Ninagawa Yukio and the Act of Cross-Cultural Transmission

In February 1866, the first public performance in Japan of Shakespeare's work was undertaken in Yokohama. "Mr Seare's Lecture Entertainment" included a selection from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and 'Hamlet's Instructions to the Players', was directed exclusively to other foreign residents of Yokohama, and was performed at the Silk Salon[1]. Since then, Japan has had an enduring relationship with Shakespeare. In 1985, performances of a Ninagawa Yukio production of *Macbeth* at the Edinburgh International Festival brought his work to the notice of wider international audience and paved the way in 1999 for the Saitama-born director to work with the Royal Shakespeare Company on a production of *King Lear* with the late Sir Nigel Hawthorne playing Lear. Programme notes for the production refer to him as "Japan's foremost director" and at what can hitherto be considered the highpoint of his career, the "acclaimed Ninagawa" is presented as part of a process of international cultural understanding between Britain and Japan. Tony Blair's preface in the programme was as follows:

> As we continue to share with the people of Japan many aspects of our culture and to enjoy, in return, the opportunity to see the rich quality of Japanese culture

[1] Ryuta Minami, 'Chronological table of Shakespeare productions in Japan 1866–1994', *Shakespeare and the Japanese Stage*, ed. Takashi Sasayama, J.R. Mulryne, Margaret Shewring (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.257

> in performance in the United Kingdom, I am very pleased that, in celebration of the new millennium, the Royal Shakespeare Company, a jewel in our cultural crown, has visited Japan with this production of *King Lear*.[2]

What kinds of explanation are offered by those involved to account for what is happening at the level of culture in Ninagawa's Shakespeare productions? Moreover, what ought we to understand is taking place in these performances, interculturally, both on stage and at the interface between performance and audience? This paper examines these questions with a particular focus on Ninagawa's 1999/2000 *King Lear* with Sir Nigel Hawthorne as Lear.

Russell Jackson, in a review for the *Shakespeare Quarterly* of Ninagawa's *King Lear* upon its arrival in Stratford-upon-Avon in December 1999 writes, "When the blinded Gloucester was led upstage by his disguised son Edgar, who held his father's arm delicately and gracefully, the stage picture was poignant and evocative of a Japanese watercolour"[3]. Reviews of Ninagawa's productions frequently mention the *mise-en-scène*, and Jackson's reference which perhaps calls to mind the compositional quality of Ukiyo-e or "floating world" woodblock prints – such as ubiquitous images of Hokusai and Hiroshige – affirms Peter Barnes's comments in the *New Shakespeare Quarterly*: "Happiest when manipulating

[2] Tony Blair, [Programme notes to] '*King Lear* by William Shakespeare', available at: <http://www.yessirnigel.com/commentaries.html>, accessed: 1st May 2006

[3] Russell Jackson, 'Shakespeare Performed: Shakespeare at Stratford-upon-Avon: Summer and Winter 1999-2000, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol.51, no.2 (Summer, 2000), p.227

bodies in space, Ninagawa, like all internationally famous directors, has a great eye"[4]. In his 1995 *Hamlet* which was brought three years later from Tokyo to London for the Barbican International Theatre Event, a moment at the end of the third scene in which Ophelia plays with dolls on the red steps of a steeply hierarchised *Hina-matsuri* display cabinet evoked the rigid verticality of the imperial court society displayed on the stage before us. Following the dumb show, the mobile central bleacher steps of the set were unveiled, serving as a red-carpeted life-sized echo of the display cabinet, with the players arrayed on the tiers in the manner of the Doll Festival; and the Player King and Player Queen descended to perform the play-within-the-play as noh actors[5]. In his *Macbeth* of 1980 – formally *NINAGAWA Macbeth* – the entire play was itself literally framed within the double doors of a *butsudan* Buddhist altar as proscenium arch. The play opened with two elderly ladies opening these doors – and it closed likewise. His 1994 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* took as its stage the Ryoanji stone garden of Kyoto where the sand, traditionally raked into ripples, presaged its fluid descent in what at first seemed but a few isolated threads hanging from the flies and broadened into temporal pillars, falling light as Titania

[4] Peter Barnes, 'Working with Yukio Ninagawa', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. VIII, Number 32 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, November 1992), p.390
[5] Dennis Kennedy, *Looking at Shakespeare: A Visual History of Twentieth-Century Performance*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp.322-23

slept heavily[6]. Most obviously under the spell of Japanese theatrical traditions was *The Tempest: A Rehearsal on a Noh Stage on Sado Island* in 1987 (1988 in Edinburgh, 1992 in London with RSC sponsorship) which gestured toward one of the founders of noh, Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1443), who was politically exiled to Sado Island in his later years[7]. Thus part of the set comprised the weather-beaten boards of an outdoor noh stage as would be found on the island today, and the performance was cast as a rehearsal in which the actor/director would step in for Prospero as required.

