Shakespeare and the Japanese Stage

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1 Introduction

J. R. Mulryne

The origins of this book go back, for two of its editors, to the Edinburgh Festival of 1988 and a performance of Yukio Ninagawa's *The Tempest*. At the end of the evening, the huge audience in the cavernous Playhouse Theatre sat for a few moments in silence, profoundly moved, before bursting into applause. Our own response paralleled that of other audience members, and the newspaper critics confirmed in the next few days that in their judgement too something of remarkable power had been staged. 'The "rough magic" of Ninagawa's *Tempest*', wrote Michael Ratcliffe in *The Observer* (19 August 1988), 'is so sinister it scares you half to death, and so beautiful it brings tears to your eyes.' Reservations were voiced, but the overwhelming balance of opinion placed Ninagawa's interpretation among the most moving of the multitude of stagings of Shakespeare's play. Years later, Jude Kelly, artistic director of the West Yorkshire Playhouse, asked by the *Guardian* newspaper (15 November 1995) to recall the highlights of her theatre-going life, wrote of the production as 'one of the most emotional evenings I can remember'. 'Ninagawa', she asserted,

> combined the theatricality and magic of the play with a fearsomely psychologically-based central character . . . Prospero, a magnificent and frightening man, was wracked both with the moral burden of total power and the terror of relinquishing it . . . Finally, he broke his staff across his knee and the sadness and relief was overwhelming. Prospero dealt with his own hubris through an act of astonishing moral courage – and so Ninagawa revealed the play.

It was precisely this sense of Ninagawa 'revealing the play' that struck us as so remarkable and so open to question. We were aware of the success his productions of *Medea* and *Macbeth* had enjoyed at previous Festivals. No doubt expectation and advertising hype had played their part in the positive audience response on the evening we attended. No doubt, too, the sheer scale of the production, the crowded stage, the richly colourful costumes and settings, the mix of traditional and modern music, the precisely choreographed movement, and the exotic glamour of the Eastern references had appealed to the expectant sensibilities of an ethnically very

varied festival-going audience. Yet the sense remained of something more deeply ingrained and significant, something that went to the heart of contemporary Shakespeare performance. What was the relationship of this exotic theatricality to Shakespeare? 'Shakespeare', we fully realised, is a construct responsive to political, social, economic and cultural influences, and to theatrical preoccupations and resources. Did the accessibility and the power of Ninagawa's *The Tempest* mean that in the so-called global village a Japanese Shakespeare speaks our language? And if so, whose language is that? Problems of a verbal kind were obvious, superficially coped with in the Playhouse by electronic surtitles. Yet the language was heard or the translation read by so diverse an audience that understanding must have varied even more widely than in the case of a non-festival performance. And the production, while using a remarkably full and (so far as this is ever the case) literal translation, employed a language of theatre that transformed the script into an experience at once profoundly appealing and undeniably strange. How far were the Japanese theatrical traditions so overtly on display in this *Tempest* essential to its meaning, and who could read that meaning? How far was the readable meaning of the acting techniques and stage strategies influenced by the actors' and the director's practised knowledge of Noh and Kabuki and Kyogen, all of them directly alluded to in the performance? Was our own limited acquaintance with these theatre-forms a barrier to understanding? It could scarcely be a bridge. Was our enjoyment coloured, perhaps deeply coloured, by an unconscious orientalism of the kind Edward Said had so notably exposed? Could we be more than *voyeurs* at a spectacle that flaunted its debt to the unbroken inheritance of Japanese theatre since Zeami, and that meanwhile vividly evoked the peculiar mix of past and present that characterises Japanese society today? Could this Shakespeare ever be *our* contemporary? What had happened to Shakespeare when his work had slipped across a linguistic and cultural divide far wider than the fissures that separate England's culture, of the seventeenth century or the twentieth, from the cultures that inform the theatre practice of Giorgio Strehler or Ariane Mnouchkine, Peter Zadek or Robert Lepage? How much light would a thorough understanding of Ninagawa's work throw on the Japanese mind of the late twentieth century, and on our own minds? Was it somehow incumbent on us as students of Shakespeare to attempt by further study to understand the evident power of the Edinburgh theatre experience by way of a more developed knowledge of Japanese Shakespeare?

