

SPAC-Shizuoka Performing Arts Center and T2G-Théâtre de Gennevilliers-Centre Dramatique National (France)

“The Cherry Orchard”

Second Report: Rehearsals

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Why Stage a Multilingual Adaptation of Chekhov Now?

In *Drive My Car* (directed by HAMAGUCHI Ryusuke), the most-talked-about Japanese film of 2021, the protagonist, theater director Kafuku (NISHIJIMA Hidetoshi), is commissioned by a theater festival in the Setouchi Region to create a multilingual stage production. What’s more, the play is *Uncle Vanya*, by the same Anton CHEKHOV who wrote *The Cherry Orchard* covered in this report. Is this sheer coincidence?

Chekhov’s four major plays (*The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*) are categorized as “classical” plays in that they have been staged repeatedly all over the world. However, this is not in the same sense as the works of William SHAKESPEARE. First of all, the original works are written in Russian, a language difficult for most non-Russians to understand. Nonetheless, in terms of theatrical history, rather than something separate from European literary history, they are positioned at the starting point of contemporary drama (together with the works of playwrights such as Henrik IBSEN). This is because over the course of the nineteenth century, Russia, which had previously lagged far behind Western Europe, raced from romanticism to modernism within just a single century (from Alexander PUSHKIN to Fyodor DOSTOEVSKY and Leo TOLSTOY).

As Daniel JEANNETEAU himself emphasized in my first report, the era in which Chekhov lived was a turning point in history. From the vantage point of future generations, it was the eve of revolution and thus an almost dystopian time in which the past had become a complete relic, and yet the future was impossible to predict. This is why Jeanneteau sees the current state of the world in Chekhov. He asserts that while the future appeared bright when he was a child, that is no longer the case for children nowadays. “Nowadays, children are taught that the earth is tiny, full of people, and thoroughly polluted; that changes in the climate can no longer be predicted; and that the gap between the rich and poor has become larger than ever before... I suspect that many people feel like we’ve entered an era beyond what we can imagine, an era in which it’s no longer possible to envision the future” (excerpt from interview with Daniel Jeanneteau in *Stage Natalie*). Needless to say, his statement carries traces of the following lines by the character of Trofimov in *The Cherry Orchard*: “The human race progresses, perfecting its powers.” “The land is great and beautiful” (Act II). Children nowadays must despair of even the lofty ideals espoused by Trofimov.

This kind of transnational inquiry may serve as another model within the framework of an international coproduction, as well as one for a program for junior and senior high school students.

Language, Translation, and Communication

The 1880s, when Chekhov became active as a writer, are considered a “Great Interregnum” in the Russian literary world, when the so-called masters retired from the front lines. As if to epitomize this, Chekhov’s works lack a core protagonist. If anything, the focal point in his stories is “omnipresent” (URA Masaharu, “Commentary” in *Uncle Vanya / Three Sis-*

ters, Kobunsha New Translations of Classics Library, p. 315). This “loss” or “omnipresence” of a focal point may be considered a rationale for staging Chekhov’s works multilingually rather than monolingually. In particular, *The Cherry Orchard*, which depicts the fall of the aristocracy, is an intimate drama set within a single room/family, and yet the characters are like ghosts tossed about in a turbulent world.

FUSE Asuka, who plays the role of Anya, explains that in the first phase of rehearsal (August 6 to 31), it was difficult for her to predict the rhythm and breaks in her counterparts’ lines, and she was forced to concentrate on listening. However, in the second phase (October 11 to November 11), she came to understand their lines. Little by little, they became able to catch each other’s words and move “freely.” That being said, from the audience’s point of view, the establishment of “natural” communication between the French-speaking actors and Japanese-speaking actors must surely appear strange, even while remaining aware that it is “art.” In other words, the closer the actors get to “natural” communication, the more “unnatural” it appears to the audience.

One interesting aspect of the casting is the fact that Solène ARBEL, who plays Varya (the twenty-four-year-old adopted daughter of landowner Madame Ranevskaya), the counterpart to Anya (Ranevskaya’s seventeen-year-old daughter, who has returned home after five years living in France), has played the same characters as Fuse in *The Blind* and *The Glass Menagerie*. According to Fuse, during the course of rehearsal, the two gradually became like real “sisters”—or rather, “artistic sisters.” In addition, the role of the “eternal” student Peter (Trofimov) in this production is played by Aurélien ESTAGER, a translator who has worked on Japanese manga. He completed an undergraduate program at the French National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations in 2001 and won the Konishi Foundation’s third annual Konishi Prize for the Translation of Japanese Manga into French in 2020 (for his translation of EGUCHI Hisashi’s *Stop!! Hibari-kun!*). Among the cast, he is the only actor with a command of both Japanese and French, and thus, in his role as the pedantic young man, Jeanneteau has experimented with directing him to switch languages partway through his lengthy lines speaking of an ideal “future.” As mentioned earlier, Peter’s lines play a meta role in defining *The Cherry Orchard* as a drama of humanity. In this sense, the casting of Aurélien is also something that could only be tried in an international coproduction.