While Ninagawa tends to work with full-length texts in both English and in contemporary Japanese translation and makes a point of not rewriting the texts, he does not treat the words as inviolable. Ninagawa is known for loud sound effects and incidental music which can aurally eclipse entire sections of scenes – an example of this would be at the end of his *Hamlet* where Fortinbras' words were drowned out by swelling piano and the sounds of war[8]. In a 1995 interview conducted for *Performing Shakespeare in Japan*, Ninagawa offers us this explanation: "I wanted strong contrasts, such as people running, with music coming from everywhere – a sort of visual rhetoric"[9]. According to Peter Barnes,

[6] Kennedy (2001), p.320
[7] ibidem, p.317
[8] ibid., p.323
[9] 'Interview with Ninagawa Yukio', *Performing Shakespeare in Japan*, ed. Minami Ryuta, Ian Carruthers, John Gillies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), conducted: 4th July 1995; with Takahashi Yasunari, Anzai Tetsuo, Matsuoka Kazuko, Ted Motohashi,

Ninagawa "says he is trying to break down the artificial barriers between different forms of theatre by combining ritual, naturalism, Kabuki, Noh, Hollywood musicals, and film westerns"[10]. Dennis Kennedy writes that in tune with much theatre which is designed for the international festival circuit "Ninagawa imagines a global spectator as consumer of global cultural product"[11]. Yet Ninagawa explicitly denies this. Speaking of the first production he directed with Nakane Tadao as producer (*Romeo and Juliet*) he insists: "I wasn't thinking about appealing to the international market while I was producing the play"[12]. Asked whether he is not merely constructing the Japanesque, Ninagawa provides the following account of the origins of his visual style:

> Then I thought I had to find a technique which would connect with the thought-patterns of Japanese people by rearranging the play to use visual images in a Japanese style, without changing the words from the original except to take some proper nouns out of the play. This is why I get angry if somebody describes my plays as "Japanesque." I have attempted to introduce to a Japanese audience my impression of Shakespeare and analyzed how to achieve this.[13]

How do these intentions correspond with popular understandings of the cultural import of watching Ninagawa? Albeit not folk understandings, but critical ones, Tetsuo Kishi collates a cross-section of British theatre reviews of Ninagawa's *The Tempest* at the

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Ian Carruthers, p.211
[10] Barnes (1992), p.389
[11] Kennedy (2001), p.320
[12] 'Interview with Ninagawa Yukio' (2001), p.211
[13] ibid., p.211

1988 Edinburgh Festival. Of what he called “a Noh version” of the play, Michael Billington described “a majestically thrilling storm complete with riven galleon and flying mariners”[14]. Robert Gore-Langton remarks “The uncanny aptness of Noh theatre” which in Ninagawa’s *The Tempest* “calls for Noh characters and spirits to populate Prospero’s island. Corn-dollies, a Kabuki Ariel, a fish-spirit Caliban”[15]. Also found wanting knowledge of what authentic noh theatre might consist of is Jack Tinker at *The Daily Mail* who writes, “A strangely bi-sexual Ariel floats balletically above in changing skies that owe everything to the traditions of Noh theatre”[16]. However, there are dissenting voices in this celebration. The following acerbic words are from Charles Osborn of the *Daily Telegraph*:

> Those who like their Shakespeare decked out with attractive stage pictures will enjoy this *Tempest*, as will those who automatically respond positively to Foreign Cultural Experiences. But anyone who regards theatre as an art form which communicates primarily by verbal means will derive little pleasure from this production unless he or she can appreciate Yushi Odashima’s translation of the play.[17]

It has surely been a sometime point of pride among middle-class members of the theatre-going public that their response to Foreign Cultural Experiences will be automatic and will be positive. How could such a benign paradigm be satirised?

[14] Michael Billington, *The Guardian*, 19th August 1988; cited by Tetsuo Kishi, ‘Japanese Shakespeare and English reviewers’, *Shakespeare and the Japanese Stage*, ed. Takashi Sasayama, J.R. Mulryne, Margaret Shewring (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.112
[15] Robert Gore-Langton, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 1 September 1988; cited by Kishi (1998), p.118
[16] Jack Tinker, *The Daily Mail*, 18th August 1988; cited by Kishi (1998), p119
[17] Charles Osborn, *The Daily Telegraph*, 20th August 1988, cited by Kishi (1998), p.121

Ninagawa's *King Lear* co-produced with the Royal Shakespeare Company opened in Saitama Arts Theatre, Tokyo, in September 1999; moved to the Barbican Theatre, London, for October, and then to the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, from December. The late Nigel Hawthorne played Lear in what was announced as the final role of his career. Apart from the Japanese Sanada Hiroyuki, who played The Fool, all other actors were British RSC members. The stage was bare and vast, disappearing into darkness between the framing device of two vast gates – painted as is the noh *kagami-ita* with pine images – which opened to the full depth of the stage. Lighting by Tamotsu Harada variously made use of the gaps in the wooden planks of these gates and in the floor, it streamed warm slow arcs of lightning and it suffused the stage with what Alastair Macaulay dubbed a "Liebestod glow"[18] upon Lear's death – in the judgement of Kennedy "some of the most striking lighting effects ever seen at the RSC"[19]. Lily Komine's costumes ranged from rough hessian to Goneril and Regan's kimonos; and Lear's crown emanated uneven, flattened golden prongs.

