

SCOT (Suzuki Company of Toga) and Restu I. Kusumaningrum (Indonesia)

“Electra” Third Report: Performance

Author: UCHINO Tadashi

The author stayed in Toga Village on the performance days, November 27–28, 2021, about a week after the visit described in the second report. During that period, the author attended four performances: *Electra*, a Japan-Indonesia co-production (from 1:00 p.m. and 6:15 p.m. on November 27 at Toga Grand Theatre (Toga Dai-Sanbo)), which was the subject of this observer work and *Shinpan: Tsugaru Kaikyo Fuyugesiki (Reissue: Winter View of the Tsugaru Straits)*; from 3:30 p.m. on November 27 and 1:00 p.m. on November 28 at New Toga Sanbo). In addition, I attended a talk given by SUZUKI Tadashi at 10:00 a.m. on the 28th.

I would like to briefly discuss here *Electra*, the subject of this collaborative production. The text of this work is based on texts by Sophocles (ca. 496–406 BC), a Greek tragedian, and Hugo VON HOFMANNSTHAL (1874–1929), an Austrian playwright active from the late 19th to early 20th century.

The script composed by Suzuki consists of seven scenes. The characters are Clytemnestra, Electra, Chrysothemis, Orestes, men in wheelchairs, nurses, and a doctor. After the famed Trojan War, the Greek commander Agamemnon returns to Mycenae, Greece, only to be murdered by his queen Clytemnestra, largely because of her affair with her lover, Aegisthus, during the ten years of the Trojan War. Agamemnon and Clytemnestra have daughters Electra and Chrysothemis and a son Orestes. Orestes, fearing for his life after his father’s death, flees, and Clytemnestra treats her daughter Electra coldly. Eventually, however, Orestes returns and kills his mother and her lover to avenge his father’s murder.

This tale of Orestes’ revenge is one of the most famous in Greek mythology, and was a subject treated not only by Sophocles but also by Aeschylus and Euripides, who, along with Sophocles, are considered the three greatest Greek tragic poets. Meanwhile, against the backdrop of the renewed attention to ancient Greece in the modern Western world, Hofmannsthal, the author of the text used in the present work, adapted a play based on Sophocles’ text and staged it in 1903. The composer Richard Strauss composed an opera from the text, using it as a libretto. The opera version was premiered in 1909.

Regarding this Hofmannsthal version of the text, Suzuki writes:

The special quality of this play, based on a Greek tragedy, is in its depiction of the emotions of each woman of the Atreus family, Clytemnestra, the wife who murdered her husband Agamemnon, and her two daughters, Electra and Chrysothemis, in a way that is convincing even to modern audiences. Although a bit wordy, the story is brilliant in the way it makes us wonder if this is where the germ of insanity begins. It is a rather good fit for my idea of stage production, which is that the world is a hospital, and all people are sick. The main reason for this impression is that the three women are placed in a closed “family” and the differences in their feelings are clearly depicted. Their feelings are not expressed in conversation, but rather almost invariably in intense monologues. And all of them are concerned with the survival and return of Orestes, the absent son and brother. This is partly why I chose the subtitle *Waiting for Orestes*, but at any rate, the present and future of these women’s existence is defined by the

nature of their relationship with the absent Orestes. One is frightened her son will kill her, one wishes that her brother will kill their mother, and one dreams that this situation will be transformed by her brother’s death. (“Director’s Notes: Circumstances of Delusion—Waiting for Orestes,” <https://www.scot-suzukicompany.com/works/05/>)

It can be seen from this that Suzuki believes that Hofmannsthal imagined the inner self of modern humans, and regards the fact that this comes out “almost invariably in intense monologues” as the main characteristic of the work. Moreover, because it takes the form of monologues, Suzuki says that it “is a rather good fit” with his idea that “the world is a hospital, and all people are sick.”

When humans are in an impossible situation—in this case, the situation of the three trapped women, to which are added several men (chorus) who are in isolation as sick people—what kind of mental state and behavior do people develop when they feel that they lack the power to change their situation? The most essential aspect of this production was the pursuit of the clearest way to present that on the stage. (Ibid.)

As a result, “as usual, we had wheelchairs and nurses making a grand appearance,” Suzuki continues, and aside from whether this is “as usual” or not, we can understand that this “wheelchairs and nurses making a grand appearance” is a major feature of Suzuki’s direction. In addition, there is an extremely important directorial touch in this work, which Suzuki himself explains below. This is the live percussion performance, and the presence of the percussionist on stage at all times.

