Multicultural Shakespeare:
Translation, Appropriation and Performance vol. 30 (45), 2024
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-8530.30.03

Tomoka Tsukamoto[*]
Ted Motohashi[**]

Hamlet (Un-)Masked: SPAC's *Hamlet* under COVID-19 Restrictions

Abstract: One of the reasons why Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, as a play representing the essential problematics of Western Modernity, is still relevant today, is that it contains the cultural dynamics that ranges over issues around colonialism, patriarchy, and individual identities, all of which have been causes and consequences of the Western Modernity. More specifically, in the current context of the declining Western hegemony, symbolized by regional military conflicts and environmental degradation, among other crises, the urgency to freshly produce and interpret this play seems to be increasing. This essay attempts to question the significance of staging *Hamlet* today by examining Satoshi Miyagi's version of the play at the Shizuoka Performing Arts Center (SPAC) in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, and through its analysis, we aim to reflect how *Hamlet*, while characterizing Western Modernity, harbors the potential to critique its essence.

Keywords: *Hamlet*, COVID-19 pandemic, sisterhood, orality and aurality, historical temporalities, *Embracing Defeat*.

Introduction: *Hamlet* and Western Modernity

Hamlet has continually been renovated by Western Modernity, posing questions to actors, directors, audiences, and societies at large, and thereby retaining its allure as a contemporary work across all epochs. In this sense, the protagonist's final words, "the rest is silence" (5.2.363)[1] have been heard not as the resignation of the departing, but rather as an invitation to those left behind, urging them to

---

[*] International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC), Japan. tomokatsuka@gmail.com
[**] Tokyo University of Economics, Japan. tedtedm@hotmail.com

[1] All quotations from *Hamlet* are taken from the Arden Edition of the play, edited by Harold Jenkins (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), and henceforth referred to Act, Scene, Line numbers only in brackets.

© by the author, licensee University of Lodz – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

undertake the challenges entrusted not only by the protagonist but by the entirety of the play, and this invitation remains relevant today. At the same time, however, as each era enacts its own *Hamlet*, or as Hamlet himself suggests, because the purpose of playing is to hold “the mirror up to nature” (3.2.22), this play inevitably reflects the cultural dynamics of a specific period in which it is performed. Consequently, *Hamlet* as a performative text lends itself to exploration within the specific political, economic, and social contexts of that era, especially in the current “post-modern” settings where Western Modernity is revealing its limitations in various aspects. The dramaturgy of interpreting *Hamlet* thus provides an opportunity to relativize the ideological apparatuses of “the West,” which are not necessarily geographically confined.

In the current context of globalization, regional military conflicts, environmental degradation, climate change, worsening food crises, and recurrent infectious diseases, all of which pose existential threats to the planet itself, as Western Modernity exhibits symptoms of decline, one should duly ask, “What is the significance of staging *Hamlet* today?” One distinguished answer to this question could be found in the production of *Hamlet* directed by Satoshi Miyagi at the Shizuoka Performing Arts Center (SPAC) in Japan from January to February 2021. This paper aims to examine this production, which was performed with a double cast under severe restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and through its analysis, consider how *Hamlet*, while characterizing Western Modernity, also harbors the potential to critique it from its core. Our analysis of the production will center upon two aspects, both of which are critical in terms of the critique of Western Modernity: one, the possible sisterhood or female solidarity between Ophelia and Gertrude; and two, its resonance to the local politics and history of post-war Japan with references to Emperor Hirohito and General MacArthur.

Japanese Theater Performances and the COVID-19 Pandemic

This article attempts to analyze SPAC’s *Hamlet* during the recent COVID-19 pandemic which tremendously disrupted public stage performances all over the world. The reason for our taking up this particular production is that it not only typically highlighted the conditions in which stage performances became available during the pandemic but also successfully revealed some deep-seated themes of *Hamlet* by excavating the subliminal impulses of the main characters. We would argue that Miyagi and his team, under the forceful restrictions on the performers as well as on audience members, took advantage of them to indicate the hitherto undermined relationship among the characters of the play.

First, let us briefly summarize the social circumstances that surrounded the stage arts in Japan during the pandemic. In Japan, stage performances were not prohibited by law but there was no public financial help for the stage artists who were severely affected by the pandemic through the loss of performing opportunities. The public performances were controlled by the Ministry of Culture's "Guidelines for Preventing the Spread of Infections in the Cultural Institutions," which stipulated that if one actor was infected, the performance should be cancelled altogether unless there was an understudy to take up the role. Most of the companies performed without any understudy because of the financial restrictions, and as a result a number of performances had to be cancelled for the whole run. Most companies carried out daily COVID-19 tests for their members, and even if the results were negative, the actors avoided speaking their lines in proximity on the stage. In the auditorium, the audience members were also asked to wear masks and to be seated with enough space in between to keep the so-called "social distance."