The part of the staging which has drawn most attention has been the storm scene. Drawing on Japanese folklore explanations of thunder, the storm scene involved large

[18] Alastair Macaulay, 'King Lear on a grand scale', Financial Times, November 1st 1999, available at: <http://www.yessirnigel.com/ft.html>, accessed: 1st May 2006
[19] Kennedy (2001), p.324

falling blocks of wood wrapped in aluminium foil to resemble rocks, dropped onto the stage along with gravel and sand as Lear tries to "outstorm / The to-and-fro-conflicting wind and rain"[20]. Hawthorne recalls that "just one of those 'rocks' was heavy enough to crush the living daylights out of me"[21]. Since Hawthorne was not given any directorial notes from Ninagawa during this production, he composed his own. His personal notes for this scene read: "*Act Three, Scene Two* The storm scene. Avoid the rocks!"[22] By the time the production reached Stratford, presumably in response to safety concerns, the rocks had become "oddly flat rocklike objects" which "fell in a desultory manner from the flies and bounced on the stage floor"[23].

A common charge was that this production failed to do what is expected of *King Lear* – to expose us to elemental forces of rage, anguish and insanity. In this, Hawthorne is criticised for an understated performance, yet others have suggested that to cast Hawthorne is already to have made a decision about the kind of Lear one is not getting. Hawthorne is not primarily an actor full of sound and fury – Billington characterises Hawthorne's forte as

[20] William Shakespeare, *The History of King Lear* [Q1], *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), Scene 8, p.2388, lines 9-10
[21] *Players of Shakespeare 5***,** ed. Robert Smallwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.187
[22] *Players of Shakespeare 5* (2003), p.190
[23] Jackson (2000), p.229

"moral decency flecked with irony"[24]. There is furthermore, an inherent contradiction between the "visual rhetoric" approach of Ninagawa (developed in the face of language) and Hawthorne's attitude to Shakespeare's language. In an interview with Kathleen Riley after the London shows, Hawthorne responded to press criticisms of his low-wattage performance: "The words do so much for you. In the storm scene, you don't need storm effects because Shakespeare has written the words and he paints the picture for the audience… when it comes to the big moments, if they're played with intensity, it's almost better than if they're played at high volume because they have a reality to them then"[25]. Although this hear/see dichotomy came to a head in the storm scene with some of Hawthorne's words dashed on the rocks, and his intensity overwhelmed, the binary structures a wider debate about Ninagawa's work.

[24] Michael Billington, 'King Nigel's Shakespearean tragedy', *Guardian*, Saturday 30th October 1999, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,3922982,00.html>, accessed: 1st May 2006

[25] Kathleen Riley, *Nigel Hawthorne on Stage* (pending); cited by Tetsuo Kishi and Graham Bradshaw, *Shakespeare in Japan* (New York: Continuum, 2005), p.83

Fig.1 Programme cover from the 1999/2000 Ninagawa *King Lear*, signed. The cover image depicts Nigel Hawthorne as King Lear and Sanada Hiroyuki as The Fool. Note that Sanada also holds a noh mask in his hand, one of a number attached to his belt and used during the performance.[26]

[26] The use of noh masks is referred to by Jackson (2000), p.227; The image is copyright ©The Royal Shakespeare Company and is reproduced here without permission. Photographer: Donald Cooper

An alternative interpretation of what happened in the Ninagawa/Hawthorne *Lear* would be that the act of combining Japanese elements with Shakespeare left spectators in what Kennedy calls "a cultural no-man's-land"[27]. Falling between epistemologies, an intercultural production arguably negates some of the terms of its own deconstruction from any given point of entry; and while criticisms of the play may remain, one experiences a dislocation similar in spirit to that John Peter describes, in response to Ninagawa's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – described as something which is "Shakespeare in Japanese, but it is not really Japanese Shakespeare"[28]. Performance is made sense of within a wider symbolic system and reviewers tended to find Sanada Hiroyuki's rendition of The Fool either awkwardly incongruous or, by virtue of his isolation, affectingly vulnerable. *The Times*' Benedict Nightingale meanwhile, came up with this succinct formulation: "but Hiroyuki Sanada's capering, cartwheeling Fool is an inarticulate intruder from another culture"[29].

