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Theatre Reviews

***Shin Titus Reborn*. Dir. Ryunosuke Kimura. OKS Campus, Kawaguchi, Japan.**

Reviewed by ***Takehito Mitsui****

Introduction[1]

Titus was finally reborn in an abandoned factory in Kawaguchi, a Japanese city just outside of Tokyo. This adaptation of *Titus Andronicus*[2] was presented by the Japanese theatre company Kakushinhan—meaning "a perpetrator"—and led by Japanese Shakespearean stage director Ryunosuke Kimura. As the title indicated, the production, staged between the 13th and 15th of October 2023, marked their third attempt, following the abandonment of the previous two due to the pandemic. It is worth noting that Kimura's speech prior to the performance highlighted the severe impact the pandemic had on their performing arts activities over the past few years and the difficulties that they had faced, which led them to choose this large factory for the production, which nearly created an open-air environment, thereby allowing for the avoidance of close contact.

Unlike the conventional productions, the performance began with a dialogue between two original characters: a young boy (Souta Matsushita) wearing headphones and a man (Daisuke Oyama, an opera singer) dressed in

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[1] I would like to thank Ryunosuke Kimura for his generosity in graciously sharing the playtext and recorded video of the production. I also wish to express my deepest appreciation to Tsunao Yamai for his insightful post-production lectures on Noh theatre at Engeki-no-gakko, a theatre school also run by Kimura. Without their kindness and support, it would not have been possible for me to write this review.

[2] This adaptation by director Ryunosuke Kimura himself is based on the Japanese translation by Kazuko Matsuoka.

a black, crow-like outfit. The man declared, "The world is filled with conflicts." The young boy tried to disengage, but the man continued, insisting that the boy shared the same blood as those who disrupt world peace. As the man waved his hands like a bird flapping its wings—as if preparing to soar into his narrative world with the boy to join the audience—the Romans, dancing to the Bon-odori tune, entered the stage through large sliding doors at the back of the stage. The two characters reappeared on stage between scenes, but their true significance in this production was revealed in the final part, which I will discuss later in this article.

Bon-odori

Bon-odori is a traditional Japanese summer dance festival that is dedicated to the memorials of ancestors. 'Odori' means 'dance', and it is believed that the spirits of the ancestors visit their family during a Bon period, typically in the middle of August. Although it sounds like a solemn religious ceremony, Bon-odori has largely lost its original meaning and has evolved into a festive dance event in modern times (Matida 28-29). The songs used for Bon-odori are often slow, but accompanied by merry, jolly tunes and lyrics, while the ritual meanings are barely noticeable.

However, in this production, the audience was reminded of Bon-odori's origins, as Kimura inserted cynical lyrics into the festive Bon-odori music, to which the ancient Romans joyfully danced, circling around the stage:

> If there had been no war in human history, the Atomic Bomb Dome in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial would have remained just an ordinary building with a dome. […] Nationalism, religions, numerous principles have divided us since the Roman period. The world has never changed. (Kimura 5)

Those lines, sung by the narrator (Yuukari Sanyutei), particularly emphasised the parallel consequences of wars across different time periods, narratives and historical events: the brutality of the Second World War, from which the Japanese suffered after waging a war against the world for their own greedy interest, and the Shakespearean tragedy triggered by the aggression led by the Roman aristocratic families. In this way, just as the young boy was told that he cannot remain a passive onlooker in bloody disputes, Bon-odori cleverly drew cultural and historical analogies to current human crises, such as the conflict in Ukraine. As well as this, it illustrated how people can joyfully dance to a happy tune while ignoring the lyrics that narrate the horrific consequences of wars. While the cheerful tune reflected our tranquil daily lives, the people enjoying

dancing highlighted our neglect of those struggling in wars happening elsewhere. As a result, Bon-odori served as an evoking introduction, drawing the audience into the Shakespearean tragedy unfolding in ancient Rome—a setting that may be unfamiliar to some—by establishing connections with historical and contemporary conflicts.

Rakugo

When the Bon-odori music ended, the narrator, having led the dancing procession, came to the centre of the stage and insisted, "This is Rome. So, no one can deny that we are in Rome!." Then, she continued with comically explaining the setting of the story, such as the death of the Roman Emperor and the rivalry of the two brothers: Saturninus (Yoshihiro Kurita) and Bassianus (Yudai Mark Iwasaki). The audience encountered one of the distinctive elements of this production, which also prompted me to write this review: the stage was animated by performers from diverse professional backgrounds, including an opera singer, a traditional storyteller, a Noh actor and seasoned Shakespearean actors. (For example, this may be apparent from the presence of audience members seated in front of me who, based on overhearing their conversation, seemed to be regular attendees of Noh theatre, likely drawn by Tsunao Yamai's appearance in this performance.)