Hamlet as a "Masked" Play

SPAC's *Hamlet* also followed these guidelines, but as a theatrical company relatively affluent in terms of finance and personnel (as it was a public company under the aegis of Shizuoka Prefecture), it could afford to set up two separate squads to perform before the different audience.[2] The abiding dramaturgy of this particular *Hamlet* was that it inspired and was inspired by the idea of "masque." First of all, the playing area that was set in the middle of the stage was a square covered with a white cloth whose four corners were hung from the ceiling, which gave an impression that this playing podium was a stage within the stage specifically concocted for a masque as a play within a play.

This version of *Hamlet* had a limited number of characters only, Hamlet, Gertrude, Claudius, Ophelia, Polonius, Laertes, Horatio and three travelling players. The radical condensation not only made the play short (less than 2 hours) but also highlighted the issues surrounding the families under enormous political pressures from the inside as well as from the outside.

All characters on the stage wore masks covering their mouths, but they were not medical ones but beautifully crafted theatrical ones that could have been considered as a part of the specific costume. Here the masks individually worn by each player asserted his or her artistic as well as social status. If, generally speaking, the masque play tends to fix characters by employing masks, this particular masked *Hamlet* made them more complex and ambiguous. We would further argue that if Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a play that problematizes the complexity and ambiguity involved with humanity through theatrical means, this masked *Hamlet* made us acutely aware of our existence as linguistic animals that controlled and were controlled by the vocal capacities.

---

[2] The cast-list called the two teams T and D respectively, and in this article we mainly discuss the D team performance, one of the reasons of which is that we have already discussed the T team performance in detail which was premiered well before the pandemic. See Tomoka Tsukamoto and Tetsuya Motohashi, *The Theater of Miyagi Satoshi* (Tokyo, Seikyusha, 2016), 162-175.

Miyagi's rendition of *Hamlet* constituted an attempt to counter and relativize the overwhelming emphasis historically placed on the actions and psyche of the protagonist Hamlet throughout the over 400-year performance and critical history of the play. This assertion will be examined by scrutinizing six key scenes—Hamlet's encounter with the "Ghost of his father," the "play within the play" scene with the travelling players, the "nunnery" scene with Ophelia, the "bedroom" scene with Gertrude, Hamlet's "lamentation" over Ophelia's death, and the "final duel" scene where the main characters met their demise.

"Remember Me": Orality and Aurality within Hamlet's Selfhood

One of the distinctive features of Miyagi's version of *Hamlet* was the awareness of the distance between the body and language, resulting in a transformation of interpersonal communications, which inherently involved contemplation of the relationship between selfhood and otherness. A typical example illustrating this was the manner in which the apparition of Hamlet's deceased father appeared in this production. In other words, the ghost served as both an icon that prompted Hamlet (Yuya Daidomumon) to question his own words and a transformative event that fundamentally altered Hamlet's relationships with other characters.

Following Hamlet's soliloquy lamenting his father's death and his mother's remarriage to his uncle, he received a visit from Horatio and they reminisced about the former king Hamlet's greatness. At that moment, suddenly a shadow appeared on the stage and approached Hamlet. The two shadows overlapped, and Hamlet alternately voiced the words of the Ghost and responded to them with his own voice. While it was not uncommon for the past productions of the play to have Hamlet speak the words of the Ghost which did not physically manifest itself, what set Miyagi's direction apart was the immense size of the two shadows that enveloped the stage, emphasizing the isolation of the dialogue between Hamlet and the Ghost. The presence of Horatio, at the margin of these shadows, was insignificant, and throughout this scene and others, the depth of friendship between Horatio and Hamlet was not highlighted. This reduction (further emphasized by the absence of the soldiers) not only reflected the lack of male bonding surrounding Hamlet but also suggested his affinity towards femininity, as we will discuss his relationship with Ophelia and Gertrude.

One notable aspect of Hamlet's monologue, where he also spoke the Ghost's words, was that it embodied the interdependence between listening (auditory perception) and speaking (verbal expression) within Hamlet's body. Typically, we consider these two activities as separate entities and use them to infer relationships between self and others. This is the fate of human beings as linguistic creatures and is a core tenet of Miyagi's dramaturgy. As Miyagi stated in the "Director's Notes" for this production (Miyagi, 2):

> […] humans, upon acquiring "language" during their growth, become the loneliest creatures on earth. Only humans don't understand what their parents, companions and neighbors are truly thinking. No other creature is as lonely as humans.