The postcolonial reading of the interculturalism of Ninagawa's Shakespeare as performed in England would be as a metropolitan cooptation of the periphery's cultural

[27] Kennedy (2001), p.323
[28] John Peter, *Sunday Times*, 8th September 1996; cited by Kennedy (2001), p.323
[29] Benedict Nightingale, 'The sadness of this king is not enough', *The Times*, 29th October 1999, available at: <http://www.yessirnigel.com/times_lear.html>, accessed: 1st May 2006

heritage; and one that regards with patronising fondness the inscrutable parvenus' attempts to "do" Shakespeare properly. Considering the extensive critical panning of Ninagawa's *King Lear* in 1999, Michael Billington thinks back to the mockery in 1955 of the designer Isamu Noguchi for his contribution to the John Gielgud *King Lear* and reflects: "maybe British critics do not like the Japanese messing with their beloved Shakespeare"[30]. Rustom Bharucha writes: "Colonialism, one might say, does not operate through principles of 'exchange'. Rather, it appropriates, decontextualises, and represents the 'other' culture, often with the complicity of its colonized subjects. It legitimates its authority only by asserting its cultural superiority"[31].

It would be important to observe the distinctions being lost here. Firstly, the implications of politically self-aware performance, even allowing for asymmetrical power relations, surely mean it is at least possible that complicity in the project of cultural appropriation endows one with leverage. Secondly, presumably Bharucha would allow that something of a different order is occurring when subalterns engage in indigenous forms of bardolatry in the periphery as against when a global pilgrimage to Stratford-upon-Avon enables every word Shakespeare wrote to include a Japanese homage to *Titus Andronicus* or

[30] Billington (1999)
[31] Rustom Bharucha, *Theatre and the World: Performance and the politics of culture* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp.1-2

a Kuwaiti *Richard III*. Yet Bharucha is categorical. In an exchange partly conducted through the pages of the *Asian Theatre Journal* with Richard Schechner – whose optimism about the place of theatre, performance and "playing" is evidenced in *The Future of Ritual*[32] – Mulryne mediates that "Bharucha consistently views interculturalism as irremediably tainted by the impure ethics of capitalism, imperialism and orientalism, an intertissued web of ideologies within which we are all caught"[33].

If we imagine identities to be constructed at the interfaces of cultural systems and upon encounters with alterity, let us consider what it may mean to watch Ninagawa's *Hamlet* in Tokyo as an American academic or to watch Ninagawa's *King Lear* in London as a Japanese director. In 'A Tokyo *Hamlet*', a review of Ninagawa's *Hamlet* for *Shakespeare Quarterly*, B.S. Field, Jr. of Wayne State University observes that while Shakespeare still needs "to be translated both verbally and culturally" for a Japanese audience, "producers of Shakespeare in Japan must acknowledge that Japanese audiences pay to see, not a Japanese play, nor a Nipponized version of a western classic, but the thing itself: Shakespeare, staged as his plays might be staged in a European or an English-speaking context"[34]. Note here that

[32] Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (New York: Routledge,1993)
[33] J.R. Mulryne, 'The perils and profits of interculturalism and the theatre art of Tadashi Suzuki', *Shakespeare and the Japanese Stage*, ed. Takashi Sasayama, J.R. Mulryne, Margaret Shewring (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.75-76
[34] B.S. Field, Jr., 'A Tokyo *Hamlet*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No.2 (Spring 1979), p.279

Euro-America becomes the normative locus of "the thing itself" and that through such means as gesturing towards an Anglophone line of descent is the legitimate claim to ownership of this "western classic" asserted. Once Shakespeare is framed as quintessentially western, his work may be seen as enshrining western values, such as the western notion of the individual – and mystification ensues. Field intercedes: "The idea of suicide in *Hamlet* for instance, is utterly inexplicable in Japan. There are firmly held and seldom verbalized assumptions in both the Orient and in the Occident; they are not the same"[35].

Conversely, upon watching the Ninagawa *King Lear* at the Barbican on 12th November 1999 the director of a Japanese drama school observed the following of Sanada Hiroyuki, the only Japanese cast member, playing a young Fool to Hawthorne's Lear:

> The moment I saw Sanada Hiroyuki's acting as the Fool, I said, 'that is Japanese acting'. Japanese people's acting is completely different from that of English people. The outward movements are always drawing attention and because there was an unease, it wasn't conducive to realism. However Sanada's obviously ill-fitting Fool was certainly original.[36]

Millie R. Creighton, in her essay 'Imagining the Other in Japanese Advertising Campaigns'[37], offers us the following analysis of representations of foreignness in Japanese