The Difficulty of Staging a Bilingual Drama

Multiple translations of Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* have been published in various countries. As I mentioned in my first report, this production is based on a Japanese translation by ADACHI Noriko (Mirai-sha Publishers, 2020) and a French translation by André MARKOWICZ and Françoise MORVAN (Actes Sud, 2002). The French translation is the eighth to be produced. A new translation emphasizing the rhythm and cadence of the Russian language was used in a 1992 staging as part of Festival d’Automne à Paris (directed by Stéphane BRAUNSCHWEIG). The theater hosting the performance was T2G Théâtre de Gennevilliers, where Jeanneteau currently serves as director.

Meanwhile, the Adachi version was a new translation for *The Cherry Orchard: A Comedy in Four Acts* directed by GONOHE Marie of the Bungakuza theater company in 2020. The Japanese predilection for Chekhov is evidenced by the sheer number of translations, as listed below.

◆ SENUMA Kayo (*The Cherry Orchard / Uncle Vanya*, Shinchosha Publishing, 1913)

- ◆ ITO Rokuro (1915 Japanese premiere at the Imperial Theatre)
- ◆ YONEKAWA Masao (*Compendium of Modern Plays, Vol. 14*, Compendium of Modern Plays Publication Society, 1923; Shincho Bunko, 1952; Kadokawa Bunko, 1953; revised edition in 1968)
- ◆ KUSUYAMA Masao (*The Complete Works of Chekhov, Vol. 3*, Shinchosha Publishing, 1920)
- ◆ NAKAMURA Hakuyo (*Three Sisters / The Cherry Orchard*, Shunyodo Publishing, 1932; *The Collected Writings of Chekhov*, Sangaku Shobo, 1943–1944)
- ◆ HANAI Shuzaburo (*The Cherry Orchard / The Seagull*, Bunshinsha, 1935)
- ◆ YUASA Yoshiko (*The Cherry Orchard*, Iwanami Bunko, 1950)
- ◆ JINZAI Kiyoshi (*The Cherry Orchard / Three Sisters*, Kawade Shinsho, 1955; Shincho Bunko, 1967)
- ◆ SASAKI Akira (*The Cherry Orchard / Three Sisters*, Obunsha Bunko, 1966)
- ◆ MAKIHARA Jun (*A Complete Collection of World Literature, Duet Edition, Vol. 43*, Shueisha, 1969)
- ◆ KAWABATA Kaori (*A Complete Collection of World Literature, Vol. 61*, Kodansha, 1975)
- ◆ MATSUSHITA Yutaka (*The Complete Works of Chekhov, Vol. 12*, Chikuma Shobo, 1987; Chikuma Bunko, 1993)
- ◆ ONO Michiko (*The Cherry Orchard*, Iwanami Bunko, 1998)
- ◆ ODASHIMA Yushi (*The Cherry Orchard*, Hakusui U Books, 1998)
- ◆ HORIE Shinji & Nina ANARINA (*The Cherry Orchard*, Gunzoshya Publishing, 2011)
- ◆ URA Masaharu (*The Cherry Orchard / The Proposal / The Bear*, Kobunsha New Translations of Classics Library, 2012)

No matter which translations are used, the French and Japanese versions will not necessarily share the same principles in every sense. It was therefore the best decision to use the Adachi translation for the Japanese, as it allowed for close and direct communication with the translator. When the need arose to make changes to the Japanese translation on the spot, alternatives were actually explored by contacting Adachi. In this regard, although it is necessary for a Chekhov play, where subtle nuances of the lines have major implications, one may imagine the extremely detailed work required on the spot.

As one example, Anya has the following lines in Act II.

Anya: Peter, what have you done to me? Why don't I love the cherry orchard as I used to? I loved the cherry orchard so tenderly. I thought there was no better place in the world than our cherry orchard.

In the Adachi translation, the play's titular "cherry orchard" occurs three times within the short speech. This seems to be the result of avoiding pronouns ("it") and alternate expressions ("our orchard"). In the French version, the phrase "cherry orchard" (*la Cerisaie*) only occurs once. Consequently, the Japanese lines, which already have more syllables than the French ones, sound even lengthier to French speakers.

