

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

“The Cherry Orchard”

Third Report: Performance

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Media Coverage of *The Cherry Orchard* (Advance Coverage, Interviews, and Talks)

The international coproduction of *The Cherry Orchard* by SPAC and T2G Théâtre de Gennevilliers premiered as a performance for junior and senior high school students on Friday, November 12, and as a regular performance on Saturday, November 13. The former consisted of a total of 10 performances finishing on Wednesday, December 15, and the latter of a total of seven performances finishing on Sunday, December 12, for a grand total of 17 performances at Shizuoka Arts Theatre. A performance was also held at Ryuyo Naginoki Hall in Iwata City on Friday, December 3. The duration of the performances was two hours and twenty minutes, without any intermission.

As I mentioned in my second report, rehearsal for this production proceeded smoothly according to rigorous guidelines against infections. As a result, not a single infection emerged before the performances. Enhanced publicity began to be actively promoted in November, when rehearsal was almost finished, and the performances were close at hand. Although the SPAC blog usually consists of real-time reports under ordinary circumstances, the first post on November 4 started by looking back on the first day of rehearsal.

◆ SPAC Blog

November 4, 2021

[The Cherry Orchard Blog #1: “Long time no see!” and “Nice to meet you!” online on the first day of rehearsal](#)

November 12, 2021

[The Cherry Orchard Blog #2: Cast Interview with SUZUKI Haruyo & Quentin BOUISSOU](#)

November 19, 2021

[The Cherry Orchard Blog #3: Opening & Artist Talk Report](#)

December 11, 2021

[The Cherry Orchard Blog #4: Artist Talk 11/20 Report](#)

SPAC uses various social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube) for publicity, but I should emphasize that the abovementioned blog on its website serves not only as “reading material” but also as an “archival” function. In particular, the publication of the content of interviews and talks online provides a record of works from the perspectives of both cast members and audiences. This sort of online initiative cannot currently be found at any of the core public theaters in Japan. Under current conditions, with reviews and criticism rarely printed in newspapers or magazines, it deserves to be recognized as a model for presenting and publicizing the results of theatrical work.

SPAC itself also shared a “collection” of Tweets related to the performances ([“SPAC Autumn-Spring 2021–2022 #2: Collection of Tweets Related to *The Cherry Orchard*,”](#) November 23). In addition, a program

hosted by one of SPAC’s affiliated actors aired an open talk session with the cast members as guests ([“ISHII Moemi Will Take Center Stage!, Vol. 86: Special talk session with the cast of *The Cherry Orchard* currently playing to rave reviews”](#) aired on November 22).

In external media, the theatrical information website *Stage Natalie* published interviews with director Daniel JEANNETEAU along with cast members Suzuki Haruyo and Aurélien ESTAGER as advance coverage ([“Daniel Jeanneteau’s hopes for *The Cherry Orchard* by SPAC: Suzuki Haruyo and Aurélien Estager discuss ‘understanding beyond differences,’”](#) October 29). The same website also ran an article to mark the play’s opening ([“Jeanneteau pleased by opening of SPAC’s *The Cherry Orchard*: ‘The realization of this international coproduction is a victory,’”](#) November 14). The *Shizuoka Shimibun* newspaper ran an article about the performances



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featuring an interview with Estager ([“Faint understanding across the language barrier: Estager from SPAC’s *The Cherry Orchard*,”](#) November 24).

In retrospect, these articles describe the appeal of the play as if the COVID-19 pandemic had never happened. However, the circumstances of Le Théâtre du Soleil’s *L’ÎLE D’OR KANEMU-JIMA* (October 19–28 at Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre; November 6–7 at ROHM Theatre Kyoto), which was scheduled to come on tour to Japan from France at roughly the same time, make it understandable why preparations for this international coproduction were carried out with such careful planning. Although it cannot necessarily be compared to *KOTATSU* written and directed by Pascal RAMBERT (September 9–12 at Ebara Riverside Theatre), which was forced to be performed with almost no audience due to the cancellation of Toyooka Theater Festival 2021, the fact that the project concluded successfully and without disruption despite the challenging circumstances was thanks to the efforts of the SPAC production team.

[What Kind of Production Was Jeanneteau’s *The Cherry Orchard*?](#)

What kind of production was *The Cherry Orchard* by Daniel Jeanneteau, who has mostly directed contemporary plays? First of all, the set was a simple one consisting mainly of lighting and images, rather than a realistic one seeking to “recreate” the mansion with actual nineteenth century-style furnishings. The props were also kept to a minimum. Although this might have been influenced by Jeanneteau’s aesthetics as a scenographer, it may also in some ways reflect his image of Japan (for example, his image of Noh drama).

