

***The Tempest*. Dir. Yoshihiro Kurita. The Ryutopia Noh Shakespeare, 31 August 2009.**

Reviewed by: Robert Tierney

There are principally two ways to perform Shakespeare on the Noh stage. The first way is to change his work into a Noh play and to perform it the same way that other plays from the Noh repertory are performed. In this case, the play has to be drastically reconfigured to conform to the structure of the Noh theatre, an ancient form that began as a religious ritual performed before the gods. In the process of adaptation, it goes without saying that much of the style and substance of Shakespeare tends to get lost in translation. The second way, however, is to preserve the integrity of the Shakespeare play but to arrange its performance in the style of the Noh. The aim of this approach is to create a stylistic fusion in which Shakespeare and Noh are brought into relation with one another. The end product is neither traditional Shakespeare nor traditional Noh, but an amalgam in which the possibilities latent in Noh are brought out by an encounter with Shakespeare and Shakespeare is enriched by its meeting with another theatrical tradition. The recent performance of *The Tempest* by the Ryutopia theatre troupe in Tokyo offers a compelling example of the strength of this approach.

Yoshihiro Kurita established the Ryutopia Noh Shakespeare (RNS) in 2004 in conjunction with the Niigata City Performing Arts Center. Besides being the associate director of the Ryutopia troupe and director of *The Tempest*, Kurita also played Prospero in the recent performance. Trained in the Fujima school of Buyo (Japanese school of traditional dance) and in kabuki, Kurita has striven to create an original style of performance of Shakespeare through marrying it with Japanese aesthetic forms and performance styles. In recent years, his innovative Noh interpretations of Shakespeare have been performed to acclaim in Japan and in Europe. Starting with *Macbeth*, he has produced a female *King Lear* (performed by the contemporary actress Kayoko Shiraishi) and highly regarded stagings of *Hamlet* and *A Winter's Tale*. In these works, he has experimented with the introduction of Noh masks, chanting and dances into his performance, yet without being slavishly bound by the conventions of the Noh theatre. In *Hamlet*, for example, he has the protagonist sit in a meditative posture throughout the play, but he also introduces a piano accompaniment rather than use the traditional music of Noh. For his performance of *The Tempest*, Kurita invited the traditional Noh master Reijiro Tsumura to play the part of the magic spirit Ariel, who oversees the execution of Prospero's plan from behind his Noh mask.

One aspect of the performance that immediately strikes the viewer is how the play makes the most of the physical constraints of the Noh stage to offer

a compelling interpretation of the play. *The Tempest* was performed at the Tessenkai Noh Theatre, a small theatre located in the Omote Sando district of Tokyo that belongs to the Kanze School of Noh and seats only a few hundred spectators. The traditional Noh stage is a square (six meters on the side) that lies under a roof supported by four pillars and connected to offstage by the *hashigakari* or bridge walkway. The main stage is bare and unadorned, with only the image of a stylized pine tree as a backdrop. At the opening of *The Tempest*, the spectator faces a darkened and empty stage. Rather than seeing a visual representation of a storm at sea, the audience hears only the disembodied voices of the characters as they are plunged into the terrors of shipwreck. In this scene, the darkened Noh stage serves as a perfect vehicle for embodying the imaginary space of the island on which the shipwrecked make landing. In addition, the storm that gives the play its title is portrayed as a spiritual or psychological event that takes place in the minds of the characters rather than a meteorological disturbance occurring in the external world. The clearly articulated voices and cries heard on the darkened stage set the stage for what will be an intensely inner exploration of Shakespeare's romance. In a Noh play, the *hashigakari* is traditionally a bridge that connects the unseen and invisible world of the spirits with the human world. The bridge in the Ryutopia performance only occasionally serves this precise function, notably during the entrance of Ariel, but generally has the more prosaic function of a walkway where the characters make their exits and entrance onto the stage. Nevertheless, in *The Tempest*, the bridge does lead the actors to the imaginary space of the unnamed island in which the play is set.

