



Profile

Oriza Hirata

Born in Tokyo in 1962, Oriza Hirata is a playwright, director and leader of the theater company Seinendan. He is also the manager of the Komaba Agora Theater in Tokyo and a professor of Osaka University Center of the Study of Communication-Design.

From his involvement in the “small theater” scene as manager of the Komaba Agora Theater in Tokyo, Hirata founded his own theater company Seinendan in 1983 as a company operating mainly out of that theater and began activities as a playwright and director. He went on to present his theory of “Contemporary Colloquial Theater” and to re-examine drama from the standpoint of actual Japanese life, and the resulting new style of “quiet Theater” became a leading trend of the 1990 small theater world. His directing method based on detailed calculation of effect also drew attention and led to a series of productions in collaboration with the playwright Masataka Matsuda that won popular acclaim.

Hirata writes critiques and essay regularly for the press and periodicals not only in field of theater but also on the subjects of education, language and all areas of the arts. In recent years he has fostered international exchange through performances and workshops with France and S. Korea as well as Australia, the USA, Canada, Ireland, Malaysia, Thailand Indonesia and China. Also, based on the Hirata’s workshop methodology written up in school textbooks since 2002, some 300,000 school children have created plays in their classroom using the Hirata method. He has also worked with the handicapped and been involved in a wide range of theater-related activities such as developing drama education programs for local governments in places like Komaba [where his theater is located] and in tie-ups with NPOs.

Artist Interview アーティストインタビュー

2007.3.23



Speaking with Oriza Hirata,
a new opinion leader in the world of contemporary theater

現代演劇界のニューオピニオンリーダー
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Oriza Hirata has grown from a leader of Japan’s small theater scene with his “contemporary colloquial theater” in the 1990s to become active in multiple fields as a playwright, director, manager of a private-sector small theater, artistic director of a public arts and culture hall and a university professor. In this long interview the 44-year-old opinion leader talks about his recent activities that include ambitious pursuit of international collaborations with Korean, Chinese and French artists.

(Interviewer: Akihiko Senda)

You were born in 1962 and are still just 44 years old. But your accomplishments as a playwright, director, leader to the theater company Seinendan and as owner and representative of the small private theater Komaba Agora Theater seem to belie your age. Until March of this year were also serving as artistic director for the public venue the Fujimi City Municipal Culture Hall KIRARI FUJIMI in Saitama Prefecture, and since April 2006 you have served as a professor for the Osaka University Center of the Study of Communication-Design. You are involved in an amazing array of activities that is certainly rare among theater people.

When you say it like that, I guess I sound like one of the power elite in some developing country (laughs). Those people might serve as a government Minister and be an artist at the same time; they do just about everything, don’t they. And, in the field of the arts, Japan is still a developing country in some ways. So, I tell myself that it is not really so strange that an odd person like me should be doing things like this (laughs).

Anyway, it is the understanding of the people around me that enable me to be acting in these capacities. At Osaka University it am a kind of research position that doesn’t obligate me to be teaching classes. But, it wouldn’t be interesting if I don’t have any contact with the students, so I do classes and seminars. Before Osaka I was involved in the setting up of an interdisciplinary theater arts course for the Department of Humanities, School of Integrated Culture of Obirin University, and I taught there for about four years. In the end I was in the position of a department Dean involved with about 500 students. Compared to that, the present assignment at Osaka will be a lot easier.

What is “Communication-Design?” What do you do in that position?

It is difficult to explain, but in simple terms what I am doing is to develop a program that uses theater to help students in the sciences who will someday be doctors, lawyers and academicians to acquire communication skills. Eventually I hope to see the program we develop become a required course, and I would like to see it effect changes in the entrance exam system in Japan as well.

“Communication Design” is a very new concept. For example, if doctors are lacking in communication skills, that problem won’t be solved by teaching them how to give speeches. There are design elements and organizational elements that can

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Using the Komaba Agora Theater Hirata runs and the rehearsal studio and experimental space Atelier Shunpusha, an undefined group of directors and playwrights belonging to Hirata's theater company Seinendan has been formed called the "Seinendan Link" and is creating its own independent productions since 2002. Through this system, any of the company's members can submit proposals for productions, which are then developed into actual productions for performance primarily by the younger members of the company and presented as side performance along with the company's main productions so that their creative activities can become subjects for critical review. This system has enabled several intra-company units to pursue independent activities. Among the Seinendan artists who have gone independent in this way are Shiro Maeda of the Gotand-dan and Motoi Miura of Chiten. Also, since 1989 the Komaba Agora Theater has hosted a performing arts festival aimed at making it easy for regional theater companies to give performances in Tokyo. Since 2001 this festival has been held biannually in the spring and summer under the name "Summit." Prominent young artists of the day are chosen to serve as festival director and be responsible for the program selection and other important decision-making. The festival director this year is the leader of the theater company Chelfitsch, Toshiki Okada.