On a textual level, this onstage world transports the audience back to a specific time and place, namely, Russia at the turn of the twentieth century. However, on a spatial level, it evokes extremely abstract human depictions. As a contrasting example, in KURIYAMA Tamiya’s 2002 production of *The Cherry Orchard* (New National Theatre, Tokyo), the director chose to shift the setting to Japan and realistically recreate the costumes and the house in order to restore the various characters to fixed “personalities” and showcase the dramatic conflict between them. In this case, the actors’ performances will inevitably resemble the acting in a television drama (depicting states of mind through facial expressions and movements). In other words, the production becomes the naturalistic Chekhov of Konstantin STANISLAVSKI, rather than the symbolic Chekhov of Vsevolod MEYERHOLD.

Although it is a very rough generalization, Meyerhold and Stanislavski are frequently depicted as diametrical opposites within Russian theater in the early twentieth century. Stanislavski demanded that actors “reexperience” their roles onstage based on naturalism and realism. By contrast, rather than embodying “natural” psychology through character analysis, Meyerhold attempted to portray the human condition on a different level through new modalities and physicality (which would eventually lead to him being purged by Stalin in 1940). As the theories of the Japanese *shingeki* theater movement were based on SENDA Koreya’s interpretation of Stanislavski, the aforementioned Kuriyama’s directing is positioned as an extension thereof. Jeanneteau is the type of director who emphasizes “script reading” and focuses on spatialization of the play’s subtext. However, his spatialization, or the aesthetics of his directing, is symbolic and different in nature from that of realism.

One recent example of simple staging breaking away from realism is the production of [The Cherry Orchard directed by Tiago RODRIGUES](#), which was performed in the courtyard of the Papal Palace at the 2021 Festival d’Avignon. The stage was only set with a large number of chairs. Although the young Portuguese director, who is eyed as the next artistic director

of the festival, cast the great actress Isabelle HUPPERT in the role of Ranevskaya, the production was far from a success. Still, his transformation of the play into musical theater by bringing the musicians of a rock band onstage in Act I was laudable. In highlighting the anachronism of the story and the isolation of the characters, Rodrigues did not take such a vastly different approach from Jeanneteau.

However, Jeanneteau suffuses his play with more of a sense of “awkwardness,” a feeling of “being out of place,” or more crudely, “unease” regarding an unpredictable future. Unlike Rodrigues, who created the music and staging based on brainstorming with the actors rather than the script itself, Jeanneteau honors the poetic resonance and imagery of the lines written by the playwright. Returning to the plot of *The Cherry Orchard*, at the end of their troubles, the characters venture out into a new environment and era. However, they still cling to nostalgia for the bygone era (yearning for the cherry orchard). When all is said and done, they have already lost their reality. This is represented by the musical scene in Act III. The xylophone music composed by TANAKAWA Hiroko functions as a metaphor for the finely wavering emotions of the characters. It is here that the somewhat ghostly aspect of *The Cherry Orchard* emerges.

Act III has a special resonance within Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*. The initial stage directions indicate, “An anteroom. A Jewish band, the one mentioned in Act II, is heard playing. Evening. In the ballroom, a circle dance is being danced.” Faced with the loss of her family’s mansion and “cherry orchard,” Ranevskaya’s adopted daughter Varya inconspicuously wipes away tears. The party in this act is the flip side of the play’s “unease.” In the end, Ranevskaya weeps and seventeen-year-old Anya consoles her as the music plays. Incidentally, this scene was completely cut in the Rodrigues version.

Belgian [theater collective STAN’s production of *The Cherry Orchard*](#), which premiered in 2015, is unusual for its indication of potential in the manner of storytelling, with only five actors swapping roles. In Act III, the play shows the partygoers gathered at the mansion as being in an almost cult-like trance by having the actors dance feverishly to fast-paced electronic music. (As a sidenote, this collective has also had a decisive influence on the theatrical career of the aforementioned Tiago Rodrigues.) The power of music is extraordinary. This is the very reason why Plato banished art from his ideal state and why MISHIMA Yukio had a distaste for the intoxicating nature of music. When the “trance” is broken, the “music” is no longer audible to Ranevskaya.