Apparently Fuse, who plays Anya, originally intended to resolve this issue by speaking her lines rapidly. However, in the scene Anya is asking Peter, who has greatly influenced her, to explain what is going on in the world. Despite the existential angst she feels, she also (vaguely) identifies with Peter's "futurism," and thus it is not such a serious speech. (Although in literal terms, she seems to be seriously accusing Peter, that is not actually the case.) As such, the Japanese lines, in which the phrase "cherry orchard" is repeated three times, are at odds with the acting up to that point. In the rehearsal on October 25, Anya playfully sprawls on the floor

out of joy at being alone with Peter. The immediately ensuing lines were changed as follows.

Anya: Peter, what have you done to me? Why don't I love the cherry orchard as I used to? I loved the cherry orchard it so tenderly. I thought there was no better place in the world than our cherry orchard.

Such changes to the script may seem unnecessary for a multilingual play. However, in this production of *The Cherry Orchard*, the actors must understand the feeling and rhythm of the foreign language spoken by their counterparts, not on the level of grammar and syntax, but in terms of the images stirred up by the speech as a whole. Thus, it is a task that cannot be ignored by either the director or the actors. It also mirrors the task of the audience members, who must listen to (and thus understand) about half of the lines in a foreign language. Although the performances will be subtitled, this is merely an auxiliary function. Instead of the surface meanings of the words in the lines, what is more important is the tone, rhythm, and cadence of the actors' words, as well as their expressions and gestures.

This task is also connected to the work Jeanneteau did in the plays he previously directed in Japan, especially *Blasted* and *The Blind*. Vsevolod MEYERHOLD once praised Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* by stating that in pursuing realism, it achieved symbolism. Jeanneteau's lyrical direction belongs precisely to that very lineage of symbolism. This aspect is slightly removed from the frequently emphasized comedic (vaudeville-like) qualities and absurdity of Chekhov's plays. The characters in *The Cherry Orchard*, who flounder about almost blindly, are certainly foolish, but if we assume them to be portraits of ourselves, then they are also objects of angst (fear). In order to produce *The Cherry Orchard* as "a play about humanity's angst," straightforward characterization becomes, if anything, a foreign element. This principle of the direction gradually became clear in the second phase of rehearsal in the theater, as work on the music, set, and lighting progressed.

[The Difficulty of Holding Rehearsals During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

Shizuoka Prefecture instituted priority measures against the spread of COVID-19 from August 8 to 19 (originally until August 31, but measures were enhanced due to increasing infections) and state of emergency measures from August 20 to September 30 (originally until September 12 but then extended). The number of daily new cases continued to rise and reached a record high of 675 on August 19, leading to the declaration of a state of emergency for the prefecture on August 20. Hamamatsu Medical Center was pushed to the limit, with the occupancy rate of beds for COVID-19 patients exceeding 80% in late August. Thanks to exhaustive measures against infections, which continued to be implemented during the second phase of rehearsal for *The Cherry Orchard*, no infections emerged among the actors or staff.

With conditions changing moment by moment, SPAC established rather strict guidelines to prevent infections. As the "strictness" of these guidelines diverged in many ways from the standards in France, time was set aside to explain them carefully to the French actors and staff. It apparently took an especially long time for them to accept the actors wearing masks onstage during the performances (as this kind of performance does not even exist in France). Even in Japan, theaters in Tokyo that have actors

wear masks onstage are in the minority. However, in light of the fact that *The Cherry Orchard* was also to be performed for junior and senior high school students, SPAC decided to have the actors wear masks onstage so as not to deprive the students of a “once-in-a-lifetime” encounter with a theatrical work.

Because of this policy, opportunities for the actors to eat together during the course of rehearsal were also avoided. According to the previously cited Fuse, being able to communicate freely outside of rehearsal in previous projects led to understanding the other actors’ ways of thinking and vibes. She felt that this was often fed back into the performances onstage and said that it was “too bad” that it wasn’t possible this time. Although it is up to the discretion of the director who leads the actors, it might have been beneficial to consider allowing both the Japanese and French actors to share the same spaces and times (if not mealtimes) outside of “rehearsal” in a narrow sense. As long as measures against infections are rigorous, providing safe opportunities for recreation and looking after the mental health of the actors and staff within that framework may also be an important factor amid a pandemic. After all, taking Trofimov’s lines to heart, “The human race progresses, perfecting its powers.”