Hirata's awards include the 39th Kishida Kunio Drama Award for playwriting with *Tokyo Notes* in 1995, the 5th Yomiuri Theater Grand Prix "Best Play" and "Best Director" awards for *Tsuki no Misaki (The Cape of the Moon)* (written by Masataka Matsuda, directed by Oriza Hirata) in 1997, the 9th Yomiuri Theater Grand Prix "Best Play" award for *Ueno Dobutsuen Saisaisai Sugeki (Attacking the Ueno Zoo for the Fourth Time)* (script, composition, directing by Hirata) in 2002 and the 2nd Asahi Performing Arts Award for *Sono Kawa wo Koete ④ Gogatsu (Across the River in May)* (Japan-Korea joint playwriting and directing / New National Theater, Tokyo) in 2003. Among his many publications other than plays are *Engeki Nyumon* (Introduction to Drama) (Kodansha), *Hanashikotoba no Nihongo* (Colloquial Japanese) (a dialogue with Hisashi Inoue, Kodansha) and *Geijutsu Rikkoku Ron* (Arts as the Basis of a Nation) (Shueisha).

encourage better communication in the doctor's office, such as the positions of the doctor's and the patient's chairs, the color of the walls, the lighting, and these elements can create an environment that encourages the patient to ask the doctor questions and bring out answers that can reduce medical/diagnostic error. Communication design is a concept that involves looking at the architectural design and the design of everything from organizational elements to the medical equipment and facilities from the standpoint of communication, for the purpose of creating an environment in which malpractice is less likely to occur. This kind of special design is exactly what is done on the stage in theater. The theater space is one that is designed for communication and then inviting the audience into that environment to spend a certain amount of time. Therefore, there are many aspects of communication design where the know-how of the theater can be applied.

It is a cross-disciplinary approach, isn't it?

That's right. For example, one of the projects we are working on now is with researchers who are working on the development of robots to be used in care-giving for the elderly and the disabled. Because these are machines that will be used in care-giving, they need to be familiar and unimposing in appearance so that the elderly will feel at ease with them. Honda's robot ASIMO is a sophisticated robot that walks on two legs and is designed not to lose its balance even when it is pushed, but the kind of robot we are going to develop is one that naturally staggers if it is pushed and one that naturally makes mistakes in speech. In order to do this, we have linguists and cognitive psychologists participating in the team, but it turns out that, as a playwright, I am able to write dialog for the robot that is more real and natural than the expressions that the linguists try hard to put together from an academic standpoint.

The academic approach until now has been one of eliminating noise, and although that may make things more functional, they (science) seem to have trouble giving quantitative values to random elements that we feel reality in and to make formulas based on them. Particularly with regard to language, it seems that the variables are so many that it is especially difficult. This is why experts today in brain physiology, cognitive psychology and linguistics unanimously agree that the final work as to be completed by artists, not scientists.

This is where the "contemporary colloquial theater theory" I have given expression to in recent years comes in. There are cognitive psychology researchers who are studying why this type of theater is perceived as more realistic. Because they are so discreet when it comes to evaluation, they say that they can only understand about 1% of what the artists are doing. Nonetheless, it seems that the artist's input has considerable effect in improving the functioning of robots and computers from the standpoint of user friendliness.

Are there any other projects you are involved in?

Another is a "Community Café" project that is planned to begin in autumn 2008. The venue is in the new station facility of the Nakanoshima subway station in Osaka. It will operate as a regular café normally, but for two hours beginning at 5:30 we will have Osaka University professors in the areas of philosophy and other advanced sciences and economics coming in to participate in discussions. They will lead discussion about subjects like the meaning of love, whether or not "natural death with dignity" is permissible, why divorce among seniors is increasing, etc. Directly above the station is the stock exchange, so we may see stock brokers joining in the discussions when the subjects are in the economic

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Up-coming productions

+ Seinendan et le Centre Dramatique de
Thionville-Lorraine
Chants d'Adieu
Playwright Oriza Hirata
Directed by Laurent Gutmann

[Tours in France]

22 -26 January, 2007

Centre Dramatique de Thionville-Lorraine

30 January -2 February, 2007

Centre Dramatique National de Besançon

7-22 February

Théâtre National de Strasbourg

23 May -17 June, 2007/03/22

Théâtre de l'Est Parisien

[In Japan]

April 5-8, 2007

Theatre Tram, Tokyo

-French with Japanese subtitles in Tokyo

<http://www.setagaya-ac.or.jp/sept/>

+ Seinendan 53rd production

Tokyo Notes

Written & Directed by Oriza Hirata

Apr.19-May.14, 2007

Komaba Agora Theater, TOKYO

-Free On-Demand Subtitle Display Service

+ New National Theatre, Tokyo Japan-

China Joint Project

LOST VILLAGE

Written by Hirata Oriza, Li Liuyi

Directed by Li Liuyi, Hirata Oriza

May 15-20, 2007

THE PIT, New National Theatre, Tokyo

<http://www.nntt.jac.go.jp/english/season/s331e/s331e.html>

April in Beijing, TBA

20-24 March

Studio Theatre, HK Cultural Centre, Hong

Kong

<http://www.hk.artsfestival.org/en/prog/8/>

field. It will be a place for holding dialog with the general public.