[35] ibid., p.278
[36] 'British Theatre 99'~00'', *Stone Wings Acting School Website*, review of *King Lear* at the RSC Barbican Theatre on 12th November 1999, available at: <http://www.stone-wings.com/britishtheatre_001.htm>, accessed: 1st May 2006. My translation.
[37] Millie R. Creighton, 'Imaging the Other in Japanese Advertising Campaigns', *Occidentalism: Images of the West*, ed. James G. Carrier (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp.135-160

culture. Pointing to how in Japan there is a popular discourse of "*ware-ware Nihonjin*" (literally, *we*-the-Japanese) conceived of as a homogenous bloc and reinforced through a literature of *Nihonjinron* (writing that takes as its premise the innateness of Japaneseness), Creighton observes how this finds expression in the cultural representations of invariably white foreigners (in the case of her analysis of contemporary print and screen advertising) as an expedient space of the other against which a Japanese self is defined. The western is used to evoke associations of progress, sophistication, stylishness, romance, acceptable sexuality and the passionate/untamed; and the image of the Caucasian gaijin (foreigner) is to a certain extent thus a trigger for an excursion into fantasy, a dream-world of self-and-other fetishism. In these terms, we might consider exported Ninagawa as Japanesque qua burlesque – the exotic as aesthetically erotic.

Regardless of whether popular understandings of "what the Japanese are like", and "what 'the West' is like", are intellectually rigorous or defensible claims, as essentialisms they can reinforce their own effects within the social reality. Thus, simply by putting on Shakespeare in Japan, one does inevitably orient oneself with relation to such a matrix and engage in this projection of perceived othernesses. As Creighton wryly observes, "Just as Western orientalisms created self-occidentalisms through an implied contrast with a

simplified West, Japanese renderings of *gaijin* are occidentalisms that stand opposed to Japanese orientalisms about themselves"[38]. In this context, Ninagawa himself adds to the *Nihonjinron* discourse by attempting to crystallise a Japanese ontology. He relates how "In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance, I told all the actors to lower their center of gravity a little. I'm not sure if this is part of Japanese or Asian character, but we turn inside ourselves and hold in the energy"[39]. Speaking of his actors in *Romeo and Juliet*, Ninagawa noted that, "I'm still struggling with this disadvantage in our culture – we don't have a definite "self," "self" as an agent, an assertive, aggressive self. The core of my artistic struggle is actually to discover such a self"[40]. Note that Ninagawa is not simply working with this essentialised notion in his directorial work, he conceives his task as being the struggle to bring such a self into being. He continues: "actors can't project the self for long. They can hold it for maybe two lines but not for five. They need physical strength and a strong personality to maintain a strong, self-conscious presence"[41].

On the question of an inferiority complex, Leonard C. Pronko rejects the suggestion made by J.R. Mulryne that perhaps the Japanese approach to Shakespeare has

[38] Creighton (1995), p.137
[39] 'Interview with Ninagawa Yukio' (2001), p.216
[40] ibid., p.211
[41] id.

something of the subaltern about it – that, in other words, "Japan's absorption of Shakespeare (and Ibsen and Gorky) has been the product of a cultural stance characterised by deference and a sense, however misplaced, of inferiority"[42]. Pronko's rebuttal consists in pointing out that for 41 years after the 1866 Silk Salon reading, while there were numerous adaptations, partial scripts and transpositions of Shakespeare's work, the decision to put on a faithful production of a full-text translation was not made for considerably longer than one would have expected had Japan truly been in sway to the authority of the text[43]. Could it be the case then that in place of the acute subaltern consciousness of postcolonial readings, we could helpfully posit that enjoying Shakespeare in Japan, especially with Western actors, just as enjoying Ninagawa in the UK, has rather more to do with the semiotic disjuncture of the foreign as exotic that permits the playgoer an escape into fantasy? Does Ninagawa's indulgence in a spectacle of alterity set us free?

Mulryne identifies in Patrice Pavis' collection, *The Intercultural Performance Reader* what he calls "the spirit of the nineties"[44]. This is "a habit of mind, broadly postmodern in character, that nourishes awareness while dissolving guilt"[45] and makes

[42] J.R. Mulryne, 'Introduction', *Shakespeare and the Japanese Stage*, ed. Takashi Sasayama, J.R. Mulryne, Margaret Shewring (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.4
[43] Leonard C. Pronko, '[Review:]Shakespeare and the Japanese Stage', *Asian Theatre Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Spring 2000), p.132
[44] Mulryne (1998), p.80
[45] ibid.