The production maintained this skepticism towards language that severely inhibited communication among the characters and exacerbated their loneliness. Although the characters' words and actions appeared aligned with each other, the viewers were constantly invited to suspect that there was an unbridgeable gap between them. As Hamlet's voice overlapped with the voice of the Ghost, indistinguishable dialogues were delivered, with Hamlet's sole body visible on stage. This scene vividly illustrated the destiny of humans who, having acquired "language," become "lonely."

Photo 1. Hamlet and Ghost: Hamlet (Yuya Daidomumon).
© SPAC photo by Nakao Eiji

In *Hamlet*, the issue of separation between language and body cannot be divorced from issues such as the succession of sovereignty in modern states, gender discrimination, and the hegemonic structures of patriarchy. On one hand, while Claudius resorts to the pre-modern method of seizing power through regicide, his governance, utilizing his sexual relationship with the queen and bureaucratic control over the courtiers, is remarkably modern and efficient. For such modern governance systems, Hamlet's struggles with the distance and alienation between language and body must seem luxurious and philosophical concerns to be ignored. Thus, in the Danish court, which boasts of modern kingship, governed by such efficient administration, Hamlet's existence further deepens his isolation. It was quite obvious that Hamlet was isolated from everyone else in the Court, but in this production, his solitude seemed aggravated by the fact that he wore a mask, as the audience was not certain to whom his voice belonged since we were unable to see his mouth. Throughout this "masked" *Hamlet,* we were unable to certify the interlocutory body as the source of utterance, as we could not witness the very moment of enunciation because of the mask, which in turn leads us to not only realize but also doubt that our human existence was defined and controlled by linguistic communication.

The Pandemic and the Social Distance

One of the new vocabulary introduced into our daily lives during the COVID-19 pandemic was a "social distance." In order to decrease the risk of infection, we were all urged to keep the physical distance between one another. Hamlet can be regarded as a prototype of the person who cannot deal with issues surrounding human communication and the distance between self and others, and this production took advantage of the regulated distancing under the pandemic. First of all, the stage was distanced from the auditorium by a translucent curtain as a precaution against the infection. This curtain, as a kind of the fourth wall, was invisible to the audience's eyesight due to the lighting effect, and its invisible presence made us more aware of the distance between the audience and the performer. This distancing effect created by the curtain had a critical function that not only foregrounded the uncertainty surrounding human communication but also raised the fundamental question about our involvement and collusion with what we witness before our eyes.

The issues associated with social distance were also highlighted by the central performance of the protagonist played by Yuya Daidomumon. His performance was, probably against an image of the mentally brooding and psychologically troubled prince, characterized by sincerity and truthfulness with a secure, calm and relaxed physicality. Even his clownish behavior was a frank invitation to others for some genuine fun that transcended the duality between sanity and madness. In the following, we examine the effects of his fresh representation of Hamlet in a few key scenes.

"What's Hecuba to him"—The Intersection of Three Histories

The visit of the travelling players (Momoyo Tateno, Fuyuko Moriyama, Mariko Suzuki) not only provided Hamlet with a means to explore the truth behind his father's death through theatrical representations but also taught him the potential of building relationships between past and present, self and others, by assuming dramatic characters with whom he had no actual connection. However, what is crucial when considering the dynamics of historical representation in *Hamlet* is the revelation of three aspects of history through the performance of the travelling players.

Hamlet requested the travelling players who had arrived at the court to perform a scene of "Priam's slaughter" (2.2.444). According to Hamlet, this was from a play that "pleased not the million, t'was caviar to the general" but was "an excellent play" (2.2.432-433, 435). We might wonder why this particular play was an excellent one for Hamlet who regarded players as "the abstract and brief chronicles of the time" (2.2.520). Reflecting on this question becomes the key to Hamlet's discovery of others, as this particular scene enacted by the players was akin to the famous monologue of Hecuba from Euripides' *The Trojan Women* (Euripides 57), which manifests her meta-dramatic and transcendent sense of history, as evidenced by the following lines:

> the gods … they do not care for anything except my suffering,
> and they despise Troy more than any other city.
> And so our sacrifices to them have been useless.
> However, if some god had not turned things
> upside down and thrown us beneath the earth, no one would know about us, and the Muses could never celebrate us in their songs for future generations to remember.