In order to make it a space that can be used with flexibility as the occasion requires, I have involved a landscape artist and designers with me on the café's planning and design stage. As a commuter station there will be fewer people getting on and off at this station on Saturdays and Sundays, so we are planning to work with the dance-related NPO named Dance Box to operate a joint arts space on the weekends.

Lately the university has a so-called "satellite campus" program that holds classes at accessible locations like in front of stations, but it is only being used as an efficient means to solicit students and not serving to make intellectual contributions of feedback to the society at large. One of my ideologies lately is that we have to be aggressive about actively creating intellectual interaction in the communities.

Listening to these activities, I feel a breath of thought that has not been seen before among Japan's theater people. In the field of theater itself, you have created a world of theater that you call "contemporary colloquial theater theory." This and the "quiet theater" that you and others engaged in since the 1990s represents a new development in Japanese theater. Could you tell us in your own words what "contemporary colloquial theater theory" is?

It is difficult to specify an exact point of origin but Japan has a history of modern theater of about 80 to 100 years. There are two issues that I focus on in this tradition.

One is the concern that during Japan's direct importation of Western drama we also directly imported the way of writing plays as well. The other is the concern that, since theater failed to break out of the grasp of ideology, the expression of ideas and philosophies became the main concern and the problems of language took a second seat in terms of importance, leaving the language of drama dominated by ideology. Also—and this is the point of contention—I

believe that not only our *Shingeki* ("New Theater") but also the small theater scene since the 1960s have failed to emerge from the grasp of ideology.

The importation of Western drama was unavoidable, but that importation happened somewhat later the importation in other fields like music and literature, and also that on the popular level that introduction was quite haphazard in form—which was probably fine in itself—and since the importation was not conducted in an organized manner, it didn't have time for the necessary maturation. This seems to me to be its definitive fault or characteristic as a modern art form.

The fact that the development of Japan's modern theater was completely different from other genre is something that Japan's theater people should have been taking into consideration and dealing with, but I think that I am about the only one speaking out and writing consistently about this issue to the public.

In short, the essence of the contemporary colloquial theater we were doing was a movement to take the ideology-dominated drama language that had resulted from the direct importation of Western theater and recreate it from the standpoint of language itself.

One easy to understand example is the question of grammatical order of words and the points of accent in their presentation. Japanese is a language in which the grammatical order can be changed rather freely and in normal colloquial speech we speak in repetitions of phrase in which the words we which to stress are brought to the front of the phrase or sentence. However, because playwrights have conformed to the fixed pattern of writing scripts in literary rather than colloquial sentence form, the actors are forced to speak with a strange placement of accents on the important words that is not natural to normal spoken Japanese, and the

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Seinendan

[http://www.seinendan.org/eng/seinendan/
index.html](http://www.seinendan.org/eng/seinendan/index.html)

Komaba Agora Theater

[http://www.seinendan.org/eng/agora/
index.html](http://www.seinendan.org/eng/agora/index.html)

Festival "Summit"

[http://www.agora-summit.com/2006w/
indexe.html](http://www.agora-summit.com/2006w/indexe.html)

actors that are able to do this skillfully have been considered good actors.

The result is a bizarre system of speech that seems to be Japanese but is not really. This is a description that was used by Hideo Kobayashi in speaking about Ikutaro Nishida, and it refers to how, under this strange system, wrestling with the translation-like lines of drama-in-translation plays has become the measure of an actor and the scripts playwrights write.

Well, I guess all this is something that couldn't have been avoided, perhaps the simple but largest discovery of contemporary colloquial theater was saying that, no, it is a problem of how the plays are written. If you just change the grammatical order [to more natural spoken Japanese] actors won't have to use the exaggerated accentuation.

In this way, I believe that there was a major change in the way playwrights of the contemporary colloquial theater and "quiet theater" movements wrote plays. When we look at plays written in the language used in playwriting up to the 1980s, they somehow feel old-fashioned now. Of course it is a different question if a particular stylization is involved, but I think that everyone is aware of this now.

At the same time, another thing that contemporary colloquial theater sought to do, as the "silent theater" playwright Shogo Ota says, "Drama should not be only a collection of the dramatic moments of life. Shouldn't it also be composed of non-dramatic elements as well?"

When my contemporary colloquial theater was introduced in France, the people there were really surprised at how a narrative play with acts could be composed purely of drama language that is simply a collection of verbal fragments. When you think about it, that may be something that the Japanese are especially good at. That is exactly what a lot of Haiku is. Take the famous haiku *Kaki kueba / kane ga naru nari / Horyuji* (Eating persimmon / the temple bell rings' / Horyuji Temple) for example. There is no direct relationship between the persimmon and the bell and the temple, but when you put the three together they define a certain world of the perceptions. So, the French were very impressed by the way things that they would call fragments or collage could be put together in a time continuum.

What was it that made you begin thinking about the drama language you arrived at your contemporary colloquial theater?