This book offers an attempt to provide answers to some of these questions, implicitly and overtly, through our own inquiries and through the participation of colleagues both in Japan and the West. Study of the

teasing and compelling relationships between East and West, specifically in regard to theatre, and in regard to culture more generally, has been in train in the West for a century or more (and has roots, as Said and others have shown, much deeper than that). The implicit framework for our inquiries, from a Western perspective, had to be the subtle presence-and-absence of Japanese life and art in the cultural life of the West. Theatre, like the other arts, has picked up for a long time the echoes of Japanese artistic practice. The craze for 'things Chinese' and 'things Japanese' that marked the 1870s and after made its way into the world of high art through its influence on painters such as Whistler, Manet, Pissarro and Klimt, and on composers such as Saint-Saëns. Dancers including Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan drew inspiration from oriental performers, and in the theatre theorists and practitioners of the stature of Artaud, Craig and Yeats have been in various ways impressed and influenced by what they learned of Eastern stages. The theatre culture of Europe and America had therefore well before mid-century absorbed and re-created a series of impressions of Eastern theatre, including the Japanese. Since then, the pace of knowledge and response has only accelerated, due in part to increasing ease of travel. The few Asian touring troupes of the 1920s and 30s have been replaced by frequent visits in both directions by companies large and small. In part it has been due to increased study (one estimate, probably an under-estimate, puts the number of institutions studying Eastern theatre in Europe and America at fifty to sixty) and increased attention in the broadcast and other media. In film, the Shakespeare adaptations of Kurosawa and Kosintsev have reached and influenced a wide audience. In theatre itself, it is only necessary to mention Brecht's 'Chinese plays', the music theatre of Britten, and the theatrical experiments of Brook, Grotowski, Mnouchkine, Barba and Lepage to recognise how widespread in Western performance the knowledge and assimilation of Eastern theatre practice has become. The same names evoke also how hybrid and perhaps questionable a form this development has taken, as the controversies between theorists such as Richard Schechner and Rustom Bharucha, in books and in the pages of specialist journals such as the *Asian Theatre Review* and *TDR*, amply demonstrate (see chapter 5 below). An understanding of the cultural meanings of Ninagawa's *The Tempest* could not be achieved, we can see, without some awareness of the qualifying context of its staging, from a Western point of view at least, including the conscious and unconscious memories of its audience.

From an Eastern perspective, the performance of *The Tempest* is bound to look rather different. As essays in this volume show in detail, the story of the assimilation of Shakespeare in Japan stretches back to the Meiji

Restoration, the moment (in 1868) when Japan turned once more towards the outside world. This is a span of 100 years or so that parallels, but with marked differences, the period of absorption of Japanese theatre in the West. Perhaps it is too gross a simplification, but it could be claimed that while the West's assimilation of Japanese theatre may be marked by hints, at the least, of orientalism, 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. At the end of the nineteenth century, in a kind of inverse colonialism, Japanese scholars and writers, the product of a civilisation emerging from centuries of cultural isolation, thought of Western theatre, and of Shakespeare in particular, as representing a privileged sector of cultural knowledge. Thus the translation of Shakespeare's texts, and the performance of the plays, carried the implication of homage, of offering a kind of service, an approach likely to be inhibiting to genuine creativity. Imitation of Western styles and performance techniques marked much of the theatrical output. The *Shingeki* movement in particular (see chapter 2 below) represented a form of deference towards the West, rather than the discovery of a culturally relevant idiom. The claims of the academy also hung heavily on the reception of Shakespeare, more heavily even than they have sometimes hung in the West. At the same time, the traditional theatre arts of Japan, Noh, Kyogen, Kabuki and Bunraku, embodying the distinctive experience of the culture, had forfeited any significant role in contemporary theatre. By a poignant irony, it was not until Japan had become an economic power of international stature (a fact not unconnected with its ability to fund international touring) that its theatre gained once more the confidence to embrace and incorporate its traditional arts.