The performance also features a unique technique for stage effect: the addition of live percussion music, with the rather intense sound of the percussion instruments, and the percussionist’s presence on stage from the opening of the show to the end. The actors move violently with the sound of the percussion instruments; however, the sound is not an accompaniment to their movements, but rather a cry from their inner selves that bursts out and fills the space. Therefore, it is fair to say that the body of the musician, who guides the movements of all the characters, is also one of the main actors in this performance. Perhaps there has never been a stage production in the history of the world’s theatrical arts where a musician has been so present as a leading actor. (Ibid.)

As you can see, the percussion performance is not merely an accompaniment to the actors’ movements, but is intended to be “a cry from their inner selves that bursts out and fills the space.” This is generally presumed to be difficult to achieve, but the participation of TAKADA Midori, one of Japan’s leading percussionists, in the show since its premiere has enabled Suzuki’s directorial intention to be successfully realized. And this time, of course, Takada is participating again.

Electra, composed and directed by Suzuki as described above, was first performed at Toga Open Air Theatre in 1995. Although it has not necessarily been performed as frequently as his other major productions, in 2007, for example, Suzuki directed *Electra* at Taganka Theatre in Moscow, Russia, where Yuri LYUBIMOV (1917–2014) was the artistic director, and it later became a part of the theater’s repertoire, giving it a glorious history.

In this version of *Electra*, an international co-production with Indonesia, the cast was as follows:

Clytemnestra: SAITO Maki

Electra: Andhini Puteri Lestari*

Chrysothemis: Agatha Irena Praditya*

Orestes: Jamaluddin Latif*

Men in Wheelchairs: Dian Nova Saputra*, Wahyu Kurnia*, Erik Nofriwandi*,

Ahmad Ridwan Fadji*, Washadi*

Nurses: KIYAMA Haruka, KITO Risa, SHIN Marie, YOSHINO Karen, SUGIMOTO Sachi, FUSO Miyuna

Doctor: Bambang Prihadi*

(Honorifics omitted)

Of these, the actors marked with an asterisk are from Indonesia.

The opening scene with the men in wheelchairs is a scene that is not described in detail in the performance script I have at hand (it says only that “five men in wheelchairs appear”). This was first of all a showcase for the male actors from Indonesia. For a while they continue to make grotesque and sometimes comical movements that rely on their outstanding physicality, almost dance-like, as they march across the stage in their wheelchairs, stamping their feet like an army, letting out incomprehensible roars in unison, and breaking ranks. Then Electra appears on stage,

pushed in a wheelchair by a doctor, echoing the percussion performance by Takada Midori onstage as the performance proceeds.

Most of the performance is spoken in Indonesian and the dialects of the Indonesian actors’ hometowns, with Japanese subtitles displayed. Only Saito Maki, who plays Clytemnestra, speaks in Japanese.

It should be noted here that the wheelchair-bound men, who continue playing a role from the beginning of the play, can be said to be the chorus of Greek tragedy, and in Suzuki’s staging, they sometimes also speak Electra’s inner voice. For example, in the stage directions for scene 3, it is clearly stated that, “The men begin speaking Electra’s inner voice.” Thus, it is the men in wheelchairs, as the inner voice of Electra, who play the role of telling Clytemnestra that she herself is destined to be killed by Orestes (scene 5).

The principle of each speaking in his own dialect when speaking alone and in Indonesian when speaking in unison is maintained. Although I cannot tell the difference in detail, after listening to the play several times, I could begin to feel the distinctive tonal quality that each of their languages has.

With that being said, Electra does not have as much dialogue as Clytemnestra, who has rather long monologues in scenes 2 and 5, but she is physically present on stage from beginning to end, responding to every bit of Takada’s percussion playing with gesticulations and showing



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that she is the real main character of the play. Andhini Puteri Lestari, who played the role of Electra, exhibited the acting skill to handle this difficult directorial challenge with aplomb. The same could also be said of the Indonesian male actors who played the wheelchair-bound men with a sense of composed control throughout as well as individuality despite their well-organized discipline.

As we have seen, the international co-production of *Electra* (directed by Suzuki Tadashi), which overcame various obstacles in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, achieved results far beyond the author's expectations. The Indonesian actors grew even more significantly than during the full rehearsals I wrote about in my second report, and it is safe to assume that this was due to the fact that they were able to continue to live in the favorable environment of Toga Art Park, where they could concentrate solely on their creative work.

As noted above, two performances were held, drawing a total of 301 spectators. The fact that such a large number of visitors came to Toga Village at the turn of the season is due in large part to Suzuki's achievements over many years, and the author is confident that this international co-production must have made a striking impression on the audience.

Please see the photos provided by SCOT of the Indonesian actors training in the Suzuki Training Method and performing on stage.