Here, Euripides' sense of history indicates that events such as the destruction of Troy brought about by the gods become history only when recognized by "songs for future generations," that is, as art that subsequent people create. Thus, in this statement by Hecuba, three different temporalities intersect: the historical time of the Greek invasion of Troy, the artistic time of Euripides' representations of the Trojan War, and the dramatic time of Hecuba's re-representing these events on stage. From these perspectives of the intersection of plural historical temporalities, what made the Hecuba scene within Shakespeare's *Hamlet* particularly intriguing was that the protagonist Hamlet, in his soliloquy after the departure of these travelling players, amusedly imitated a similar sense of temporal discrepancy:

> Is it not monstrous that this player here,
> But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
> Could force his soul so to his own conceit
> That from her working all his visage wann'd,
> Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
> A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
> With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing!
> For Hecuba!
> What's Hecuba to him, or he to her,
> That he should weep for her? (2.2.545-554)

Here, Hamlet inadvertently suggested that by immersing themselves in "a fiction, in a dream of passion," theatrical performances could transcend temporal discrepancies and actually reveal historical truths. Hamlet's reflection had a reverse vector from the previous sequence of events. First, there was the current temporal space of the stage where actors assumed the role of present characters ("For Hecuba!"); then there was the movement of actors delving into the temporal space of the characters in this play ("What's Hecuba to him"), and finally, there was the moment when the victims of the Trojan War, represented by Hecuba, became the subject of the actor's performance ("or he to her"). As hinted in the earlier scene of Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost, the relationship between listener and speaker inherent in the theatrical performance inevitably transformed two subjects that logically had no connection, from a relationship between self and other into the one between self and self, or between other and other.

Faced with a series of unexpected and unbearable events—his father's sudden death, his mother's hasty remarriage, and his uncle's ascension to the throne, Hamlet within the Danish court was plagued by an absolute sense of isolation where nothing he said would be communicated to others, leading to a situation where only the Ghost became a communication partner. The exit from this desperate situation was provided by the travelling players, as their theatrical representations indicated historical interconnections between past and present. The theatrical body forcibly created an irrational yet crucial connection between "him" and "Hecuba." *Hamlet,* heralding the dawn of Western Modernity, revealed the essence of drama in the figure of an old woman who should have been destroyed and buried in the darkness of history, but instead was commemorated in a song for future generations. And in Miyagi's version of the play, these otherwise forgotten voices of the vanquished, comparable to those of Hecuba and the Trojan Women, were emanated from none other than Ophelia and Gertrude.

"Get thee to a nunnery": The Bond Between Mother and Daughter

In the four-hundred-year history of performances and critiques of the play, *Hamlet* has overwhelmingly been interpreted and performed with the psyche, motives, and actions of the protagonist Hamlet at its core. Other characters have only served to embellish his actions, or have been noticed only when confronted by him, including the two female characters, Gertrude his mother and Ophelia his lover. As a corrective to this play that has been so focused on Hamlet as a distinctive individual, the Miyagi version of *Hamlet* attempted to impress upon us the voices and bodies of Ophelia and Gertrude.

For instance, as we mentioned, in the opening scene, Ophelia broke away from the crowd celebrating the coronation of the new king Claudius to address Hamlet. Although Hamlet did not accept her gaze, he did not reject it either. It was also notable that, as we will analyze in detail below, when Hamlet said to Ophelia, "Get thee to a nunnery" in Act 3, Scene 1, his statement sounded like a sincere plea asking her to take refuge in a safe haven. He seemed to have predicted tragedies that would engulf the Court as if the entire kingdom would be infected with the virus of conspiracies and violence. In this Hamlet, there was nothing cynically self-derogatory and ironic: instead, his sincerity was accompanied by heart-rending sorrowfulness. For another instance, when he asked Ophelia if it was all right to "lie in your lap" (3.2.110-111) in the play-within-the-play scene, his request manifested a genuine friendship rather than a cynical gesture pretending insanity.

Then, what about Ophelia who had to confront this Hamlet as an epitome of sincerity? Probably the word which would best describe Yamamoto's Ophelia was serenity. In the "madness" scene, for example, she did not sing but quietly narrated her lines sitting on the floor without any movement. We sensed that her poetic expressions were not caused by madness but transparent grief from the one who understood the situation very clearly to the extent that she would be victimized by a political maneuver. We were invited to wonder if her poetry was the only means to resist the political discourses manipulated by Claudius and his followers.

These freshly cut figures of Ophelia and Gertrude (Haruyo Suzuki) made us wonder why these women characters had been marginalized and characterized by the male characters as those who were devoid of poetic and political agencies. There was a definite sense of "sisterhood" between Gertrude and Ophelia, but their bond was a result of politically independent actions against the male dominancy rather than of their being essentially "women." In this production, it was indicated that Ophelia was secretly assassinated by Claudius' order because he sensed the danger posed by these politically regenerated women. We could further argue that there could have been a definite possibility of a coup d'état spearheaded by Ophelia and Laertes supported by the incensed populace, which was prematurely annihilated by Claudius.

