

Company Derashinera with LEE Ren Xin (Malaysia) and LIU Juichu (Taiwan)

“TOGE” Fourth Report: Reflection

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In December, Derashinera finished two shows at the Kanagawa Arts Theatre (KAAT), “TOGE Atrium” and the “TOGE” theater performances. This time, I report on an interview with the artist HARADA Ai, conducted immediately after a main show performance, and sum up interviews with performer FUJITA Momoko, and the director, ONODERA Shuji, at the end of January, about a month after the shows ended.

1. Interview with Artist Harada Ai

— You also worked on the art for Derashinera’s last production, “Knife.” Onodera had the idea of imitating the previous work, but what did you actually follow, or did you create new artwork?

Harada: As for the larger items, boxes are used in common. Last time, a box was used as a table with legs on it or as a wall, but this time, it is used directly on the floor to create a step, making it look different even though the same thing is used. The slanted table was used again, but this time, it is used as the main feature, whereas last time it was used something like a sub-stage, a separate space from the other tables, or more specifically, a place for the characters’ enemies, without moving it much. Also, last time, we greened the back of a table based on the idea of “what if, when the table is turned over on the black floor, out spreads a natural area such as green grass and water like a box garden?” This time, when we experimented with it for the atrium performance, we carried it on its side, and this act itself was incorporated into the movement of the performance in the theater. The major new element is the speaker, which is a symbol of control over the characters. Also new this time is the rope, which is woven with the image of erecting a tower.

— As an artist, what do you think of Onodera’s style, moving art and other objects in various ways?

Harada: We worked together for the first time on “Knife,” and I feel that there is more work than usual in moving things around in the rehearsal studio. I would throw out an idea to Onodera’s image, and then we would massage it into shape. From that, Onodera would get a new image, and I would be asked what we need to make and process to realize it. It was also necessary to proceed with production while experimenting with the visual aspect during rehearsals so that the desired movements could be realized in a realistic manner. The stage manager, IWAYA Chinatsu, for example, asked me to make it possible to insert a rod. So, I gradually transformed the apparatus, incorporating various events that took place in the rehearsal studio. Also, both the ropes I prepared and those that were in the theater were used, and the chairs were also from the theater.

— What effect did the live show have on you?

Harada: This production in particular is not a world that can be created only with art, so I made things with a focus on how Onodera could use it, or rather, leaving room for him to use it. In that sense, I think it turned out to be a very good piece.

2. Interview with Performer Fujita Momoko

— As a performer, what did you gain from this project?

Fujita: This is close to the first time that a Derashinera production is practically all females. Strictly speaking, the same was true of “Red Shoes” (September 2014), in which I performed with KATAGIRI Hairi and Sophie BRECH from the UK, but this time the composition was unprecedented in that it was only Asian women. What I felt while spending time with LEE Ren Xin and LIU Juichu was strength. They were so fearless in going about all sorts of stuff that I realized that I may be hesitant about some things. It may be simply a matter of my own qualities, not their race, but while rehearsing with them I was made aware of ways of thinking and strength that I usually don’t notice when working with Japanese people. In particular, even though I had never met Lee before, I felt it was wonderful how easily she became one of the troupes. I was also impressed by their timing. When Onodera asked them to do something or other as a pantomime—something like sitting down and looking back—they did it in their own timing right from the beginning. With Japanese people, I feel that they usually only get enough time after they can do so. Lee creates her own works and performs solo, so I guess she is used to this, and that could make a difference.

— As a performer, what did you discover in terms of expression?

Fujita: People who are interested in mime and silent theater are hard to find in Japan. The genre itself is not well established. It’s dance, it’s theater, and it’s something that is neither, so it may be alien to people in their 20s who are still young, for example, who want to express themselves. However, when I have people I have met by chance at workshops and so on perform silent theater, they are very interested in it, so I think it is a world with a lot of potential. The best part of it is that, rather than learning techniques and rules, you can hypothesize what might be conveyed by a certain action, and create a new method each time, so to speak. That is why, by interacting with people from other cultures, you can become aware of the principles of your own culture and come up with ways that might get ideas across to people from other cultures. For example, when you are trying to persuade someone, instead of just touching them on the shoulder, you search for a completely different way to persuade them, such as by standing a little further away. The two [foreign] women this time had the ability to gather our meaning, so even if we suggested a gesture, it was not completely unintelligible to them, and they would also make suggestions. And it was not so much that I didn’t understand their suggestions due to cultural differences, but rather that although I wouldn’t have come up with them myself, I understood them when I thought about it.