In terms of diverse professional backgrounds, the narrator, Yuukari Sanyutei, is a classic, comedic storyteller known as a Rakugo-ka. Rakugo is a traditional form of Japanese verbal entertainment established around the seventeenth century during the Edo period. It consists of humorous storytelling by a single performer sitting alone on a small cushion in the centre of the stage. A performer usually narrates a story while distinctively playing several characters at once (Morioka & Sasaki 40). It is clear that the audience members readily recognised Yuukari Sanyutei as a traditional storyteller due to her Rakugo-styled, fast-paced narration technique, accompanied by a distinctive brisk intonation. (Not only in this scene but also several times throughout the show, she appeared as a comical TV news reporter and a party host to perform a similar narratorial role.) In the programme of the production Kimura argues that, by incorporating elements of Japanese traditional performing arts, one of Shakespeare's most violent plays can be seen as both an artistic endeavour and a form of entertainment. In line with Kimura's intention, Sanyutei's Rakugo-style introduction played a crucial role in making the Elizabethan tragedy more accessible to new audience members who might otherwise have perceived Shakespeare as exclusively highbrow.

Noh Theatre

The title character of *Shin Titus Reborn* was performed by Tsunao Yamai, a Noh-gakushi (Noh actor) from the Konparu school, the oldest of the five major Noh schools. (Noh is a traditional Japanese drama that combines elements of music and dance. Originating in the fourteenth century, it is one of Japan's oldest forms of performing arts. Noh performances, characterised by highly stylised movements preserved through Noh's long-established history, are often solemn and ritualistic.) As a Noh actor, Yamai portrayed Titus Andronicus as a solemn and loyal character who holds laws and customs in high regard, reflecting the reverence typical of protagonists in Noh theatre. On that account, his portrayal of Titus, who persistently and compellingly prioritised the order of Rome, seemed to intrinsically embody Bushido–the samurai's philosophy or moral code–, which places a high value on honour and the virtues of hierarchy. This ideological alignment in his performance was rooted in its strong ties with samurai culture. The samurai, who were the aristocratic members of the military class, learnt the art of Noh theatre as a symbol of their high social standing. This traditional form of performing art also flourished with their financial support during the Edo period (Yasuda 22-23).

Furthermore, Bushido is regarded as a central and esteemed element in Japanese folktales, serving as both a foundation and inspiration for Noh performances. Embraced by the aristocratic society in Japan, Bushido has long been associated with patriarchal values aimed at upholding the traditional family system, where only the eldest son inherits the household. This context vividly clarified for the audience why Titus, embodying samurai values, advocates for Saturninus, the elder son of the former Emperor, to be crowned as the next ruler.

On the other hand, Bushido, admired and dutifully practiced by the samurai, can also be a harsh instrument, often compelling Japanese folk heroes to make risky and occasionally tragic decisions in the name of justice, prioritising authority over the well-being of individuals or households. For instance, Minamoto no Yoshitsune, the main protagonist of the well-known Noh performance *Yashima*, is a famous historical figure who risks his life for his reputation by retrieving a bow he once dropped before his enemies during a brutal naval battle, exemplifying the spirit of the samurai.[3]

This aspect of Bushido was particularly crucial in Kimura's direction, as it conveyed effectively the Shakespearean narrative, which was occasionally marked by abrupt and imposing storylines, to a new audience. For example, this samurai protocol effectively captured Titus's mindset when he abruptly kills his son Mutius (Ryo Morimoto). This is because Titus, who deeply values the moral

[3] During his post-performance lectures, Yamai remarked that Yoshitsune in *Yashima* is possibly one of the most renowned characters embodying the principles of Bushido.

principles upheld by the Japanese knights, cannot ignore Mutius's disobedience, as it not only defies his authority but also disregards the hierarchical norms concerning the marriage of his daughter Lavinia (Fuka Haruna). Furthermore, Titus, in this production, appeared to show no regret for his irreversible punishment of Mutius, even when condemned by his eldest son, Lucius (Maya Asaba). Instead, he was utterly confused by the bitter treatment from his master, Saturninus, when he was not invited to accompany the Emperor and Queen Tamora (Tsuyoshi Kijima) to the Pantheon. Devastated by the rejection, he fell to his knees.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the stage, Titus's sons grieved over Mutius's death by his body. This scene powerfully illustrated the dramatic contrast: Titus is the only one strictly adhering to the protocols of the knights, while his other family members prioritise family values. It also emphasised that the character played by the Noh actor is the only one who truly embodies the samurai tradition among the other stage characters. Nevertheless, as the story progresses, Titus gradually begins to struggle with maintaining his faith in the Bushido spirit he so deeply admires.