From 1984 into '85 I spent a year studying in South Korea and during that time I began thinking about the unique character of the Japanese language and a variety of things like why the language of Japanese theater became like it is. However, I didn't really connect that to an immediate effect on my plays. Just as my writing style began to change little by little, I happened to see Ryo Iwamatsu's production of the play *Daidokoro no Akari* at the Agora Theater and that work really struck me. It made me think that the directions I had been thinking and working in were not wrong. That was the decisive encounter and with that, I arrived at something very close to what I am doing now.

The way the play is written also surely affects the actors' acting. I think it can be said that contemporary colloquial theater caused a big revolution in acting technique.

Yes. It is very difficult to explain, but with contemporary colloquial theater the actors will be speaking in a normal way. But that rings up the question of what normal is. In effect, theater had created a fictional in a language that was different from everyday Japanese and within that ambiguity a kind of artistic aesthetic was born, but in our plays using real Japanese became one of the thematic elements. In that sense it was a new world that made it possible for almost anyone to participate. For better or worst, it made it look like anyone could do it.

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Tokyo Notes

(2000, New York Japan Society
Performance)

Photo: Tsukasa Aoki



From S Plateau

(2004, at Komaba Agora Theater)

Photo: Tsukasa Aoki

One point I want to make in regard to acting technique of speaking normally is what I call “division of consciousness.” Speaking is just one of numerous human actions and this makes it essential that the actor be capable of a division of consciousness to include other actions, rather than just focusing on delivering one’s lines. This is probably a new discovery in acting that comes with contemporary colloquial theater. In terms of this division of consciousness, I think that the plays of **Toshiki Okada** of Chelfitsch use it as a form of expression most consistently.

I have been working with a specialist in cognitive psychology researching the mechanisms of an actor’s memorization for a long time, and we have found that the better the actor the more clearly they remember other things around them while delivering their lines, like the distribution of props on a table for example.

In the case of an Olympic gymnast, for example, they naturally memorize the voluntary muscular actions used in a performance, but at the same time they are also memorizing things like the visual order of appearance of the walls and ceiling during an action like a flip. And such periphery information such as visual and auditory memories is closely related to the voluntary movement of the body. This is true for an actor as well. In fact, when they are saying their lines, it is important to remember what they are hearing—because my scripts often involve several things being said by others at once—and what they are seeing.

It is often said that it is best to rehearse for a play in a place where you can use something close to the actual set. It is not just a matter of getting used to the set. We know now that it is related to this memorization mechanism of the actor. That is why I believe that having our own theater where we could rehearse with a full-scale set was important to developing an acting style that involved the “division of consciousness” I am concerned with.

Are there any playwrights that you consider to be forerunners of contemporary colloquial theater?

Kunio Kishida, Yukio Mishima and Shuji Terayama have long been cited as playwrights who were deeply concerned with the question of how to use the Japanese language. Although, they were not in the majority of the Japanese theater history. And, as the playwrights who have directly influenced me, I would cite Minoru Betsuyaku and Shogo Ota. Betsuyaku grew up in China and the language he uses in his plays could be called something he made up himself. It is a language without place. For me, it was important to experience that kind of language without regional or clear cultural affiliation.

As for Ota, I was very much influenced by his approach to theater and drama. Another direct influence was the plays of Tetsu Yamazaki from the 1980s. In terms of questions like the grammatical order used, I believe that his approach is very close to that of contemporary colloquial theater. For a while, Yamazaki was director for Tokyo Kandenchi, so I believe he also influenced Ryo Iwamatsu, although that may just be an unfounded belief on my part.

Your contemporary colloquial theater has been well received overseas. Has your style that minimizes excessively dramatic developments been a fresh discovery for foreign audiences?

We have given performances in a number of countries, but I believe that I have done the best work in France. I am very grateful for the fact that the people in France have been very enthusiastic about my work. In fact, my new play *Chants d’Adieu (Wakare no Uta)* is on tour now in France. Until now, our plays that initially debuted in Japan have been performed in France

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Until now, our plays that initially debuted in Japan have been performed in France as plays in translation, including *Tokyo Notes*, *From S Plateau* and *Citizens of Seoul*. But, in the case of *Chants d'Adieu*, this is a play that was commissioned by Centre Dramatique de Thionville-Lorraine in a small town near the Luxembourg border and it was written for French actors.

The cast consists of five French actors and three from our Seinendan company. Two of the Seinendan actors have most of their lines in French, so they studied French for a year to do this production. But, since they play the roles of Japanese who speak only a little bit of French, there is no need for subtitles.

It premiered in January and I think there were six performances in Thionville. There were four performances in Besançon and now there is a three-week run in Strasbourg and it is sold out. I believe the audience in Strasbourg alone totals about 5,000. After performances in Japan in April it will go to Paris in May.

This play is like a French version of the play *'Cause the Moon is So Bright Tonight (Tsuki ga Tottemo Aoi Kara)* that I wrote for Bungaku-za Theater Company and it is the story of a funeral wake. Since it is a warm story, where nothing particularly dramatic happens, older French audiences are enjoying it just like a normal play. Kenji Yamauchi plays a role of a person who can only say thank you at first, but in the later half of the play he starts to speak more in Japanese, so the French audiences are made to listen to these violent outbursts of Japanese that they can't understand. But it appears that they are enjoying that along with the rest of the play. It may not be my place to say this, but it seems that I have just about made a name for myself as a playwright in France.