— By meeting people with different lifestyles and different circuitry, you have more options and a wider range of things you can do.

Fujita: That’s right. However, we didn’t have much time this time, so it was more like we [Derashinera] created the framework and flow ahead and then together we managed to get it to the deadline, rather than a creation that came about through real discussion. If there is another opportunity like this, I would like to take creation a step further.

3. Interview with Director Onodera Shuji

From Complex to Simple

— How do you feel now that the performances are done?

Onodera: I am relieved. Under the COVID-19 pandemic, with all the pressures of whether or not we could do it, the state of everyone's health, and the limited time for rehearsals, I am thankful that we were able to put on the shows to the end without any serious injuries. The performances were very fruitful and gave me inspiration for the future.

— What were some of the most striking responses and impressions of the shows?

Onodera: Surprisingly, we received many reactions that the shows were “different from usual.” Many people said this in a good way. This may have had something to do with the fact that my work is often relatively male-driven, but this time it was almost exclusively female, and also because my approach to abstract expression has changed from the past.

— Indeed, it seems to me that more had been left up to the audience than in the past regarding interpreting what is being done on stage.

Onodera: That's right. At the same time, we certainly swung the complexity of what we were doing in a slightly simpler direction this time. This is because, rather than do a complicated story, we were a group that could take simple things and explore how each of us would express them. Usually, I tend to try to strengthen the story by adding detailed explanations or complicating it by adding different elements. That is why the pictures change more than the story, or I make other things happen behind the main events that are taking place, but this time I wanted to throw that out once and see how much the audience could imagine from a single picture. I think what is needed for that is an expressive body. I have a feeling that if this is pursued, in the end it will be very effective for physical expression, which cannot be explained in detail with words, and that new expression may come out of it. It is a little bit difficult to do, so I felt like explaining things and doing things all jumbled up, and I would ask myself every day, “Is this understandable?”

— Yet, because of the members this time, you were able to use abstraction without fear of not being understood?

Onodera: There is that, too. What I also liked about Lee and Liu is that their movements based on folk dancing come out so easily. I feel that such bodies are the source of culture, and I thought I need to learn more about it. The fact that the performers this time were only women also brought out their individual differences, and I was able to feel satisfied myself as a creator, or perhaps that was the reason I was able to be so bold.

— In my third report, I mentioned that the ending had a slightly different atmosphere from the work that was the motif. Was that also connected to your desire from the beginning to present the strength of women?

Onodera: I think that the motif of *Animal Farm* is to show how the world works after all, but this time I wanted to extend it and show a bit of “what to do next.” This may be my own wish as a man, but when there were five

women standing there, I wanted to show that they are not going to give up and create a sense that they are not defeated yet.

Assumptions and the Unexpected

— How well did you meet your expectations this time around, and how much did you change?

Onodera: I made a rough roadmap with Fujita in advance, but even if the rehearsals proceeded as planned at first, we would continue to search whether that map was really right. Then something completely different would turn out to be fascinating, and we would want to explore it a little more, but due to time constraints we had to move on to the next step of settling on a final shape. This was a process repeated again and again. So, it could be said that our assumptions were not adequate, but on the other hand, it could also be said that we were able to do some good unexpected things. In any case, I keenly felt the need to improve the strength of the original idea in order to enjoy how much derivation is possible. For example, some people commented on the scene where the tower is made of rope, saying that the rope twisting around the chair seemed like confining authority, and others thought that the use of rope evoked sado-masochism—that is, sexual perversion. I think the interesting thing about mime is that there are so many different ways of looking at something, and there are so many different impressions, and it is up to the creator to understand and explore these different ways of looking.

— At first, there was talk of online rehearsals, but in the end, you decided to wait until the cast could get together.