Cross-gender Casting and Racial Diversity

Cross-gender casting has become a common practice in Shakespeare productions in the West, but it remains relatively uncommon in Japan. On the other hand, Japan has its own controversial tradition in theatrical forms like Kabuki, where female characters have historically been portrayed by male actors, known as onnagata, while women were excluded from the stage. Although this custom has begun to evolve, particularly in Noh theatre, it is still uncommon to see traditional stage performances of any kind featuring female performers on the main stages in Japan. In this production, Tsuyoshi Kijima, a male actor who frequently plays leading roles in productions directed by Miyagi Satoshi at the Shizuoka Performing Arts Centre, took on the role of Tamora. His portrayal of the Queen of the Goths appeared to draw inspiration from the onnagata tradition in Kabuki.

In this way, it was clear that Kimura had no intention of employing the gender-swapped Queen for comic relief—a stark contrast to some problematic all-male Shakespearean productions in Japan that often mock same-sex relationships by having male actors portray female characters. If not for comic relief, then what does the onnagata tradition represent in this production? I argue that the use of onnagata as a theatrical device serves as an antithesis to male dominance in traditional Japanese theatre.

> [...] the term "onnagata" inevitably entails connotations regarding the one who performs: male identity, maleness, masculinity, and so on. The concept of the term "onnagata" is ostentatiously composed of the enunciated femininity and the enunciating masculinity. (Isaka 112)

According to Isaka's argument, as quoted above, Tamora's persona can also be interpreted as that of a loyal traditionalist resistant to new female voices. In this sense, she is also categorised as a figure who aligns with Titus's ideology, adhering to Bushido-style male authority.

Meanwhile, two of the main characters, Lucius (Maya Asaba) and Aaron (Miki Takii, who also features frequently in the productions directed by Miyagi), as well as Demetrius (Rion Yanagimoto), were portrayed by female actors, further challenging traditional gender norms. Asaba's heroic portrayal of Lucius, who stands against his authoritative father, reflected discernment and solidarity within the Andronici, ultimately culminating in a resolve to seek revenge against the Roman political system that unjustly wronged his father.

Besides, Takii also brought Aaron to life as a bold yet pitiable villain, driven by a deep desire for vengeance against Rome. This characterisation was intensified by the addition of powerful lines by the director that highlighted Aaron's vivid emotions in the soliloquy at the end of the first scene:

> I am Aaron. My body is filled with blackness. As a Moor, I have faced discrimination and been used by Tamora as she pleases! I have no freedom! My will means nothing! There is nothing! But so what! (Kimura 33)

The remark quoted above is especially beneficial for new Shakespearean audiences in understanding Aaron's uniquely tragic personal history, since his racial difference is less apparent, given the ongoing challenge of casting Japanese-speaking actors with diverse racial backgrounds in Japan.[4] In the interview he gave to the Shakespearean scholar Sae Kitamura, Kimura also stresses the difficulties he often faces when staging performances including racial diversity:

> [I]t was difficult for Japanese companies to hire black actors. [...] [T]heatre was for minorities because it challenged the social norms, but that Japanese companies had to take different approaches from English-speaking theatre in order to encourage the audience to understand Shakespeare. (Kitamura 95)

In addition to this, Kitamura asserts that "Kimura cast actors with 'differences' in order to represent the racial 'Other' in Shakespeare plays" (95). These

[4] On this matter see Kitamura.

differences may include an actor's unique acting style or their ability to speak foreign languages.

In this production, such differences were cleverly employed to represent Aaron's racial distinction through cross-gender casting and Takii's impatiently fast-speaking acting style. I perceived that she portrayed Aaron as a character reminiscent of a typical Edokko—a merchant living in Tokyo during the Edo period (17^{th}-18^{th} centuries)—in contrast to Yamai's solemn portrayal of Titus. Edokko are known for their distinctive personalities, characterised by assertiveness, straightforwardness, short tempers, and impatience. They are regular protagonists in Rakugo (classic comedic stories) and, despite their flaws, are beloved by the audience for their unwavering determination to achieve their goals, often for the benefit of others. Of course, Takii's Aaron was not a comical character like those in Rakugo. However, despite his cruel deeds toward the members of the Andronici family, the discrimination and enslavement he endured at the hands of the Romans rendered him a barbaric yet pitiable and ultimately unhatable character in the eyes of the audience.