All of this may be 'read' in Ninagawa's *The Tempest*, a production that hybridises Shakespeare with traditional theatre, and splices both of them with allusions to current popular culture. But the implications, and the ironies, run wider. Ninagawa learned his theatre craft on the experimental stages of the *Shogekijo Undo*, the radical 'little theatre movement' of the 1960s and early 70s. *The Tempest* at Edinburgh drew, by contrast, on the resources of the wealthy Toho company and filled the vast stage of the Playhouse with a cast including celebrated actors and media personalities. How was a Japanese spectator, implicated in the history of modern Japan and the history of its theatre, to interpret this Shakespearean performance? Did Ninagawa's internationalisation of the Japanese stage offer a genuine image of his cultural moment? How far was Shakespeare fully assimilated, technically and emotionally, and how far was his work merely the occasion for soliciting international attention? Even if this

latter were the case, did the monied representation of a Western writer, more lavishly presented and more vigorously performed than in his own country, stand for the appropriate Japanese contribution to an emergent 'world culture'? Was the traditional theatre of Japan genuinely incorporated, or used merely for effect? Was the audience witnessing a culturally fragmented or culturally integrated work of art? What had all this to say to Japanese audiences in Tokyo or Osaka or Kyoto, as compared with audiences in the Edinburgh Playhouse? It became evident that Ninagawa's *The Tempest* raised numerous questions of a socio-cultural kind, for the Eastern observer as much as for the Western.

The moment seemed propitious for embarking on a book of the present kind. Cultural exchange between Japan and the West was quite evidently on the increase, fuelled by the electronic media, by more frequent international travel and (in the late 1980s and early 90s at any rate) by rising economic prosperity, especially in Japan. People exchanges between America and Japan and Europe and Japan, at both student and instructor levels, as well as between businesses and in leisure travel, were becoming more numerous. Strong socio-political as well as cultural links were developing between the countries of the Pacific Rim, with a marked increase in awareness of the Japanese arts in, especially, Australia. All of this was accompanied by much greater frequency in theatrical touring in both directions, with a significant number of theatre professionals now making the journey to observe Japanese performances and to study under Japanese masters (a considerable volume of similar traffic had moved in the opposite direction for some decades). From our own perspective in Britain, a particular effort was in place, especially through the British Council, to raise awareness of British culture in Japan. The UK90 initiative, which ran for three months of 1990 in Tokyo and thirty-five other Japanese cities, and comprised 120 different events, was 'the largest festival of British culture ever mounted in Japan, and possibly the largest cultural festival in Japan which has been staged by any country.'[1] Among the events were performances by the English Shakespeare Company, Cheek by Jowl and the Royal National Theatre. The costs of the Festival were largely met by Japanese business, and there were considerable commercial and goodwill spin-offs. In the day-to-day work of the Drama and Dance Advisory Committee of the Council, Japan became a frequent destination for touring by British companies large and small. Plainly, the days were coming to an end when the popular media could regard Japan and its arts as belonging to an Eastern world where an exotic civilisation lived out its life in cultural isolation. The overlap of cultures, ensured by the American occupation of Japan after the Second World War, and by

subsequent Japanese economic successes, was turning into a cultural mingling. In the Shakespearean theatre, the visits to Japan of leading British companies were having their effect, as chapters of this book indicate, not only on audience attitudes to Shakespeare but on the techniques of Japanese performance. The frequency in Japan of home-bred and visiting Shakespeare productions increased. In 1990, to take an exceptional but telling instance, seventeen different productions of *Hamlet* were staged in Tokyo, many of them at the Tokyo Globe, itself erected in 1988 as a monument to Japanese Shakespeare, thus anticipating by almost a decade the opening of Shakespeare's Globe in London.[2] Of the seventeen, six were foreign, including outstanding interpretations such as those of Yuri Lyubimov from Russia and Andrei Wajda from Poland. Any account of Shakespeare and the Japanese stage would have to be written in an awareness of this multifarious cultural interchange, social, commercial and theatrical, both as a relevant context for practical matters of theatre performance, and as conditioning the imaginative awareness of audiences, directors and performers.