However, in Jeanneteau’s *The Cherry Orchard*, the music is not external to the characters. It is treated on the same level, so to speak, sympathizing with their (un)conscious anxiety. A key feature of Jeanneteau’s direction is that he does not cynically suggest that people are automatons controlled by music, but instead creates a “temporally disjointed” space in which they speak of their own philosophies, ideals, and lives on the level of reason, or rather, madness. In our society (even within families), we must all to varying degrees get along with people whose values or ways of thinking differ from our own. In this sense, *The Cherry Orchard* is like a multi-protagonist play in which the characters are “antiheroes” who accept compromise as part of a “losing battle.” No one is right, and conversely, no one is entirely wrong. It is a microcosm of our labyrinthine modern society, which gives to rise to laughter and humor that have a completely different aspect from the surface-level comicality of lines and gestures.

Normally, staging a nearly two-and-a-half-hour scripted play would require physically and mentally drawing the audience’s attention to the stage by varying the tempo of the music and images. In this sense, Jean-

netau does not “grovel” to the audience. Even when the performance is directed at junior and senior high school students, instead of presenting an “easily understandable” story, he seeks to convey the atmosphere, worldview, and spatiality of the work to the audience through the resonance of the lines, with minimal stage setting and music. Like the images of “clouds” projected onto the back of the stage in Act I, the actors on-stage form a single mass and yet continue to move subtly. By focusing on the movements of actors other than the speaker, the circumstances of the family and their acquaintances, who resemble “clouds” before a storm, are steadily changed over the course of mindless “chatter.”

More than anything, the fact that Jeanneteau has produced a bilingual adaptation of a Chekhov play (which he has never staged before) with his actors is the work’s greatest feature. Any other device would therefore almost be a distraction. As I touched on in my second report, the actors from the two countries do not perfectly understand each other’s languages, but at the same time, there is not a complete lack of understanding. Creating an integrated and intimate drama under these conditions requires very elaborate, careful, and disciplined work. By adapting the play with the awareness that the world is currently undergoing a historic transformation, Jeanneteau attempts to derive hints for how to face our own fears from Chekhov’s lines, and as such, his production will surely remain deeply etched within the history of *The Cherry Orchard* in Japan.

Partnership Initiatives with Educational Institutions

About 2,000 junior and senior high school students from Shizuoka Prefecture were able to attend these valuable performances. As the number of junior and senior high school students in the prefecture is reported to be about 100,000 for each, this works out to 1% of the total. SPAC aims to deliver performances to about 35,000 junior and senior high school students (100 performances) annually, not limited to just this play. If that target is achieved, it means that junior and senior high school students in Shizuoka Prefecture will be able to watch a SPAC performance at least once during their six years of schooling. SPAC has created a system to reduce the burden on participating schools by subsidizing the cost of chartering buses from the schools to the theater, in addition to making the performances free for the students and their chaperones. SPAC also conducts guest performances and visiting school workshops, and furthermore, Shimizu Minami Senior High School has just become the first public high school in Shizuoka Prefecture to sign an agreement with SPAC aimed at offering specialized theatrical training (“Shimizu Minami Senior High School becomes first public school in Shizuoka Prefecture to offer specialized theatrical training under agreement with SPAC,” *The Shizuoka Shimbun*, November 5, 2021).

Free pamphlets are also distributed at the performances for junior and senior high school students (available for sale at regular performances). These have been produced by students in the graphic design course of the Shizuoka Professional Training College of Design since 2014, with the quality improving every year. They are beneficial not only to the high school students, but also to regular audience members unfamiliar with Chekhov’s plays or theater. The pamphlets can be viewed on the portal site “Shizuoka ebooks.”

Shizuoka Prefecture has established a system to promote regional development through culture based on its “Basic Ordinance for Cultural Promotion” formulated in 2006. Since the appointment of MIYAGI Satoshi as its second General Artistic Director in 2007, SPAC has also been focusing on outreach under the principle that “theater is a window on the world.” In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, SPAC hastily

transformed its “World Theatre Festival Shizuoka” usually held every year in spring and summer into “World Theatre Festival on the Cloud” via on-line performances and streaming. With a plan to “bring art into people’s homes,” shows were delivered to facilities such as nursing homes with social distancing ensured, and telephone theater was also performed.

Surrounded by such diverse public projects, the 2,000 students who were able to attend this international coproduction realized despite a pandemic are lucky indeed. Of course, they are only “seeds,” and it may take a long time for them to sprout. However, the theater is a place where such seeds are planted, watered, given light, and sometimes fed with fertilizer. The concept of “culture” in both of its senses is being realized on a daily basis at SPAC’s unique theater, with involvement from the community and local residents. Not only the creation (invitation) of a high-quality production, but also the inclusion of 2,000 junior and senior high school students as audience members ought to be remembered as a miraculous outcome of these performances.



A performance for junior and senior high school students



Pamphlet distributed to junior and senior high school students