Furthermore, in analysing these two characters portrayed by female actors together, it becomes clear that, despite their opposing political stances, they share a common objective: to exact revenge against the decaying authority of the Roman political system. It is also worth noting that Rakugo, the traditional performing art practiced by Yuukari Sanyutei, who played the female narrator, is another male-dominated field. In this context, the cross-gender casting in the performance could be interpreted as both a comparison to and a subtle critique of the Japanese theatrical tradition, which has historically excluded women from the stage, as well as a commentary on the still male-dominated Japanese society, which is very slowly beginning to embrace sexual and racial diversity.

Noh Mask

After discovering that Demetrius (Rion Yanagimoto) and Chiron (Ikeda Naohiro) are responsible for the death of his two sons, and for raping and brutally wounding his daughter to conceal their crime, Titus, wearing a Noh mask (Noh-men) representing a demon (Hannya),[5] made a slow and eerie entrance on stage with her, evocative of a Noh performance. In the second half of a Noh performance, putting on or changing to a different mask typically signifies that a character is transformed into another being, such as a god, a ghost, or a demon. Those beings are often portrayed as tragic figures, cursed

[5] According to the programme, the mask used in this production was carved by Hisato Iwasaki, a distinguished Noh mask maker (Noh-menshi). The mask is named *Titus*, with the inscription (mei) "revenge."

by inevitable fates that led to their transformations. Similarly, in this adaptation, Titus, overwhelmed to madness by the profound agony he feels for his sons and daughter, is destined to become a brutal yet tragic figure. By using the Noh mask as a theatrical device, it was clearly depicted that his will is overtaken by a demonic spirit, leaving him with no choice but to abandon his long-standing commitment to Roman laws and customs in order to seek gruesome revenge against Tamora's family.

Yamai's traditional Noh vocalization, characterised by its distinctive slow, low tone, revealed his plan to turn the flesh of the two offenders into meat pies. His voice, which echoed and projected throughout the large factory building, sounded horrifying, but also sorrowful. The reason why demonised Titus expresses sorrow can be traced to the concept of evils in Noh theatre. Such non-human figures, including demons, are not merely malevolent characters; there are often tragic and unavoidable reasons behind their transformation.

When this aspect of Noh tradition is reflected in the Shakespearean tragedy, in addition to his deep anger, Titus's sorrow expresses his regret for being unable to prevent the series of tragedies resulting from the aggressive war he led, which connects to the violence described in Bon-odori at the opening scene. In doing so, this sorrowful voice also demonstrates the complexity of his feelings about his military achievements, to which he has devoted himself for both his country and his family.

While Titus remained in his Noh mask, Saturninus asked, "Why art thou attired, Andronicus?" when the queen and he arrived at the banquet. This question suggested that Saturninus failed to recognise that Titus has gone mad and transformed into a demon. However, for audiences familiar with Noh theatre, this remark may appear puzzling, as it is a well-known convention in Noh performances that wearing or changing a mask signifies a character's transformation. In this context, this remark served as a subtle critique, mocking Saturninus for his ignorance of Noh tradition. Moreover, it also revealed his failure to recognise that Titus has gone mad, which further highlighted his ineptitude as a ruler in understanding the gravity of his precarious political situation. This emphasised that not only was Saturninus, whom Titus endorsed as emperor, unfit for the role, but Titus himself also became the very person who disrupted the state's order through his choice of emperor. Thus, this discrepancy dramatically disclosed the gap between Titus's duly commitment to Roman order and the emperor's failure to uphold it.

Lavinia's Death

In the playtext there are scenes where Titus's impulsive and violent actions may cause the audience to question his true motives. However, Kimura's direction, skilfully connecting these moments to the concepts of Bushido and traditional

performances, brings coherence to the narrative. This technique is particularly evident in the final scene, where Titus kills his own daughter.

By referencing the story of Virginius's daughter to Saturninus, Titus believes he secures the emperor's tacit approval for his actions. Thus, in Titus's eyes, killing Lavinia becomes an act of martyrdom for the sake of justice, guided by the samurai's code of honour. At the same time, Titus's appeal to Saturninus can also be interpreted as his final plea for redemption from the emperor in order to prevent his daughter's death. This is because Titus, having transformed into a demon-like figure with the Noh mask, is in a state of madness. In other words, Titus is no longer capable of making a judgment about the legitimacy of his actions. Interestingly, this restricted perspective parallels the experience of an actor performing with a Noh mask; Yasuda, a Noh actor, explains the concept of vision while wearing such a mask:

> For the actor, the Noh mask is also an aid to mystical metamorphosis. Tied tightly to the actor's head, the mask has only tiny openings for the eyes, severely restricting the performer's field of vision. (At workshops for the general public, participants who put on masks are always surprised at how little they can see and how dark everything becomes.) Not being able to see much of their surroundings, actors naturally turn their attention inward. (Yasuda 38)

By expanding on Yasuda's explanation, the wearing of a Noh mask, which drastically limits one's field of vision, can also be viewed as a symbol of Titus's declining ability to perceive and assess the reality around him. In other words, this physical limitation caused by the transformation reflects his loss of sanity and rationality. Isolated and lost within his own mind (inward), he struggles with the moral dilemma of killing his daughter. Consequently, his inquiry to Saturninus can be seen as a plea for pardon from the emperor he has long respected, in the hope that this authority figure will intervene and prevent him from committing such a terrible and irreversible act.

On the other hand, aligning with her father, Lavinia also seemingly internalises the Bushido spirit, which marks her as a figure of defilement. Without resistance, she accepts her deadly fate. Namely, when this horrific event in ancient Rome is juxtaposed with the traditional samurai ethos, this intercultural integration appears to create a chilling justification for the murder of one's own daughter through the veneration of chastity. In doing so, the demon-transformed Titus is also seen as a pitiful figure, much like a character in a Noh narrative, driven by his solemn beliefs and tragic fate to kill his daughter and ultimately to die himself.

Okinagamae

After the massacre at the banquet, the boy and the black crow-like man reappeared on stage.

> The man called the black crow: From now on, you will continue to live. You will experience every emotional moment this world has to offer. There will be sights you wish you hadn't seen. There will be things you'll be able to change, while others you won't. I have written about all these aspects of being human—not to judge what is good or bad, but simply to describe them all. (Kimura 103)

The man subtly suggested that he may be the playwright, though he did not confirm this explicitly. Nevertheless, the boy expressed his gratitude for showing him the play and proceeded to perform a traditional Noh movement known as Okinagamae. In this movement, both arms are raised horizontally—the right hand representing the sky, the left the ground—symbolising peace and stability in the world.[6] Then he finally reunited with his father and mother at the back of the stage. This final gesture was perceived as a requiem, not only for the dead on the stage but also for those who continue to suffer from current conflicts, since the two characters blurred the lines between past and present, as well as between the narrative and the real world. While the man acknowledged that there are things one cannot change, the boy conveyed a hopeful message to the audience at the end of this brutal play: one can still wish or pray for peace, which might influence outcomes for the better.

Conclusion

This adaptation of *Titus Andronicus*, directed by Ryunosuke Kimura, blended traditional Japanese elements, such as Noh and Rakugo, with Shakespeare's tragedy to create a unique intercultural performance. The production employed cross-gender casting, with female actors portraying key male characters, challenging traditional gender norms. Kimura integrated Bushido, the samurai code, into Titus's character, highlighting his rigid adherence to authority, which ultimately leads to his tragic downfall. The use of the Noh mask and traditional vocalizations further enhanced the portrayal of Titus's descent into madness, transforming him into a demonic figure driven by sorrow and anger.

Finally, I believe that Kimura's primary directional intention in integrating the traditional Japanese moral philosophy of Bushido in the

[6] According to the programme, Okinagamae was incorporated into the final scene of the performance based on a suggestion by Yamai.

Shakespearean tragedy must have been to demonstrate how easily horrific acts of violence can be righteously justified through the moral codes that people believe in or once believed in. In other words, the performance served as a cautionary tale, reminding the audience that an atrocious military action involving many casualties can potentially be received as a success or triumph for many in the name of justice.

However, much like the inescapable and destructive fate of the characters in this tragedy, once a mortal event occurs, it rapidly spreads on a large scale and it is nearly impossible to prevent its course. In the end, what we can do would be to only pray for peace as the young boy does. Given that Okinagamae, symbolising the people's wish for world peace, has not been forgotten as a Noh movement throughout over four hundred years of the enduring history of the Japanese performing arts, it may be a depressing truth that the human conflicts will continue to exist preventing the world from becoming a peaceful place—just as the necessity for Noh actors to perform Okinagamae will persist.

Aaron (Miki Takii) captured by Lucius's men. Photograph by Masanori Ikeda

Lavinia (Fuka Haruna) and Titus (Tsunao Yamai) wearing a demon mask.
Photograph by Masanori Ikeda

Tamora (Tsuyoshi Kijima), Saturninus (Yoshihiro Kurita) and Lucius (Maya Asaba)
at the final banquet. Photograph by Masanori Ikeda

Okinagamae by the young boy (Souta Matsushita). Photograph by Masanori Ikeda

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