Several theatre events of 1991 further illustrate the growing complexity of the cultural matrix within which Japanese Shakespeare needs to be understood. The Japan Festival, beginning in August 1991 and running for six months, brought to London and other centres throughout Britain 'a sample of the many different strands that make up life in Japan'.[3] For most observers, however, the Festival offered principally a glimpse of Japanese culture as expressed through its creative arts, from the 'Visions of Japan' exhibition of artefacts at the Victoria and Albert Museum to the 'Japanesque' version (to use the word of the show's translator and director Keita Asari) of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Among the diverse offerings carried on the powerful tides of diplomatic and financial interest that motivated the Festival – the UK 'Committee of Honour' included John Major, Neil Kinnock, Douglas Hurd and Margaret Thatcher and the parallel Japanese Committee included the then Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu and his Minister of Foreign Affairs Taro Nakayama – there came to Britain a series of Japanese theatre events, traditional and contemporary, that provided for many British audiences their first (and certainly their most concentrated) opportunity to experience a range of Japanese performance, including Shakespeare. Contemporary plays such as the Chijinkai Theatre's *Orin*, directed by Koichi Kimura, and Yukio Ninagawa's production of Kunio Shimizu's *Tango at the End of Winter* (played by a British cast, including Alan Rickman) combined with showings of Bunraku puppets, Noh plays and Grand Kabuki to offer a wide if necessarily unrepresentative and displaced (and in that sense inaccurate) survey of the Japanese theatre scene. Shakespeare performances included a Kabuki

Hamlet, Yasunari Takahashi's *The Braggart Samurai* (an adaptation of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*; see chapter 16 of this book) and the Tokyo Globe Theatre Company's *King Lear*. The *Hamlet*, centred on the exquisite talents of Somegoro, an eighteen-year old idol who played both Hamlet and Ophelia, raised even more acutely for many in its audiences the same questions that intrigued and troubled observers of the Ninagawa *Tempest*. Here was a delicate and technically brilliant art that bore a singularly problematic relationship to Shakespeare, both in terms of its performance styles and its highly uncertain cultural placing. (The adaptation was by the Kabuki author Robun Kanagaki. A century old, it had never been played.) As Peter Lewis reported in the *Sunday Times* (22 September 1991), 'one soon accepts the white mask-like faces, the painted screens that serve as scenery, the metallic twanging of the *samisen* from the musicians' booths on stage, even the beating of the wooden clappers to intensify moments of excitement', though within this willing adjustment he found it more difficult to relate to 'the stylised chanting and dialogue in a deep "belly voice" which sounds as if it was forced out of actors straining in agony'. Others present were disconcerted by the invitation to mimic Japanese audiences by greeting particularly striking moments by crying out the performer's name. Plainly the theatre culture offered here was foreign in ways that represented not cultural mingling but cultural divorce, even if by a sympathetic effort of imagination the gulf could be temporarily crossed. The question of how this performance fitted into the paradigm 'Shakespeare' was scarcely broached, at least in the press. Banyu Inryoku's experimental *King Lear* construed this same conundrum in almost diametrically opposite ways. Here was an updated version, drawing on rock music, current references and big sound, though also incorporating allusions to traditional Japanese theatre. The show set its actors physical challenges that ranged from the naked one-man mime with which the performance opened to the athleticism of rapid scaling of networks of ropes and an engagement in choric ensemble-playing that cut short its stampedes, especially in the confined spaces of the Other Place in Stratford, within milliseconds of collision with the audience. Kenneth Rea found the production one that 'reflected both a distrust of simplicity and a pressure to feed the audience . . . an unremitting barrage of sensation.'[4] This might have been Western Shakespeare except for the choreographic discipline and athletic skill of the performers, which owed its intensity and refinement to the severe regime of Japanese theatre training.