possible statements about artists being bricoleurs whom one, if anything, would expect to steal from other cultures because this is simply "what they do"[46]. Yet even the dissolving guilt of postmodernity does not mean that representation undergoes a miraculous depoliticisation. Signs are interpreted differently according to their location and as Barbara Hodgdon notes mediating Phillip B. Zarrilli's essay 'For Whom is the King a King?', a postmodern comfortableness with bricolage may not necessarily mean that the elements being stitched together are conveying the meanings intended at source: "Certainly, codes and constructions that are easily read by those within a particular culture may be opaque to outsiders who, in decoding them, turn them toward their own, more familiar "shaping fantasies""[47]. What might be the "shaping fantasies"[48] of Japaneseness that Ninagawa projects abroad? The domestically celebrated Shakespearean director Deguchi Norio denies that there is any inherent cultural exchange going on in these intercultural projects because what they reinforce is simply a fantasy of agrarian Japan. His comments in an interview for *Performing Shakespeare in Japan* bear quoting at some length:

> I also know that you can't cross borders by 'Japanization'. 'Making it Japanese'

[46] id.
[47] Barbara Hodgdon, 'Looking for Mr. Shakespeare after "The Revolution": Robert Lepage's intercultural *Dream* machine', *Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance*, ed. James C. Bulman (New York: Routledge, 1996), p.85
[48] Phillip B. Zarrilli, 'For Whom Is the King a King? Issues of Intercultural Production, Perception, and Reception in a *Kathakali King Lear*', *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p.25; cited by Hodgdon (1996), p.85

> is already about marking a border where exoticism begins. But I think exoticism is partly due to the ignorance of other nations. If there were no such ignorance, mysteriousness would not exist. Once you know that, it becomes an ordinary matter. When people prostrated themselves before British productions, they were worshipping exoticism. Now we are used to seeing British companies, so there's no longer anything mesmerizing about them. For that reason, I don't think we should emphasize our 'Japaneseness'. The images most people have of Japan at the present time derive from the period when we were an agricultural society: that is, old Japan, the 'so-called Japan.'[49]

The relative lack of recognition which Deguchi enjoys internationally compared with Ninagawa could perhaps illuminate some of the political issues at the heart of international poetics. Not to overstate the irony, if the success of Ninagawa's productions suggest anything, it is that precisely by Japanizing at the aesthetic level, it is possible to cross borders in a literal sense. We are reminded of Arjun Apppadurai's comments on the experience of the mediascape for many audiences: "The lines between the realistic and the fictional landscapes they see are blurred, so that, the further away these audiences are from the direct experiences of metropolitan life, the more likely they are to construct imagined worlds which are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects, particularly if assessed by the criteria of some other perspective, some other imagined world"[50].

To a certain extent this manufacturing of difference, this self-orientalising seems to be concomitant with borders. In Deguchi's terms, "'Making it Japanese' is already about

[49] 'Interview with Deguchi Norio', *Performing Shakespeare in Japan*, ed. Minami Ryuta, Ian Carruthers, John Gillies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), conducted: 4th April 1995; with Takahashi Yasunari, Anzai Tetsuo, Matsuoka Kazuko, Ted Motohashi, James Brandon, p.190

[50] Arjun Appadurai, 'Disjunction and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy', *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick William and Laura Chrisman (New York: Colombia University Press, 1994), pp.330-31

marking a border where exoticism begins"[51]. Yet it is precisely this mythologizing process which has so profoundly contributed to the Japanese notion of national identity. Kishi and Bradshaw allow that, "Unfortunately, Japanese ideas of what counts as distinctively and uniquely 'Japanese' have too often been shaped, as if in some hall of crazy mirrors, by Japanese perceptions of Western perceptions of what is distinctly 'Japanese'"[52].

Others have argued that far from being within the production itself, the defining intercultural exchange in this situation occurs at the fourth wall – at the interface between the production and the audience – and that the experience of watching any foreign performance changes one's relationship with the text. In his essay 'Foreign Shakespeare and English-Speaking audiences' John Russell Brown recalls this encounter with Shakespeare in a foreign city – "Well-known characters seem to move on that stage according to unfamiliar principles or unforeseen impulses. Crowd scenes dominate the story-line. … The audience is excited, talkative, restless, serious, or quiet beyond expectation. … Ordinary reactions are bypassed or displaced, and perception is quickened. The critic comes away with an enthusiasm not easy to explain"[53]. Kishi and Bradshaw