In this context of the coexistence of poetry and politics, it is important to remember these words of Ophelia seemed to reach the heart of Gertrude as an observer of this scene. Suzuki's Gertrude had a kind of solemnity as if she were a character from a Greek tragedy: being the Queen who bore the destiny of the country in crisis, she looked as tragic as Hecuba. Her decision to marry the former King's brother Claudius was suggested to be the only viable political choice to keep the turbulent country secure. Gertrude's tragic figure made a stark contrast to the mafia-like Machiavellian Claudius, who in a business suit made no secret to his sexual desire and political ambition, revealing no sense of remorse even in the contrition scene (Act 3, Scene 3).

As a prelude to the "nunnery scene," Gertrude addressed Ophelia as follows:

> Queen. And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish
> That your good beauties be the happy cause
> Of Hamlet's wildness; so shall I hope your virtues
> Will bring him to his wonted way again,
> To both your honours.
> Oph. Madam, I wish it may. (3.1.38-42)

In this production, this dialogue between Gertrude and Ophelia was performed with such genuine passion that the audience sensed that there was truthful affability between the two women as if they could have been a mother and a daughter, causing Claudius and Polonius, upon hearing these bold words, to openly show agitation and consternation. As Polonius stated, the marriage between a prince and a minister's daughter was not something to be condoned, and for Claudius, Hamlet's marrying and obtaining an heir posed an obstacle to the continuation of his own reign. However, despite the concerns of such men, the bond of trust between these two women forged in this scene, left a strong impression on us, which Claudius would plot to violently sever. One of the reasons why *Hamlet* has been so male-centered and power-centric is that we, as the audience, have only heard the voices of women as lamentation or remorse, ascribed to their "Frailty" (1.2.146). If we were to listen to their voices as those of politically viable individuals, albeit fragile and vulnerable, attempting to fulfill responsibilities in building progressive solidarity between self and others, then, as Hamlet himself would do, we would find a path to escape from the modern male-centric power structures.

Through such signs of female solidarity, Ophelia gained confidence and confronted Hamlet boldly. Encouraged by her demeanor, Hamlet, spotting Ophelia alone, let down his guard, and spoke to her affectionately. When he told Ophelia, "Get thee to a nunnery" (3.1.121), his remark sounded so sincere that we understood that he was trying to share with her his own feeling of solitude as to how unfortunate it was to live in such a courtly environment, and that the nunnery alone provided a secure refuge in such circumstances. However, when Hamlet, illuminated by the flickering light, realized that Polonius, hiding behind the curtain, overheard their conversation, he was driven by astonishment and despair to repeat, "Get thee to a nunnery, farewell" (3.1.138-139).

Photo 2. Hamlet and Ophelia (Nunnery Scene): Hamlet (Yuya Daidomumon), Ophelia (Miyuki Yamamoto). © SPAC photo by Nakao Eiji

As we have indicated, one characteristic of the Miyagi version of *Hamlet* was that it gave voices to female characters who had previously been overshadowed by Hamlet, asserting their own political and poetic agencies. Therefore, the lines of Ophelia after Hamlet's departure resonated with us as a poignant protest against the court's power dynamics:

> O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
> The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword,
> Th'expectancy and rose of the fair state,

> The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
> Th'observ'd of all observers, quite, quite, down! (3.1.152-156)

After the death of her father Polonius, Ophelia fell into "madness," seemingly imitating Hamlet, but here again, the Miyagi version of *Hamlet* revealed that her "fractured sound" had both societal ramifications and personal justification. Ophelia learned the efficacy of feigning madness from Hamlet, realizing that in this "rotten" world, it was an effective strategy for survival. However, her "insanity," like Hamlet's, posed a serious political threat to Claudius. Therefore, the king secretly ordered Osric (performed by Yoichi Wakamiya who also played Polonius) to assassinate Ophelia. As far as Claudius was concerned, Ophelia's conspicuous presence, as someone who might reveal inconvenient truths, would interfere with his plans, and if Laertes' grief could be turned into anger toward Hamlet, it would be killing two birds with one stone. As if to hint at such machinations by the ruling factions, it was Osric in this production, not Gertrude as in the original, who announced and described Ophelia's death. Thus, the male-centric power system, by cruelly severing the bonds between Ophelia and those around her, sought to further push Hamlet into isolation. However, this production identified Gertrude with the one who ultimately resisted such power structures.