Yet the most culturally informative experience of the Festival for students of Japanese Shakespeare was perhaps not one of the Shakespeare productions but the powerful theatricality of Grand Kabuki at the Royal National Theatre. Here one gathered a sense of the artistry of the

Shochiku Company as an ensemble – the absolute integrity of the performance, in sound, costume, colour, setting, gesture and choreography – and of Tamasaburo Bando V and Kankuro Nakamura V as individual performers. Tamasaburo's utter refinement as *onnagata* (male performer of female roles), his control of every facial expression, every nuance of sound, every expressive posture, every conscious movement of head or body or feet, not only validated his international fame in Australia and America as well as Japan but allowed the audience to glimpse the ideal theatricality towards which this Kabuki performance gestured. For the student of Japanese Shakespeare the question arose whether this magnificent and fragile theatre could ever be successfully married to the robust expressiveness of a Shakespearean script. This is not a matter of the Kabuki performance being 'fixed' while Shakespeare undergoes a process of continuous renewal. As Sir Richard Eyre has written, 'the fact that Kabuki, for all its formality, takes the stage with such freshness, is a challenge to our ideas of tradition, of theatre and of human emotion'.[5] When Tamasaburo Bando, with his supreme and practised artistry, inhabits his role in *Narukami* or *Sagi-Musume* he *renews* it, making it current for today's audience. The interaction of past and present is as strong and active as in stagings of Shakespeare. The problematic issue is whether the marriage of Shakespeare and Kabuki can ever breed other than a bastard theatre. The question is an important one, since Kabuki represents the Japanese sensibility as expressed in theatre terms, taking Kabuki as the characterising form that draws on the essence of Noh, Kyogen and Bunraku. The success of Ninagawa's *The Tempest*, measured in terms of audience response and drawing as it does on all these forms, becomes yet more puzzling. A less puzzling matter, one might think, is the failure of an enterprise such as Shunkan, which came to Saddler's Wells in London in July 1994, with its company seeking to stage on a single occasion Noh, Bunraku and Kabuki versions of the same famous story, with interwoven commentary and explanation. Despite the skills and experience of the performers, the occasion succumbed to the dead hand of instruction (or even 'education') and the undermining pressures of inappropriate theatre-space, wrong audience and (one might argue) perversely inappropriate cultural assumptions.

It is difficult to assess with any certainty the effect of Japanese performance on contemporary British Shakespeare, a topic not taken up at any length in this book. There have been a number of pastiche imitations, betraying mainly the performers' lack of knowledge and skill. Occasionally, as in the Shakespeare and Fletcher *Two Noble Kinsmen* that opened the Swan theatre in Stratford in 1986, a more serious attempt was made to annex Japanese motifs in the interest of exploring the play's

meanings. Barry Kyle's careful and conscious use of samurai allusions was felt by some observers to be valid and revealing, and by others no more than colourful. Adrian Noble's *Cymbeline* for the Royal Shakespeare Company (Stratford-on-Avon, 1997), designed by Anthony Ward, incorporated allusions to Japanese costuming and theatre-space, including a mock-up *hanamichi* (entrance walkway through the audience) that consorted with other features of the production to acknowledge by reference and pastiche the presence of Japanese theatre within the vocabulary of the Western stage. More extensive attempts to use Japanese techniques have been undertaken in the United States and Canada, both at college level and on the professional stage. The work of such leading directors as Robert Wilson and Robert Lepage has been influenced in ways that reach into the smallest details of their craft, even if not so conspicuously in relation to their Shakespeare (though Lepage's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Coriolanus* and *The Tempest* could be fruitfully studied in relation to Japanese theatre forms).[6] Ariane Mnouchkine in France is an obvious case where the relationship to Japanese theatre is overt, even if also open to debate (see chapter 6 below). Tracing influence in the other direction, the work of the Royal Shakespeare Company in particular has had its effect on Japanese performance. Peter Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Trevor Nunn's *The Winter's Tale* are repeatedly mentioned by Japanese theatre professionals as having provided stimulus for their own work. Other Western theatre pieces have taken their place in the Japanese repertoire. Britten's *Curlew River*, once resisted by Noh troupes, has been assimilated into the practice of more than one company. Noh masters have been influenced in their own theatre practice by observing new approaches to staging Shakespeare in the West.[7] The trend towards appointing Western directors for productions of Shakespeare in Japan has contributed in its own fashion (not I think a very positive one) to the overlapping of Western and Japanese Shakespeare. An instance might be the interpretation of *Macbeth* directed by the English director David Leveaux at the Ginza Saison theatre in Tokyo in September 1996. Even with a noted Kabuki actor, Koshiro Matsumoto IX, in the title role, this was an 'English' production with Japanese actors, and only in the most superficial sense intercultural. The production, strong and visually compelling as it was,[8] and with a supple and playable new translation by Kazuko Matsuoka, might even be characterised as representative of a new phase of *Shingeki*, so markedly indebted was it to Western perceptions and practices. Pressed to comment further, an unsympathetic observer might even ponder whether the Leveaux production fell within Richard Schechner's icy remarks about unconscious colonialism: 'I think that this is one of the deepest leftovers of colonialism: that we think colonized people can

