Performance Arts Practices in Japan:Historical to Obsessional Movements

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Abstract

From historical religious and court-based performances to traditional theater created by government adaptation of people's theater into 'traditional' modalities, performance arts is deeply embedded in Japanese culture. In contemporary Japan, people's theater again emerged through the obsessional performance arts utilized as a vehicle for expressing anti-government sentiments. The movements of the 1950s-1970s encompassed plays in tents, street theater, butoh dance and other exhibits of public displays of expression. This paper explores the historical to the obsessional.

Early Performance Arts in Japan

Performance arts in Japan can be traced back to Shinto, Buddhist, and court-based arts. Kagura and Gigaku are some of the earliest recorded forms of Japanese artistic expression which were related to religious ceremonies. Kagura refers to Shinto-based celebratory dances and sketches, while Gigaku refers to Buddhist dances and scenes. Kagura were performed during Shinto festivals after the gods were summoned to entertain the deity. Kagura performances can take many forms including masks, musical instruments, enactment of a story and are to ask the deity to assure prosperity or for a good rice harvest, for example. Gigaku was introduced to Japan between the seventh and tenth centuries from China and Korea in order to propagate Buddhism but eventually died out by the twelfth century because it lost support from the imperial court. A typical performance would have included ritual Buddhist music played on flute, drums, and other percussion instruments; chanting monk characters masked to appear as Buddhas; and another procession of ten actors dressed in various roles performing comic skits which teach about Buddhist belief (Ortolani, 1990).

Bugaku which was also adopted from Korea and China is a semi-dramatic court dance, eclectic in nature, which utilized aspects of Chinese and Korean music, in addition to dances introduced from India and Vietnam. Through music, including flute and percussion and dance, often performed on a raised stage outdoors, stories were performed for the entertainment of the high court officials. Therefore this was a majestic and stately style of performance. Early performance arts were valued as both courtly entertainment as well as a practice to entertain and appease the gods.

Traditional Performance Arts

Noh and Kyogen

One of the most well-known Japanese theatrical traditions is Noh. Brandon (1997) summarizes Noh as follows. Noh was originally performed by Buddhist priests, all men, and acting was a hereditary profession handed down to sons. Its origins date back to the 1300s when one director combined rhythmic dance and popular music for a climactic scene in another performance. Performances consist of prose and poetry, which is sung, and was influenced by the Buddhist view that the world is ever changing. Here again, we see religious expression through theatre. Accordingly, Zen's artistic principles were incorporated into Noh, and the singing style was based on Buddhist chanting. Historical events were the subjects of most plays. However, when the Tokugawa Shogun ruler gained political power in the early 1600's, the government recognized that these alternate versions of history had power and feared the effect they would have on people's thinking. Noh was forbidden to common people and changed into a longer, more controlled form. It became less entertaining losing its original impact.

Kyogen, which is performed when Noh actors are on intermission between the two acts, provides a sharp contrast in style and offers comic interludes. Kyogen is one of the few genres of Japanese theatre that is not accompanied by music. The costumes are relatively plain, usually no masks or makeup are used, and the spoken dialogue is relatively easily understandable prose. The subject matter tends to make fun of human tendencies towards greed, lust and cowardice and people who normally are revered in society are often made out to be useless. One example of a famous Kyogen play depicts a village troubled with uncontrollable mushrooms and the mountain monks who are supposed to posses powers to save the people, in the end run away from the mushrooms utterly scared and helpless (Brandon, 1997).

Kabuki

The most famous style of Japanese theatre, Kabuki provides one of the best examples of the subversive power of theatre. Kabuki was started by a woman named Izumo no Okuni and was often performed by prostitutes. It had a very brash style when it was first created. The word Kabuki comes from kabuku which means strange or tilted and its scandalous nature can be inferred from the original characters which were used to express it- ka (song), bu (dance) and ki (prostitute) (Brandon, 1997). As was the case with Noh, Kabuki was also feared and amended by the government because of its power with the people. In 1629, because of the law stating one could not have two professions, for example a prostitute and an actress, women were banned from public stages by the Tokugawa Bakufu government. Apparently, young men who were prostitutes performed, but were also banned in 1652. Subsequently, Kabuki started with all male adult casts. Within the more well known all male Kabuki, the role of the onnagata began to be developed. These were the roles of women in the play who were portrayed by males. Even this slightly cleaned up, all-male version of Kabuki was still an art form by the people, for the people as it changed with the culture of the people and adapted to fit the times.