One of the reasons I have been recognized in France, I believe, is that aspect of fragments coming together into a comprehensive whole that I mentioned earlier. I am often told that it is like haiku in that respect. It seems that the French especially like the resonance of feelings like afterglow, poignant pauses and moments of silence.

Another reason for my recognition seems to be the difference from Yukio Mishima that I am often asked about overseas. That is a good indication of what a big literary presence Mishima is overseas. Mishima was an importer of Western literature and drama and he was a great genius at translating it into extremely self-made Japanese. That is why even in translation the beauty of his literature was not lost at all. That is especially true in the case of his plays.

When Japanese read his writing, however, we get the feeling that no one could talk like that, only a person of exceptional intelligence could talk like that. In short, the works of Mishima are Western in their format (logic) and Japanese in their contents.

In contrast, the contents of my plays are global and the format of the communication is Japanese. For example, during the American tour of *Tokyo Notes* I was asked why the Japanese characters in the play were always talking about Western artists and paintings. At that time I answered that Japanese didn't always wear kimono and talk about nothing but ukiyo-e prints. In fact, we are quite global in that the painters that are part of our lives today are Van Gogh and Picasso and Renoir, not Hokusai. That's why wherever my plays are performed you don't hear people saying they don't understand them.

The interesting thing is that while the contents are global, the way of speaking is very Japanese. The subject of conversation tends to shift suddenly and the logic that it follows is very Japanese. My play *Tokyo Notes* begins with the like, "So what happened to that mayonnaise in the end?" That surprises everyone. Although it is not drama of the absurd, the lines sometimes run off into the absurd by European standards. The French seem to love this.

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I always say that even if we reach a point where the whole world is eating hamburgers and drinking cola, the forms of people's communication will not change that easily. That is why I believe that the job of artists from now on will probably be to depict or accentuate those slight differences.

One of the reasons my work is appreciated in France is that within the large framework of the EU, there are pressing problems of confrontation between people of different races and religions. In the face of the way that market economics tends to flatten all before it into one homogenous world through globalization, isn't it the role of the artist to express the ways that we are all different as individuals and our how ethnicity makes us different too.

You have said that the manner of speaking of the characters in your plays is very Japanese. What happens when French actors play those roles?

They are particularly interested in the non-word interjections like "Ahh" and "Ooh." At first their efforts sounded rather strained because they were trying hard to imitate the sounds, but because actors have good musical ears they soon get used to it. I thought it went very naturally and well when Arnaud Meunier directed *Citizens of Seoul* at Théâtre National de Chailiot and the interjections "Unn" and "Ahh" were made like musical elements between the lines.

Both Meunier and Frederic Fisbach say that it is impossible for French actors to play Japanese characters, so the characters have to become global characters without nationality. That is why for example

in Arnaud Meunier's production of *Citizens of Seoul* the costumes were very successful, because they were quite abstract in appearance but also had an aspect that could be seen as Asian.

I would like to ask you about the *Citizens of Seoul* Trilogy as one of your representative works. The first of the trilogy, *Citizens of Seoul* premiered in 1989, the second work, *Citizens of Seoul 1919* came in 2000 and the third, *Citizens of Seoul 1929: The Graffiti* premiered in December of 2006 to complete the trilogy and then the three were performed together.

The first play of the trilogy is set in 1909, the year before Japan's annexation of Korea, the second is set ten years later during the time of the "3-1 Movement" and the third one is set in October of 1929, just before the stock market crash that started the Great Depression. In this way, they occur at even ten-year intervals. In these plays we see the prosperity and eventual failure of Shinozaki family and their stationary store in Seoul reflecting very vividly the changing of the Korean political situation during those years. It is an excellent compositional structure. Did you have this [trilogy] structure in mind from the start?

I had no idea at the beginning that it would be a trilogy eventually. I think I was very lucky. I chose 1909, the year before the start of Japan's colonization of Korea, as the setting. Since the Shinozaki family is Japanese, they are not really citizens of Seoul, but I chose the irony of giving it that title.

Much of the literature and drama dealing with war and colonization tends to follow stereotypes, with evil military or entrepreneur types and the suppressed or victimized common people. In the case of Korean it is always the theme of activists in the resistance. But, if you always allow the ideology to dominate, you are in fact playing into the hands of the powers that be. So, although it was rather vague at first, I thought that I should try writing that looked more directly at real life.

To me, "citizens" are people who have voting rights and other freedoms of choice available to them. If you think in terms of "point of no return," I believe there's no such thing in our history. The year 1909 that I chose as the setting was a point

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Citizens of Seoul
(2006, at Kichijoji Theatre)
Photo: Tsukasa Aoki



Citizens of Seoul 1919
(2006, at Kichijoji Theatre)
Photo: Tsukasa Aoki



Citizens of Seoul 1929: The Graffiti
(2006, at Kichijoji Theatre)
Photo: Tsukasa Aoki

where Japan could have withdrawn from the course of colonization, and I made this is a story about a quite liberal Japanese family that nonetheless becomes vehicles of colonial suppression because they are citizens of Seoul.