[51] 'Interview with Deguchi Norio' (2001), p.190
[52] Kishi and Bradshaw (2005), p.ix
[53] John Russell Brown, 'Foreign Shakespeare and English-Speaking audiences', *Foreign Shakespeare: Contemporary Performance*, ed. Dennis Kennedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.21; cited by Matthew H. Wikander, '[Review:]Foreign Shakespeare: Contemporary Performance', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No.1 (Spring 1996), p.87

proffer this interpretation for the dramatic volte-face of British critical opinion on Ninagawa post-*Peer Gynt* in 1994: the critics had loved the Japanese-language productions "because they were able to concentrate on non-verbal aspects of the productions without being bothered with what the actors were saying"[54]. Such a mode of engagement with only the spectacle and the visual power of the play would seem to risk being but one coherent symbolic framework away from a superficial dalliance with surfaces. As Rustom Bharucha writes in *Theatre and the World* of the silence of a traveller in exile from the logocentric world, "the omnipresence of images that one absorbs in this non-linguistic state of being can be numbing after some time. In retrospect, one realizes that one's seeming insights into another culture amount to mere impressions"[55]. The rejoinder of Kishi and Bradshaw would probably be that those British reviewers who derived a frisson from the notion of having made contact with an authentically noh *Tempest* were experiencing this latter effect: "Although they did not realise it themselves, they were simply responding to what was vaguely Japanese"[56].

Arguably – and more charitably – the process that the western audience member finds occurring in a Ninagawa Shakespeare production may be a Brechtian *Verfremdung*

[54] Kishi and Bradshaw (2005), p.84
[55] Bharucha (1993), p.152
[56] Kishi and Bradshaw (2005), p.86

which offers a visual culture analogue to what is being undertaken in approaching Shakespeare in the present age. As Kishi and Bradshaw mediate Hans-Georg Gadamer, "our responses to works of art from other cultures and periods are always, and inevitably, culturally and historically bounded. This, as Gadamer went on to argue, is not simply a sign of 'bias' or of some reprehensible and escapable limitation: rather, it is a condition of our responding at all"[57]. It could be that rather than being connoisseurs of orientalism, contemporary British Ninagawa devotees are finding in his style a corollary to the cultural distance they feel between our age and Shakespeare's. Michael Billington reflecting in *The Guardian* on *Peer Gynt* in March 1994 was unable to define precisely why the videogames parlour as framing device used by Ninagawa to bookend a virtual reality journey through Ibsen's play seemed inappropriate: "the framing-device seems oddly redundant when grafted on to Frank McGuiness's highly colloquial English version"[58]. Could it be that the 1867 *Peer Gynt* in contemporary translation does not require the same kind of aesthetic distancing as Shakespeare – particularly not if the frame is comprised of a contemporary idiom?

While this *Verfremdung* phenomenon may offer an explanation for what is

[57] ibid., p.ix
[58] Michael Billington, *The Guardian*, 5th March 1994; cited by Kishi (1998), p.122

happening when Japanized Shakespeare is being performed in the UK or in the US, it seems incongruous to apply it to Japan. Yet the case can be made that Ninagawa's mixing of kabuki and noh elements alongside modern popular culture in the reimagining of a European text has some of the same defamiliarising effects in the context of contemporary mainstream theatre in Japan as it would have in Europe. James R. Brandon argues that "by the 1920s, the production system of kabuki could no longer provide a viable milieu for Shakespeare"[59] because the improvisatory qualities of kabuki were being overwhelmed by the stable, passive, unchangeable qualities disseminated by attitudes to the translated texts of Shakespeare. To bring something reminiscent of elements of kabuki into a performance which also has Elton John's music in it (Ninagawa's *Romeo and Juliet*) certainly creates the kind of uncomfortable disjuncture which prevents the audience from feeling entirely familiar with what is taking place. Moreover Robert Hapgood observes of Japanese theatre's relationship with its past that, in contradistinction to Western theatre where productions are energised by a modernist impulse to "make it new" via "an infusion of contemporary perspectives"[60], more often than not, in Japanese theatre "it was the extreme

[59] James R. Brandon, 'Kabuki and Shakespeare: Balancing Yin and Yang', *TDR (1988-)*, Vol. 43, No.2, (Summer 1999), p.44
[60] Robert Hapgood, 'A playgoer's journey: from Shakespeare to Japanese classical theatre and back', *Shakespeare and the Japanese Stage*, ed. Takashi Sasayama, J.R. Mulryne, Margaret Shewring (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.245

stylisation from the past that provided this stimulus"[61]. Thus, elements of traditional Japanese theatre within Ninagawa productions should perhaps be seen as creating moments of disjuncture by default, by virtue of their radical abstraction from representational theatre. Pronko affirms this: "Western realistic drama today is an extension of everyday life, whereas Asian traditional forms *begin* with the idea that a performance is something apart from everyday life"[62].