"Breath of Life": Imitating Actions

As previously suggested, the distinctive feature of the Miyagi version of *Hamlet* lay in its ability to resurrect the voices of those we may have heard about but never truly listened to, especially the voices of women such as Ophelia and Gertrude. This was starkly evident in the pivotal encounter between Hamlet and Gertrude in the latter's bedroom. What marked a turning point in this scene was Hamlet's lines appealing to Gertrude's "feeling":

> Hamlet Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,
> Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all,
> Or but a sickly part of one true sense
> Could not so mope. O shame, where is thy blush?
> …
> Queen O, Hamlet, speak no more.
> Though turn'st my eyes into my very soul,
> And there I see such black and grained spots
> As will not leave their tinct. (3.4.78-81, 88-91)

What was noteworthy in this production is that while Hamlet criticized his mother by aligning her senses with the concrete parts of her body, Gertrude articulated a reflection that combined "eyes" and "soul" in response, which led her visualizing "black and grained spots" on her part. Reminiscent of the dialogue between Hamlet and the Ghost at the beginning of the play, in which an eerie black shadow indicated the eternal presence of Hamlet the father within the psyche of Hamlet the son, here in this bedroom scene the shadow of Hamlet the husband was transformed into a "black and grained spots" within Gertrude's soul. In other words, a circuit of oral transmission and aural perception was active between Hamlet and Gertrude too, with these visual images, which were manifested by these spots, being foregrounded as both the cause and consequence of the strained relationship between the mother and the son.

However, it was equally intriguing that immediately afterward, when Hamlet confronted the Ghost again, Gertrude did not share Hamlet's vision of the Ghost. In many interpretations of *Hamlet*, the fact that Gertrude did not see the Ghost, had been considered as evidence of Hamlet's fixation on his deceased father and Gertrude's betrayal of her former husband. The insight of the Miyagi version lay not in judging this apparent difference in visual ability between mother and son, but rather in evolving it into a confirmation of the affection between mother and son. As if to prove this, after this conversation, Gertrude never again succumbed to Claudius' dominance and seduction. And as a precursor to this transformation, in response to Hamlet's assertion that his madness was only feigned, she manifestly declared:

> Be thou assur'd, if words be made of breath,
> And breath of life, I have no life to breathe
> What thou hast said to me. (3.4.199-201)

Hearing these affectionate and sincere words from his mother, Hamlet's stubborn heart finally relaxed its guard, and from a sense of reassurance and trust, his body literally collapsed at Gertrude's feet. Thus, what began as Hamlet's accusation of severing "feeling" from "sight" culminated in Gertrude's declaration that combined "breath" and "life," completing the circuit between the inner sense and the outer existence. Condemnation was redeemed by trust, "life" supported by "breath," and doubt was transcended by love. And Gertrude, from then on until the final moments of her life in Act 5, Scene 2, raising the poisoned cup (apparently knowing it to be poisoned), never abandoned Hamlet.

Photo 3. Hamlet and Gertrude (Bedroom Scene): Hamlet (Yuya Daidomumon), Gertrude (Haruyo Suzuki). © SPAC photo by Nakao Eiji

Immediately after the bedroom scene, Gertrude recounted what had happened to Claudius, but her theatrically feigned delivery was reminiscent of the lamentations by the travelling player. Thus, the strategy of "acting as mimicking" as a means to survive in this "rotten" world was also inherited by Gertrude. However, against such acting, infiltrated by the modern power system, Claudius sought to marginalize these women and maintain his sovereignty. We will next consider Hamlet's solitary resistance to such power politics in his silent and despairing mourning of Ophelia.

Vulnerability and Euphoria

As we examined Gertrude's bedroom scene, the "breath" as the source of human lives transcended not only the linguistic content but also their relationship within the family. We felt that if Hamlet here pretended to be "mad," Gertrude too feigned someone who was beyond the "Queen" or "Mother." Despite the aggressive tone of their exchanges, this pair realized a harmony based on each other's "breath," which was another notable effect accomplished by their respective masks that hid the moment of utterance.

This reunion through the breath was further strengthened by the scene in which Hamlet was confronted with the dead body of Ophelia laid upon a white sheet. Hamlet tried to move her body, but being weak and devastated by sadness, he was unable to do so. In the previous productions before the COVID-19 pandemic, this scene was strikingly accompanied by Hamlet's animal-like roar, but to lessen the risk of infection, that roar was replaced by the song "Euphoria" (composed and sung by the German-born, Netherlands-based singer-songwriter bülow, Megan Bulow). Due to concerns about infection, Miyagi decided to change the staging of this scene so that Hamlet would not vocalize at all. Instead, replacing Hamlet's lament, this high-volume song enveloped the stage throughout this scene. Here, our general conditions under the pandemic where we were prohibited from voicing loudly our feeling of loss were theatrically redeemed non-verbally by this song, strongly suggesting a lost possibility of "euphoria" between those lovers. Here, Daidomumon's Hamlet looked so weak and dejected, echoing sorrow over the lost happiness. This song was a poignant symbol of "what could have been"—the precise feeling so many of us had during the pandemic—, and the weight of Ophelia's body barely carried by the vulnerable Hamlet was exactly a sign of the limitless distance between the two human beings.