And, although this may sound a bit haphazard, seven or eight years later I got the idea that ten years later would put them in the year 1919. I had done a ten-years-later sequel with another work, so I thought that I could do the same thing with *Citizens of Seoul* too (laughs). Of course, when I was writing “1919” I was thinking about the third sequel as well.

You portray the Japanese family as intellectuals and good-hearted within the temper of the times, but in the first play of the trilogy you also have the daughter and others showing a colonial attitude by making statements showing that they look down on Korean culture. Normally one would be quite careful about creating the right context for such statements, but in *Citizens of Seoul*, which is a work that looks directly at the responsibility of the common citizens, the statements are just blurted out and left that way. What was the reaction like at your performances of the play in South Korea?

In the 1993 performances in Korea I was very nervous. We had all learned Korean and gave the performance in Korean. At the time my company wasn't very well known and there was no term at the time for our kind of “quiet theater,” and it seemed that no one knew what we were doing. The reaction was something on the level of “Is this theater?” and it didn't get as far as an actual discussion of the contents.

With “1919” we were fortunate to have the famous Korean theater company “Koripe” led by Lee Yun-Taek performed it in Korean. Actually, I was worried whether or not it would be acceptable to present the 3-1 Independence Movement with such a light touch. And when I asked Lee about it, he said, “It's all right. I'll make it even more light-hearted.” I went to see the performance and this time they had the young audience laughing from start to finish.

Lee made about half the characters Korean and made them, for example, Koreans who had been raised in Japan and used excuses in the directing to make them look like they could be from either country. I thought it was very skillfully done. At the time I went to see it there was a conference and a number of Korean critics had gathered for it. I was very glad to hear the comment from them that this was a play that a Korean should have written. Next I hope to be able to take the whole trilogy to be performed in Korea.

Citizens of Seoul is about Japan's colonial subjugation of Korea, and in any country with a history of colonization of another land, there are always people who want to justify it. When they do that it usually involves comparisons with other colonial powers, saying that their colonization was more benevolent than that of the other powers. But that is simply a case of the quality of the colonization being changed from an asset stripping type to an industry-creating type, but it doesn't change the fact that they are both cases of subjugating the territory of another country. Japan's was an assimilation type colonization, which is a strange type of subjugation that caused a distortion of the emotional relationship with Korean people that has still not healed more than 60 years after the War. I believe it is important that the artists of each country give defining expression to the cruelty of such colonial domination.

You are involved in collaborative projects with overseas artists. The production *Across the River in May (Sono Kawa wo Koete, Go Gatsu)* that you put on at the New National Theater in 2002 was a joint work with the Korean playwright Kim Myung Hwa. And the play you did in

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collaboration with Lee Byung Hoon was also highly acclaimed and won the Grand Prix of the Asahi Performing Arts Awards.

Also in May of this year performances of your joint Japan-China production *Lost Village* (*Kashuson – Hana ni Arashi no Tatoe mo Aru sa*) are planned at the New National Theater, Tokyo. I hear that this production opens in Hong Kong and then tours to Beijing before coming to Tokyo.

I don't think there are any other Japanese playwrights who have done this much international collaboration.

When Tamiya Kuriyama became the artistic director of the New National Theater, Tokyo, I received a commission for a work. But, at that time I believed that it was not right that the National Theaters be the only ones getting national financing, and so my stance was that I would not cooperate with the New National Theater until public theaters and private companies began getting national funding. However, with the joint Japan-Korea holding of the World Cup of football in 2002, that year was designated a special Japan-Korea friendship year and I was asked to put on a commemorative production. So I accepted that as a special case.

In return, I wanted to do it in a different framework from productions in the past. So I made a proposal that the play be written by both Japanese and Korean playwrights and that it be jointly directed and the actors and staff also be half and half.

More than being interested in international collaborations, what interests me most as a director and playwright multi-lingual theater. I am interested in plays in which there are several languages being used, but in a way that it still comes together coherently as a play. It can be Korean and Japanese, French and Japanese or Chinese and Japanese. The interest is the same.

To do this, however, requires a lot of work at the playwriting stage. But, the subtitle systems are getting good today, so it doesn't have to be an experimental theater type of production but one where any audience can come and enjoy it. That is the kind of theater I want to create.

Of course there has been multilingual theater before, but I agree that they remained on the experimental theater level. But in *Across the River in May* there was the essential aspect of having the story about a professor of Korean and Japanese students that made it viable as a play about communication in Japanese and Korean. What was the collaborative work with Kim Myung Hwa that led to this type of device like?

It was very difficult work writing a play in collaboration with another playwright. We talked for three days and three nights and came up with about 24 plot developments. Then I drew some scene sketches. After that we divide up the actual writing, having me do scenes one to ten, Kim Myung Hwa do 11 to 20 and me do 21 to 24. As we wrote, we were also working repeatedly with the outstanding translator Juri Ishikawa. I can read Korean, so I was able to compare the two texts, by Myung Hwa doesn't know Japanese, so this process was necessary.