One wonders if Tetsuo Kishi's distress at British theatre reviewers' misappropriation of Ninagawa's *The Tempest* as authentically representative of noh was not misplaced. He writes that in Ninagawa "distortion of the devices of traditional Japanese theatre occurs constantly" and "so it would be awkward to praise something for what it is not, as some of the English reviewers did when they saw Ninagawa's productions of Shakespeare" [63]. By "awkward" it seems that Kishi empathetically posits some embarrassment on behalf of the reviewers. Instructively he shows no such compunction in the face of *Return to the Forbidden Planet*, a rock musical loosely based on *The Tempest*, at the point when the Ariel-figure robot throws white thread at the Stephano character. Although this reference to the noh play *Tsuchigumo* (Earth Spider) lifts a trope qua

[61] ibid.
[62] Leonard C. Pronko, 'After Hanako…' *Asian Theatre Journal*, Vol. 5, No.1 (Spring 1988), p.91
[63] Kishi (1998), p.114

spectacle without any attention to its context within "the aesthetics and semiotics of Noh drama, where the effects are constituents of a more sustained poetic-dramatic meaning"[64]; in the case of *Return to the Forbidden Planet* this does not cause Kishi the cognitive dissonance it did when Ninagawa's Prospero used this signifier: "I think the crucial point is that the creators were well aware of the incongruity and absurdity of their work," he notes of the rock musical[65]. Pointedly, "None of this applies to Prospero. He is not a spider. … In other words, we were presented with a signifier without the signified"[66].

Aside from an ill-ease with the destabilising postmodern project which does not even have the courtesy to demarcate when it is taking its own signifiers seriously, there is also in these words a sense of concern for the decline of faith in what Osborne called "theatre as an art form which communicates primarily by verbal means"[67]. Is the lavish spectacle of Ninagawa symptomatic of Barnes' prognosis – one which suggests that we will not be able to think again in terms of going to "hear a play tomorrow"? He writes: "Nowadays the image takes the place of the thing and the word; audiences see but do not listen, and the ear, the organ of the imagination, becomes redundant. Perhaps the present is

[64] ibid., p.112
[65] id., p.114
[66] id., p.113-4
[67] Charles Osborne, *The Daily Telegraph*, 20th August 1988; cited by Kishi (1998), p.121

too corrupt and the time for words is past. It has become too late"[68]. Is this a greater problem with international theatre in that there is an inherent risk that alterity can itself too swiftly become the focal point for our attentions? Leonard C. Pronko would suggest it is possible to achieve popular success in "fusion productions" without "vision, without well-trained actors, without a firm grasp of *any* body or vocal discipline, and with no mastery of any style" simply because "the public often responds to the exoticism of a production"[69].

To conclude, Pronko counsels that "The temptations of quaintness, cleverness, and the surprising (like the quick changes of *kabuki*) must not necessarily be resisted, but they must be used only after a firm foundation has been built"[70]. Pavis' answer in *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* is that these are simply different kinds of theatre:

> Unfortunately, we seem to be heading towards a two-tiered culture and interculturalism: a consumerable culture for a large audience or even for a targeted group from the conservative middle class, a culture of easy access that is neither controversial nor radical, which provides readymade answers to big questions, cavalier views on history (Cixous) or pleasing embellishments (Mnouchkine), preaching an end to cultural differentiation under the cover of 'an all-purpose culture'; or, on the contrary, an elite culture that is radical and irreducible, that abandons spectacular performance to work at the microscopic level, almost in secret, and whose results are never immediate and often obscure.[71]

[68] Barnes (1992), p.390
[69] Pronko (1988), p.90
[70] ibid.
[71] Patrice Pavis, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*, trans. Loren Kruger (New York: Routledge, 1992), p.212

Presumably what is misleading for us is that without this framework, our interpretative association of the cosmopolitanism of work like Ninagawa's with high status, our thrall to the token display of mesmerising foreign forms, and the postmodern milieu which encourages us to celebrate the dissolution of distinctions between high and low culture as a jouissance of pastiche, collage and bricolage, make it harder to distinguish that for all its textual richness – and beauty – a Ninagawa performance does not typically offer us the semiotics that Kishi identifies, "where the effects are constituents of a more sustained poetic-dramatic meaning"[72].

It seems that for the 1999/2000 Ninagawa production of *King Lear*, one of the specific "cultural" conflicts between Ninagawa and Hawthorne may have stemmed from their contradictory positions on "seeing" versus "hearing" the play. Ninagawa's Shakespeare as performed interculturally becomes part of a process of mutual misrecognition in which elements of Japaneseness and traditional Japanese theatre are misconstrued in a shared fantasy of self-and-otherness on the one hand, and the attempt to create spectacle which will transmit cross-culturally on the other. At least in popular interculturalism, this is a form of mutual misrecognition in which both parties have vested

[72] Kishi (1998), p.112

interests, yet neither is entirely conscious of their complicity. Postcolonialism is not perhaps the most fruitful analytical frame within which to conceive of this, and although preoccupations about the representations of authenticity being made do seem more pronounced on the Japanese side than on the British, there is also anxiety in “the West” about foreign influence over a prized cultural possession. Resetting the jewel in someone else’s cultural crown can cause considerable disquiet, despite our supposedly postmodern habit of mind.

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