The lyrics of this song (Bulow), which fluctuate between rap and rock, with ambiguous pronunciation and meaning, murmured in a nasal voice, went as follows:

> You give me, you give me a-a-adrenaline
> I give you, I give you d-d-d-dopamine
> This euphoria-a-a-a-a-a
> This euphoria-a-a-a-a-a
> You give me, you give me a-a-adrenaline
> I give you, I give you d-d-d-dopamine
> But I should warn ya, I should warn ya
> This euphoria don't last forever

Here, the “euphoria” (intoxication), induced with the help of drugs, could be seen as a metaphor for the “madness” adopted by Hamlet, Ophelia, and Gertrude as a self-defence mechanism. Whether Hamlet knew about Ophelia's murder or not was unclear, but his profound sense of powerlessness and anger towards society causing her sudden death seemed undeniable, and the following lyrics could be seen as expressing his despair:

> With you, it’s never an invasion.
> I like you all up in my space, oh
> About to toy with your emotions
> You’re about to cry me an ocean

Photo 4. Hamlet Lamenting Over Ophelia: Hamlet (Yuya Daidomumon), Ophelia (Miyuki Yamamoto). © SPAC photo by Nakao Eiji

For the two lovers, trapped in the conspiratorial space of the Danish court and unable to find a space of their own, "cry me an ocean" became the only evidence of their bond. For the lovers in this play, such euphoria was fleeting, and as if to prove this point, Miyagi's *Hamlet* in the end would present a vision of history played out by the victors that reminded us of the postwar origins of the contradictions currently plaguing the Japanese state.

Embraced Silence within the Mask

After the fleeting euphoria faded and tranquility returned to the stage, Osric reappeared to convey the King's proposal to Hamlet for a "trial" by swords with Laertes. Unlike the original text, Horatio did not intervene, and Hamlet immediately accepted the proposal. Hamlet and Laertes started to play promptly, and in this final scene, the Miyagi version prepared a surprising new twist to astonish the audience. Midway through the trial between Hamlet and Laertes, sounds reminiscent of bomber planes reverberated, and the stage began to be tinged with red. Then, Gertrude took the poisoned cup Claudius had arranged, and as if to seek revenge on Claudius who tried to stop her, she raised the cup triumphantly and drank. After the duel, both Claudius and Laertes perished, and Osric was also killed by Horatio, and Hamlet died with the words "the rest is silence" (5.2.363).

Here, it was again Hamlet's mask that phenomenally emphasized the silence. Then, the last question posed by this "masked" Hamlet was critically related to what we should take this silence for. Miyagi's ending of the play was so unique to the extent that it questioned the whole meaning of silence in a particular political and historical context. On Hamlet's death with this silence, Horatio, being absolutely static, did not attempt to drink the poisoned cup, nor did he offer any eulogy to Hamlet. Then, a piece of jazz music and the sound of a stopping jeep were heard, and a shadow with a corn pipe in his mouth covered the whole stage. Then, an English voice that sounded like General MacArthur announced the following message which reminded us of an unforgettable image of the American military occupation of Japan at the end of the Asia Pacific War:

> This quarry cries on havoc.
> For me, with sorrow I embrace my fortune.
> I have some rights of memory in this kingdom,
> Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me. (5.2.369, 393-395)

Miyagi mentioned in his "Director's Note" (Miyagi 3) that he was inspired by John Dower's book *Embracing Defeat*, that graphically described the Japanese people's reactions to American occupation. When the speech was completed, all of sudden, a box filled with Hershey's chocolate bars (another symbolic image of American affluence to the eyes of poverty-stricken Japanese people) dropped from the ceiling. Miyagi, whose constant project had been the revaluation and reexamination of Japanese Modernity through his radical adaptation of Western classical plays, resorted to these historical memories to refer to the people's inferiority complex toward the United States after the War.