We were able to do this thanks to the convenience of today's e-mail I believe. Once the basic form was complete we got together to spend time working out the final stage script. After that I worked with director Lee Byung Hoon to make it stage-able. In all, it took about one year to produce the joint script.

In the case of the play *Chants d'Adieu* that we did for the Centre Dramatique de Thionville-Lorraine, I wrote the whole thing, after which we had it translated and then got myself, the translator, an interpreter and the director and worked together on it for about three days. Then I checked with them about how the lines for the French actors sounded according to their sensibilities.

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In the case of *Lost Village* it was a bit different because I wrote about 80% of it and Li Liuyi directed about 80% of it, but when I have worked with the French or the Chinese I write while anticipating what the French or Chinese actors should be saying, so I need a partner to check what I write.

How was it decided that you would do *Lost Village* as a joint Japan-China project?

When we did *Tokyo Notes* at the 2004 Hong Kong Arts Festival it was very well received and I was asked to do something in Hong Kong at first. But things developed from there and eventually it was Li Liuyi in Beijing whom I know well that was chosen to work with me and create a work that would be performed in Hong Kong, Beijing and Tokyo.

What is the story about?

I based *Lost Village* on my own play I wrote in 1992 *Isn't Life More than Goodbyes?* (*Sayonara Dake ga Jinsei ka*), which is the story about a day in the life of workers at a construction camp where the work has been stopped because historical ruins have been discovered under the construction site. For this production I changed to setting to Sichuan Province and make it a story about work being stopped by the discovery of a grand-scale ruins that could change the textbook understanding of history itself. In fact an archeological site implying an ancient culture similar in scale to the Yellow River Culture has been found, but some people say it is all a fake and no one really knows yet what the truth is.

What I consulted with Li Liuyi is that because of the present situation between Japan and China, we cannot avoid the problem of our conflicting interpretations of recent history [the Sino-Japanese War and World War II], and I had no intention of doing that. But if you write about war and invasion, it can easily become doctrinaire, and there will inevitably be things you can't write about. So I wanted to write something that dealt with a longer scope of ancient history. So I chose as the setting for *Lost Village* a village that had been manufacturing imitations of valuable ancient relics about 300 years ago and had also become an area of recent archeological excavation.

By creating a scenario in which people were beginning to question whether or not the imitations made 300 years ago might not be actual ancient relics, and raising questions about how arbitrarily people can create so-called history so that it reads one way or another, I wanted to create an history play with an ironic touch that enabled people to look at all the current problems between Japan and China from a longer historical perspective.

Again this time it is a bilingual play with Japanese and Chinese being used. How does it work in this play?

There are roles for eight Chinese actors and five Japanese actors in the play. The Japanese are people in the construction business and archeologists who have come to participate in the excavation project, and two of the five are cast as people who can speak rudimentary Chinese. One of these is a member of our theater company whom I had study Chinese from about a year ago and has now reached a level of proficiency in everyday conversation.

Earlier you said that multilingual theater is very important to you. How did you initially become interested it?

I would rather say that I simply find it more interesting as an artist. In my first serious multilingual play, *Across the River in May*, we approached it very carefully,

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Across the River in May
(May, 2005, at New National Theatre,
Tokyo)

Photo: Masahiko Yako

doing a workshop for about a week before we began working on the project itself. In the readings, there are two languages being spoken at once in simultaneous lines, so it was quite difficult. But, when it first started going well there were moments when it created beautiful harmonies between the two languages. That was when I said to myself, “Ahh. This is what I have been wanting to do.”

I believe that theater is a form of expression in which we can directly and mutually discover the beauty in each other's words and the beauty of its reverberations. When two different languages are mixed and become even more beautiful as a result, I find in that a source of hope for the future. In the autumn of next year a production will be mounted at the Centre Dramatique National de Besançon in France that will be created by Japanese, a local French director and an Iranian director. There will be three actors from each of the three countries and the work will be a kind of omnibus with 40 minutes for each nationality. I would actually like to make it a more scrambled composition with simultaneous multilingual dialogue, but that would make the script even more difficult to write (laughs).

In the last 20 years a lot of public arts and culture facilities have been built here in Japan and the amount of public-sector funding has increased while the public policies that influence contemporary theater have changed considerably. What do you feel about these changes?

I think that in general the environment surrounding contemporary theater today has improved. Looking at social conditions over the last 30 years or so, the European countries, and especially Britain, began a gradual process of structural reform from the 1970s in their efforts to arrive at the place they want to be as mature nations. In contrast, Japan was hit by two “oil shocks” in the 1970s and, in the process of working together to overcome these national crises, the structural reform efforts fell behind and soon we found ourselves entering a “bubble” economy.

I believe that if structural reform had proceeded, the consumption habits of the Japanese would have begun to shift in the 1970s from material consumer goods to non-material consumption. Because of the delay in reform, however, we reached a point where we only used money for material consumption and after the Plaza Agreement we began to pump our leftover money into stocks and real estate, which led to the creation and eventual collapse of the bubble economy. This painful mistake led to the consumption slump of our Heisei Period (the 1990s and continuing to the present) when we stopped spending our money.

