though, that having one person play all the women was confusing to the audience, especially in the scene when all of them alternate in venting out their agony in front of the Tower gate. It blurred not only the storyline but also the individuality of the female characters, reducing them into a single abstract construct of the lamenting, cursing woman. I think this heavy polarization along the gender line between man as macho wrongdoer and woman as victimized object of male desire (and hate) was going
too far, admitting that the dichotomy is what the original Richard III by and large embraces.

Once on the throne, the usurper realizes it is time for serious worrying. Kuninusubito depicts Richard’s transition from a jovial villain to an agonizing hero as that of a figure who, having long believed he had been confined in the shadow, begins to get frantic and restless once he is brought out into the light of day, desperately resolved to hold on to his newly acquired source of anxiety. The word “shadow” is a keyword emphasized in the adaptation text, and the Shadow (performed by Junjun, a skilled mime) accompanies Richard until the moment of his coronation. After that he momentarily retires, but then comes back to stab Richard in the final battle scene. It was a striking directorial touch – Richard killed by his own shadow – and quite effective in highlighting Richard’s ego split due to the emergence of his conscience.

Works cited


King Lear at the Cameri Theatre of Tel-Aviv

Reviewed by TALI SILBERSTEIN

“But even the want of that for which I am richer –
A still-soliciting eye, and such a tongue
That I am glad I have not, though not to have it
Hath lost me in your liking.”

(Cordelia in King Lear 1.1.230–33)

The production of King Lear at the Cameri Theatre of Tel-Aviv for the theatre season 2007–2008 was directed by a Georgian director, a non-Hebrew speaker, the widely-known Robert Sturua. But this is not the main reason for choosing the above words of Cordelia as a motto for this review. Sturua’s adaptation of the play, and its consequent translation into Hebrew by Dori Parness, omits large extracts from the play’s dialogues. Actually, some of its most famous parts are removed. Instead, this production puts a strong emphasis on the play’s physical aspects.