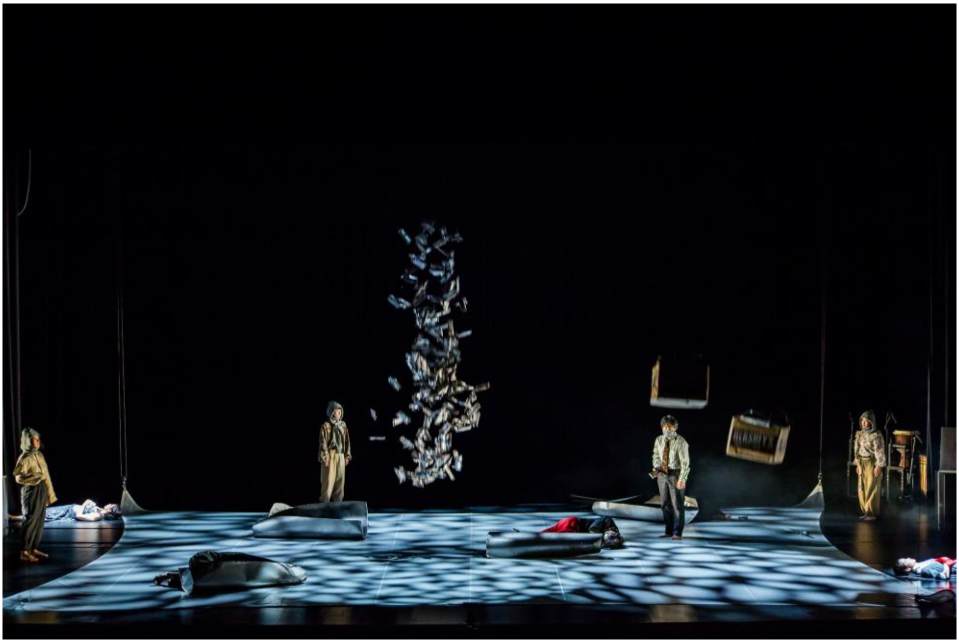

Photo 5. Hershey's Falling (Last Scene). © SPAC photo by Nakao Eiji

Conclusion: Embracing the Pandemic

Up to this point, the staging was almost identical to the previous performances before the COVID-19 pandemic, with the dubious thinness of the American voices intact. However, in this masked performance, to further accentuate the dubiousness of this scene, instead of Horatio's voice as in the previous productions, a Japanese voice imitating Emperor Hirohito's responded as follows:

> Of that I shall have also cause to speak,
> And from his mouth whose voice will draw on more. (5.2.396-397)
> Of course, the opinions of the majority of the people will follow suit.

The added last line was invented by Miyagi, which had a definite resonance with Emperor Hirohito's deal with General MacArthur that defined the political shape of the postwar Japan under the American occupation with the preservation of the Emperor system.[3] This moment of closure graphically reflected the outcome of the Japanese nation at the end of the Asia Pacific War in 1945, when Hirohito and the Emperor System surviving the defeat, sought a surrogate father, MacArthur, and the ending of this play presented an intriguing caricature of Japan's postwar history, constructed through the political, economic and military collaboration with the United States through the US Japan Security Pact.

However, the play did not finish with that image only: just before the blackout, we were able to glimpse at the travelling players, now impersonating the destitute Japanese population, slowly climbing up the stage from the back and approaching toward the scattered chocolate bars. Hamlet died, his country was defeated and would be governed by the occupying forces; but the players survived by eating the thrown-away chocolates, transmitting Hamlet's stories. They would continue to survive the postwar era shrewdly, whether following the ruler's conspiracies or not, by eating the food they scavenged. Thus, on one hand, Miyagi's version of *Hamlet* under the pandemic revealed the desire of Western modern hegemonies to fix the history of the victors as the official discourse, while erasing the history of the defeated; but on the other hand, this production covertly suggested that the political and cultural institutions were maintained by the surviving populace, here symbolized by the travelling players as the "abstract and brief chronicles of the times." And in the present context of the pandemic, the theater survived against the infection and viruses, with the players wearing masks observing the "social distances," who represented the stories of our own and others. The final image of Miyagi's COVID-19 *Hamlet* suggested the theater's eternal and indefatigable capacity of "embracing the pandemic."

WORKS CITED

Bulow, Megan. *Euphoria*. https://www.shazam.com/song/1457759950/euphoria. Accessed 10 June 2024.

Dower, John. *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*. New York: Norton & Company, 1999.

---

[3] As the newly devised Japanese Constitution during the period of American occupation clearly indicated in Article 1 (on the "Symbolic Emperor System") and Article 9 (on the "Renunciation of War"), the deal was a kind of barter between the Emperorship and pacification under the American occupation which largely constructed the political, economic, military and social regimes in the post-war Japan.

Euripides. *The Trojan Women.* Trans. Ian Johnston. https://johnstoniatexts.x10host.com/euripides/womenoftroy.pdf. Accessed 29 February 2024.

Miyagi, Satoshi. “That is the question,” *Theatre Culture*, SPAC Autumn~Spring Season, 2020-2021 #3.

Motohashi, Tetsuya and Tomoka Tsukamoto. *The Theater of Miyagi Satoshi*. Tokyo, Seikyusha, 2016.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Ed. Harold Jenkins. London and New York: Methuen, 1982.