Also, whereas the countries of Europe have all deliberately sought to build their nations with their own distinct character in the face of American-type globalization, Japan has paid no attention to such a task. And, I believe that this is not unrelated to the way Japan's cultural policy has changed in the last 10 to 15 years.

The timing of this change just happened to coincide with the start of my artistic activities and I have been grateful that the growth of my company has come at the same time as the growth in Japan's arts support system. However, I tell the college students now, partly as a kind of warning bell, that Japan is going to go into decline. And I tell them that even as Japan declines, the culture of the regions where they were born and raised will not disappear, so they should value and nurture that culture.

In that sense, my work may be an attempt to depict with affection the people of this declining Japan, just as Chekhov depicted with a loving gaze the people of the declining Romanov Dynasty a hundred years ago. But, since I have some sense of social responsibility (laughs), I also send out messages about what we should do if we don't want to decline, or what we can do to decline with greater grace if we are going to decline anyway.

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You are also the artistic director of a public hall. What is the state of public culture facilities today?

The position of cultural programs in the political system has improved little by little over the last ten years in Japan or so and the quality of the officials involved has also improved compared to the past. Considering these changes, I think the state of public halls has gotten better. However, there are the realities of transfer of personnel authorized by each local government and the fact that these civil servants don't have the same approach as private sector producers who are will to take risks to do the artistic programs they believe in. In Japan the system has now changed to enable private enterprises or NPOs to operate public cultural facilities (*Designated Manager System), but I don't think this is going to change things. Under the present system, I think things have gone as far as they can. Since I consider public halls to be places where art should be created, I believe that you need producers and artistic directors who are not bound to the [civil servant] system. I think that they should be on yearly contracts like the manager of a baseball or soccer team, and if they don't produce good results their contracts are not renewed. Of course, real results cannot be produced in one year, so I envision three to five year periods of tenure. But, if the system isn't tough enough that a failure to produce even some results in one year can lead to a termination of contract, then I don't think it will be effective.

At the Fujimi City Municipal Culture Hall KIRARI FUJIMI where I serve as artistic director, we receive no public funding from the city. We operate strictly on the income we get from facility rentals and ticket sales and what we can get in terms of support money from external sponsors. The budget for our theater activities totals less than 30 million yen (approx. 255,000 USD), so we mount one production a year by soliciting works by young playwrights and choosing the actors by audition. We provide a budget of 3 or 4 million yen for the young playwright, and pay some money enough for them to live on for a couple of months, and we build a set in our small theater where rehearsals can be held for two or three weeks.

In the Greater Tokyo area alone there are about 100 public halls, and if each of them did one production a year like this, I think that would ring about a big change in Japan's theater scene. This type of production is something that can be done at any hall if the people just try, but no one tries. In fact, it is usually due to a lack of production capability that they are unable to mount such productions even if they want to, but if people try to make the changes little by little, I believe that Japan's theater environment will get better.

That brings us to the question of who should be serving as artistic directors. I believe that we should give that opportunity to more young people. For the seasonal theater festival that is held at the Agora Theater we asked Toshiki Okada to be festival director, and he is a young man born in 1973. He has done a very good job and has matured a lot as an artistic director.

I once asked my college students what kind of program they would put together if they were made an artistic director and given a budget of 100 million yen. They all came up with balanced programs that used about 10 million yen for their own production and allocate the rest for a few more conservative popular-audience productions and one overseas production. If they actually did become artistic directors I believe that they would work hard on the research, go out and see plays they had never seen before and come up with well-balanced programs with good public appeal and community value.

There are few artistic directors as such in Japan today and young people tend to be shunned because no one knows what they may do. So people with long careers and accomplishment are given these positions like honorary posts. But, in fact,

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young people are more likely to study the field seriously with honest intentions, so I think that we have to start by getting more young people involved if we want things to change.

In closing this interview, I would like to ask your opinion about today's theater scene.

We have seen the emergence of new talents like Toshiki Okada of Chelfitsch, Shiro Maeda of Gotandadan and Daisuke Miura of Potsudo-ru theater company, but the question is what kind of movement will be shaped by this. They certainly each have an atmosphere of their own and they have some issues that make them deal with themes of violence or grotesque eroticism, but I don't think they themselves have found what their uniqueness or originality is yet. If they can find the rationale in what they are doing, I believe that they could form a movement to be the next thing after our "quiet theater."

However, I also feel that the way information outruns everything with the development of the Internet and the fact that commercial funding has reached even into the small-theater scene, the consumption of talent has accelerated greatly. To rationalize a new form of expression requires that the artist face a solitary period of contemplation that is a necessary rite of passage in an artist's maturation. In today's world, however, I am afraid that there is no longer time for this process to take place. The only courses that seem to be available today are to become a theater company for the theater freak who gather on the Internet or to go commercial. Especially in the case of our "contemporary colloquial theater," if the work is well made there will inevitably be invitations from commercial investors. I saw one playwright telling a young playwright like "If you keep pitching your work like that you are going to get pitcher's elbow." In short, it has become very difficult today for artists to stick with their ideals and methodology.