Onodera: I did deliver props I planned to use for this piece to Lee in quarantine, and wrote her an email asking her, “Can you explore this kind of thing I'd like to try?” So, I gave out something like homework, but we didn't do overall rehearsals online. This time, we had set aside a month for rehearsals, but those coming from overseas spent half of that time in quarantine. If the people in Japan are in a large rehearsal studio and tell those in a hotel room, “This is what we are doing,” there is still detachment. As we were thinking about the various options, we decided to try something new for Derashinera—that is, to create a text (script) in advance. Fujita always makes a rough draft text, but usually it is not yet ready when everyone gathers at the rehearsal studio. We will have a number of themes, and we start by meeting and rehearsing to create short pieces. The completed short pieces are then arranged, and just before the shows, a text is completed. This time, however, we made the text in advance and shared it with the performers. It was like script reading in theater. In theater, there are script readings, and people also spend a great deal of time with the play to learn the lines. In our case, this means getting the movements into our bodies, and I feel that it was effective to provide a text for the performers to read when they were separated from that by the quarantine. Because, usually, the performers, including myself, are so absorbed in rehearsals that even if I give them a text, they often don't read it (laughs). This time, however, Liu said she read the text every day at her hotel, and she was able to talk about the story with Derashinera member SAKIYAMA Rina, so Fujita's aim was on target.

— I think a script writer is very important in ballet and dance, but Fujita won't be credited?

Onodera: She adamantly refused, saying that her text was only a kind of

guide for the rehearsals, but if she is going to make texts properly like this, we might as well put her name out there. In fact, when we tried using a script, it was very effective, so I would like to continue trying this regardless of COVID-19. Separating the script from direction will probably change my awareness and the ease of doing things, so I would like to think positively about this.

— This is a little related to that, but you did not mention in advance that *Animal Farm* was the motif of your work this time.

Onodera: I was hesitant to do that. After all, we weren't making a faithful reproduction of *Animal Farm*, but rather a spin-off from a different angle, and my main focus was on something different from the scathing criticism of political power that *Animal Farm* has. Because of this, I was afraid that mentioning *Animal Farm* would lead to reactions such as, "It's not like *Animal Farm*," or "It's my fault for not having read *Animal Farm*," so I didn't understand it."

— However, it was included in the brochure on the day of the event.

Onodera: I wanted to convey the fact that this book is the motif for the show in the sense that we all read it and started out from there. If we had been able to publish a sizable text, such as a post on our website, I would have included this information in advance, but there may be many people who come to the show with only the title of the book. My recent works at Derashinera, whether "Knife" based on MAUPASSANT's *Boule de Suif* or the current work, overlap a lot with the current times, which is why they tend to be preachy, depending on the approach taken. I feel like I am in the process of learning to balance within myself between the parts of the theme that I can take a pragmatic approach to and those that I can get to the core of. There are many original works in theater, but if I can show that so many things can be done with physical expression that does not use words, I think there will be a next step for me to take. So, I want to think carefully about this.

— It seems that you have made discoveries that will lead you ahead in many ways, including Asia, women-only creations, and how to relate to the underlying works and texts.

Onodera: It is difficult to take a step like this on our own, so I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Kanagawa Arts Theatre (KAAT), which first approached me about international exchange in 2017 and gave me the opportunity to co-produce with Vietnamese creators, and to the Japan Foundation for this project. Even in these hard times, they went out of their way to invite performers from overseas and allowed me to continue opportunities for exchange and development. I have a feeling that by building on these opportunities, instead of making them a one-time event, we will be able to create something new. Lee and Liu have told me that they would like to come back again, and I would love to continue working with them.

4. Impressions

Since this project was an international co-production during the COVID-19 pandemic, I initially imagined that the creation would be done using online tools. However, it seems that Derashinera got by with more primitive and essential means and, as a result, reaped a great deal of rewards unbound by the times. As an observer, I felt enlightened, if I may

say so hyperbolically, as I was able to catch a glimpse of how international exchange not only became an experience for the artists, but also affected their creative methods and ways of thinking in concrete ways. I am looking forward to their future development.