Kabuki performances are high energy and emotionally charged. One play from 1817 which was quite subversive in nature included an imperial princess becoming a prostitute, a gangster who becomes a government official and a samurai lord who gets killed by a common criminal. Kabuki was said to be akin to rock music of seventeenth century Japan. Rock music in the 1950s and 60s was clearly for the people, elicited strong emotional and political reactions and stirred up the cultural scene. At Kabuki's peak during the Edo period, the arena of theatre provided for a wide mixing of classes, which was generally frowned upon during the Tokugawa era's strict political rule. When the Meiji government took over in the late 1800s they again sanitized Kabuki changing the character of *ki* from the meaning of prostitute to skill.

Contemporary Performance Arts

With the aim of rejuvenating the Kabuki tradition in a more rational and civilized form to create national theater, mottos such as civilization and enlightenment became guiding principles for the Theatre Reform movement in the early Meiji period (Lee, 2002). In the early Meiji period, the establishment of the Ministry of Religious Affairs effectively placed all actors and entertainers in government service as teachers to educate the masses to 'encourage virtue and chastise vice' (Tschudin, 1999). Kabuki gradually became monopolized and institutionalized by large corporations. In addition, European artistic techniques and radical

political ideas produced actors who were no longer suited for the Kabuki stage. Shingeki (literally "New Theatre") was then created as a stage for expression of multinational theater ideas and by 1960 was dominant in Japanese modern theater (Lee, 2002).

When *Shingeki*, which was really Western-inspired theater serving a dominant text, itself became "establishment" theater and could not respond artistically to crises with a new perspective to the demands of young people, the *Seinen Geijutsu Gekijo* (Youth Art Theatre) was formed in 1959. One of the early underground dramatists, Kara Juro, leader of *Jokyo Gekijo* (Situation Theatre), saw his group as a pre-modern Kabuki troupe of itinerant actors producing a bawdy vaudeville act (Goodman, 1971). One of the concepts of contemporary Japanese theater is the transcendence of the modern age. To challenge and revolutionize modernization, a new language must be created to recognize and shift the fallacies of established policies and laws, that is, the most fundamental politics.

As an example of one of the new languages through aesthetic movement, Butoh also exhibits characteristics of the original Kabuki's folk appeal as well as Kabuki's representation of the dark side of social life (Klein 1988).

Obsessional Performance Arts

The body as site for disfiguration to overturn social structures as a form of social rebellion was a concept which intersected with several arenas at the time Butoh was born in the early 1960's: an aesthetic tendency toward Obsessional Art with its Actions and Happenings stemming from Surrealism and Neo-Dadaism, Western expressionism and existentialism, post-WWII social upheaval, and demonstrations against American political and economic hegemony. Japanese post-WWII art derived from action developed around issues of the body and place. Physical and site-specific works examined the relationship of the appropriate body expression with the elements of the place (Osaki, 1998; Munroe, 1994). At the same time, underground street theater or *Shogekijo* (literally 'Little Theater') developed in response to the perceived need for expression of social issues by and for the people. These itinerant groups performed in tents and small theaters in an attempt to recapture the popular entertainment of pre-canonized Noh and Kabuki theater Japanese culture. Influential groups included *Aka Tento* – Red Tent, and *Jokyo Gekijo* - Situation Theater (Kara Juro); *Tenjo Sajiki* – The Gallery (Terayama Shuji); *Kuro Tento* – Black Tent and *Waseda Sho-gekijo* – Waseda Little Theater (Sato Shin).

Such fertile expression through the body in the avant-garde art and theater world opened a gap for Hijikata to create a new form of "ethnic dance" through Ankoku Butoh. Perhaps best described as a global social movement, Butoh dance was created in 1959 in Japan as

a critical reflection to Western culture and political dominance at a time of violent social protests against AMPO, the Japan-US Security Treaty, and the Vietnam War. Its founder, Hijikata Tatsumi, saw the West contributing to a fragmentation of self-identity and a loss of relationship between humans and nature (Kurihara, 1996; Klein, 1988). An aesthetic form of avant-garde movement, a dance (*bu*) step (*toh*) that challenged and incorporated both Western dance and Kabuki and Noh theatre of the period, Butoh explored movement through transformative imagery in an attempt to find the natural body. Butoh also contributed to the process of subverting and deconstructing the "national body" - a mentality formed by the aesthetic construction of Kabuki and other forms of traditional theatre.