master Western forms . . . That's a residue of colonialism; the native can "step up", but the Western "developed" person ought not to "step down". It's a kind of reverse patriarchalism'.[9] The impulse behind *Shingeki* reverence for Western culture has not quite faded, perhaps, in the Japanese Shakespeare theatre.

Leveaux's *Macbeth* might be seen as indicative in another respect. The boundaries between cultures are being eroded, for the most obvious reasons, and with this erosion the vigour of cultural translation is itself in danger of being lost. The tension of political distance that characterised the production of Shakespeare under Communist regimes was one important source of strength that withered away when communism fell. It may be that a similar attrition awaits intercultural Shakespeare as differences between cultures, still so considerable at present, gradually fade. Or is there some truth in the assertion by current commentators that, while business grows ever more international, politics (and with politics culture) becomes increasingly national? The forces of nationalism, in both Britain and Japan, are by no means exhausted, and there are many examples of the resurgence of national and indeed intra-national loyalties across the world. Japanese Shakespeare lies at the point of intersection between traditional theatre forms and the internationalism of a significant sector of contemporary performance. The striking success of Ninagawa's *The Tempest*, it could be argued, among many other examples, shows such an interaction to be theatrically viable – an interaction that justifies exploration from the various perspectives represented in this book.

We have arranged the book's chapters in four parts. The first deals in a broadly chronological fashion with the 'discovery' of Shakespeare in Japan this century, following Akihiko Senda's account of Japanese Shakespeare today. The essays here identify some of the key moments and key persons in the assimilation of Shakespeare, and, in Kishi's essay in particular, ponder the barriers of misunderstanding and lack of knowledge that may compromise the reception of Japanese Shakespeare abroad. The book's second part focuses on the relationship of Shakespeare to the traditional forms of Japanese theatre, Noh, Kabuki, Bunraku and Kyogen. Some chapters in this section consider the questions raised by Western texts for the interpreter of Japanese traditional theatre. Are there clues in *Antony and Cleopatra* to the meanings assumed by the *onnagata* (male performer of female roles) in Noh and Kabuki? How do Shakespeare and Zeami, the acknowledged masters of Western and Japanese theatre, illuminate each other's place as cultural icons? We have included here too both an interpretive essay on, and the text of, Yasunari Takahashi's *The Braggart Samurai*, a Kyogen adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. In part III Robert Hapgood

rounds out the volume by giving an account of the reflections of one experienced Western theatre-goer exposed to the cultural novelty of the theatre of Japan. Part IV offers a chronology of Japanese Shakespeare from 1886 to 1994, compiled by Ryuta Minami. Thus the interaction of Shakespeare and the Japanese stage, a lively instance of the cultural chemistry of the modern world, is viewed by writers and scholars of differing cultural backgrounds from diverse but related perspectives. While the outcome can never be an overview of so rich a topic, the student of Shakespeare and modern theatre may gain here, we hope, a sense of the fertility of Shakespeare's scripts and the hospitable adaptability of the traditional Japanese stage.