I would also mention the compelling use of the Noh stage to create a sense of spatial depth. Unlike the audience in a traditional theatre, the audience in a Noh play is seated both in front of and to the side of the stage. This means that when an actor faces the front he is seen in side profile by the spectators on the side and vice versa (I should mention that I watched the play from the side). Recognizing that the play is being watched simultaneously from different angles, the director pays a great care to the composition of the stage and the choreography of the actor's movements in a way that I have not noticed in other theatrical performances of Shakespeare, and to brilliant effect. In *The Tempest*, there are a few scenes where some of the actors are asleep or in a trance, others are speaking and acting while a third group of actors merely observe the action or intervene magically to influence its course. Making the most of the spatial constraints of the Noh stage, the director succeeds in layering the theatrical space so that three or more scenes can unfold simultaneously onstage without producing an impression of confusion. The effect is of a deep space composed of several different strata that are precisely articulated so that the spectator can observe multiple activities taking place simultaneously while losing sight of the central action. This multilayered space is best seen in the penultimate scene of *The Tempest*, where Ferdinand and Miranda, who play a game of chess, share the stage with Prospero and the shipwrecked crew, but are not seen by them at

first, whereas Ariel put their final touches to the denouement of the play. This articulation was also strengthened by an economy of movement, which, while it did not precisely follow the dance steps of a Noh actor, certainly expressed the restraint and dignity of the Noh.

In the Noh theatre, the principal actors wear masks. In *The Tempest*, only two characters wear masks. As an anti-naturalist element, the masks distinguish these two characters and set them apart from the others who perform unmasked. In the first case, Ariel, the supernatural spirit, performed by a Noh actor, not only appears on stage with a mask but he also moves in a hieratic and highly stylized manner of the Noh dance. If the rationale for distinguishing Ariel from the other characters seems clear, the reason for Ferdinand's mask appears to obey a different logic. In response to this writer's question, the director Kurita remarked that he had Ferdinand wear a mask of a young man in order to represent his unearthly beauty in the eyes of Miranda, for whom he is the first man (apart from Caliban or her father) that she has ever seen. In fact, a very handsome actor played the role of Ferdinand, but only a stylized mask of a young man could do justice to the dazzling beauty that he represents in the eyes of Miranda. That is to say, Ferdinand's mask serves to represent the experience of beauty as filtered through the love of Miranda, whose point of view the audience is invited to adopt. While this explanation was intellectually satisfying, it seemed less artistically convincing than the case of Ariel and therefore somewhat forced.

A striking feature in the casting of the play is the apportionment of the role of Ariel among no fewer than five different actors. I have already mentioned the fact that a Noh master plays the nominal Ariel wearing a mask. However, Ariel is not simply an individual but rather a plurality, not simply a person but a spiritual force; indeed, to speak of Ariel as "he" is based on a misunderstanding. In the performance, in addition to the masked actor, four women, each wearing a differently coloured costume, represent the different avatars of this supernatural force. These players remain on stage during most of the play are posted at the four corners of the stage. Like the chorus in a Greek tragedy, they serve as witness before whom the play is performed. In addition, they occasionally intervene in the plot by magical means.

Peter Hulme's path breaking essay, "Prospero and Caliban," argues that *The Tempest* is a play about colonizer and colonist that cannot be properly understood outside the history of England's actual colonial endeavours in the Caribbean and North America. Though this post-colonial reading has fundamentally reshaped the way we think about the play, Kurita's play seems totally uninfluenced by this interpretation. In the Ryutopia *The Tempest*, Prospero is a power-hungry magician and an imperious artist who wields a dictatorial power over everyone on the island. In that respect, it matters little whether he is dealing with his own daughter or his servants, and he pursues his goal in a single-minded manner. By contrast, in the post-colonial reading, it is important that Prospero is an intruder on the island and that he makes himself

the ruler and proprietor, notably of its former inhabitants. If the characterization of Ariel in the Ryutopia *The Tempest* brings out the strengths of this interpretation, the weakness of Caliban's portrayal in the play points to its possible shortcomings. In the performance, Caliban is dressed in black with facial tattoos, and rather than walk he seemingly slithers across the stage. Notwithstanding this guise, he is no less human than the other characters of the play. Indeed, Prospero's resentment toward his slave and the slave's revolt against his master seem gratuitous and unmotivated given the total absence of the colonial subtext that give them meaning.

One final point: the costumes in the play, which were a fusion of Western and Eastern motifs, seemed to this viewer less successful than the amalgam of other artistic elements in the performance. In addition, the colour-coordinated avatars of Ariel seemed to jar with their rather staid performance as chorus and their connection with the austere Ariel wearing a Noh mask. Yet these are minor and unimportant cavils to make in what was overall a rich, thought-provoking and artistically successful performance.



Fig. 1. Miranda and Fredinad with Prospero behind them. Photo by Jun Ishikawa. By the Courtesy of Ryutopia.



Fig. 2. Trinculo, Stephano and Caliban (from the left). Photo by Jun Ishikawa. By the Courtesy of Ryutopia.