Mishima Yukio, an author and member of the obsessional art community was the subject of a photo shoot by the famous photographer, Hosoe Eikō, during which he had a moving experience:

> "The world to which I was abducted under the spell of Hosoe's lens was abnormal, warped, sarcastic, grotesque, savage and promiscuous…It was, in a sense, the reverse of the world we live in, where our worship of social appearances and our concern for the public morality and hygiene create foul, filthy sewers winding beneath the surface. Unlike ours, the world to which I was escorted was a weird, repellent city - naked, comic, wretched, cruel, and over decorative - yet in its underground channels there flowed, inexhaustively, a pellucid stream of unsullied feeling." (Hosoe: 1963)

This dirty, imperfect, underside of himself which he experienced as the world of the photo shoot is filled with clear meaning and feeling which can't be expressed in the normal, daily world where appearances and keeping those unclean feelings under the surface is of the utmost importance. These feelings can only be expressed through art.

Kabuki was by the people and for the people and a large part of obsessional art was also an attempt to make art by the common people and for the common people who had all struggled together. This is probably best exemplified by Shingeki, "new theatre," and the use of the tent or mobile theatre. One group that utilized tent theatres was the Situation Theatre. They appeared with their red tent for the first time in the summer of 1967. In 1969 they toured, bringing theatre to people and places no one had ever considered performing before, which brought stationary, established theatre into question. Because traditional theatres all have a proscenium arch, the audience and the actors are separate, but in the tent theatre the people and the performers have much less of a barrier, bringing theatre closer to the people. The Gutia group, formed in 1955, as their first big project, made a huge outdoor exhibit on an

industrial beach for 13 days with the goal of taking art out from closed rooms into the open air and exposing the works to the natural forces of sun, wind and rain. They said they "wanted to create something that had never existed before," and aimed to combine the human spirit and the spirits of material objects and bring energy to both. One of their members was Tanaka Atsuko. She had an exhibit called "electric clothes" where she wore colored light bulbs as a dress during the 1956 second Gutai art exhibition. Murakami Saburou was another artist at the same exhibit. His installation called "At One Moment Opening Six Holes" was a giant, layered paper wall that he broke through as part of his performance. Another group of artists located in Kyushu was called Kyushu-ha. They were the first avant-garde group in Kyushu, established in 1957, and were active for about ten years. Their work was mostly anti-art or works relating to omnipresence of politics in our lives. This was reflected in their art by using asphalt and junk objects and turning them into fine art. The Guggenhiem musem honored this art period with its special exhibition titled "Japanese Art from 1945: Scream Against the Sky", documented in a book by the same title (Munroe, 1994).

The art and performance world since obsessional art has been dispersed throughout museums, alternative art spaces, in exhibitions. The art also spread across many genres - an anti-modernist movement in the 50s, social protests, butoh in the 60s, conceptual art, experimental video and films of the 70s, and postmodernism in the 80s and 90s. All of these movements are under the label of modern art.

Contemporary Performance Arts in Fukuoka

Questions for exploring this study further can be found in the meaning of contemporary performance arts practices for provincial areas such as Kyushu, and in particular Fukuoka. The debates which need to be explored center around the art-society relationship, and the diffusion/dispersal of performance practices. What were the debates? How did they manifest in performance practices? How did they influence today's practices?

Fukuoka City was established in 1889 in the 22nd year of the Meiji era and is comparatively newer than other cultural centers in Japan. Visible theater in northern Kyushu reveals a lack of Kabuki and Noh presence so there is no historical memory of these traditional arts in Kyushu. In Fukuoka there is a Noh Theater and Hakata-za, a theater venue designed as a Kabuki theater, both of which were recently established only within the past 20-30 years. Therefore, understanding the rich array of alternative and experimental movements as well as local participatory performances in Fukuoka will expand our perspective on the lack of historical traditional performance arts practice toward creating fertile ground for innovation

in experimental expression. Alternative and experiential groups include Hakata Niwaka, Yamakasa, Dontaku , Seiryukai butoh, mentai rock, Shanghai Somen Koba, gingira taiyos, Shanghai Somen Koba, and experimental film groups.

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