

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

“The Cherry Orchard”

Fourth Report: Reflection

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As my third report focused on advance media coverage, interviews, and talks, in my final report I would like to present some stage reviews interspersed with my own brief comments. Media in which public reviews of the play may be published are currently limited to the stage-review columns of newspapers, theatrical magazines (*Theatreux*, *Higeki Kigeki*, etc.), or review websites. In terms of reviews and criticism, the performing arts are surrounded by a far from abundant environment. However, the following two stage reviews have been published as of January 2022.

- KITANO Masahiro’s review in *Shimbun Akahata* (published December 1, 2021)
- TAKAHASHI Hiroyuki’s review in the February edition of *Theatreux* (published January 13, 2022)

As Kitano has also covered past SPAC productions in his column, he writes as follows with the stylized acting of director MIYAGI Satoshi (or even of SPAC’s first General Artistic Director SUZUKI Tadashi) in mind. “SPAC is a theater company that prizes stylistic beauty, but the acting this time seems to be almost realistic for them. Still, as it is a bilingual (subtitled) production with actors invited from France, rather than immediately reacting to or empathizing with the words of the characters, the premise of distance enables a unique viewing experience in which the audience savors the meanings and nuances of those words.” As I mentioned in my third report, when we consider the special circumstances of the “realist” reception of the works of Anton CHEKHOV within the *shingeki* theater movement in Japan, it may naturally follow that the play is critiqued as a “unique viewing experience” domestically. Ideally, I would have liked the reviewer to go further and share how that “uniqueness” may influence interpretations and experiences in the theatrical world, but unfortunately, he was constrained by space limitations.

Takahashi, on the other hand, writes as follows, focusing on the onstage visuals and “symbolism” as a keyword. “[The multi-protagonist play] is like a mirage filled with symbols. For example, there is a scene where the carpet on the floor, which initially appeared to be covered with a thick layer of sand, is cleaned all at once and swept into the corners so that the floor of the stage is visible. This alone seems to symbolize that the cherry orchard has been sold off, the old generation is in decline, and everything has been lost.” As I mentioned in my third report, the visual-arts approach of Daniel JEANNETEAU is derived from the poetic aspects of language, and the fact that this leads Takahashi to conclude that “the reading of Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* stands out in the careful directing” could be considered a certain degree of praise. Regarding the bilingual staging, he writes, “Strangely, it did not bother me at all.” As described by this report, that was the result of careful work carried out according to meticulous planning at a difficult time.

Some excellent writing can also be found on personal blogs and social media posts. I would like to present some excerpts here with the author’s permission.

- ODA Toru’s review posted on his personal Facebook page (updated December 10, 2021) and [personal blog Uratadona](#)

Among the reviews written so far, Oda’s is the richest in analysis and also comes closest to the subtext of the work and direction. Although the previously mentioned Kitano review is interesting for its detailed examination of the acting methodology of each character and actor, I would like to cite the following passage regarding the intertwining of the themes of the work and the bilingual staging.

The whole play is dominated by a vague sense of unease. Something like sound effects that build suspense in a horror movie accompanies the monologues of Ranevskaya (SUZUKI Haruyo)... With the directions for “pauses” written throughout Chekhov’s script presented literally, the gaps in the characters’ words and conversations take on an absurd degree of horror and ominousness. Certainly, the actors talking past each other is to a certain extent due to the obvious reason that they are engaging in dialogues in two different languages, Japanese and French. However, the thorough miscommunication onstage cannot be blamed entirely on linguistic issues. The frustration of words that convey no meaning, or rather, the inability of the words to reach their target in the first place is topicalized. This is the degree to which the peculiar bilingual format is incorporated into the method of direction. As the play moves along, we begin to accept the different languages as obvious.

While pointing out that Jeanneteau’s idea of structurally building the bilingual staging into his directing functions well with the lines and “pauses” of the play, Oda’s review also clearly identifies the directorial theme of “unease.” The review is particularly brilliant for its juxtaposition of Chekhov and Samuel BECKETT, focusing on the directing in the final part of Act II. We could call this an example of a “fortunate encounter” between a director and critic.

The climax of Jeanneteau’s directing is probably... the scene with the “passerby” (OUCHI Yoneji), who appears only in Act II. His arrival is a mysterious one. With the scrims removed, blinding light pours in from both sides of the stage. A beggar wearing a brown hooded sweatshirt and pants, blue down jacket, and ocher baseball cap walks extremely, almost terrifyingly slowly from stage right to stage left. All eyes are on him, and everyone turns toward him. The intruder has the power to make everyone’s attention converge upon him. Who is he, really? In Chekhov’s script, he declares himself “a hungry fellow Russian,” but to Jeanneteau, he is a divine stranger who is not supposed to appear, and perhaps even an absolute other. When Varya “screams, frightened” at the sight of him, her intense startlement and backing away may represent our bewilderment and discomfort at being unable to understand the discovery of the strange neighbors who are always and already present in modern society, which we mistakenly thought to be homogenous and stable.

In an ordinary reading of the play, the “passerby” appears in order to demonstrate Ranevskaya’s “cluelessness” in giving away her gold without fully grasping her own debt. However, Oda indicates the appearance of this bit character to be the arrival of a “divine stranger.” He is like Godot, who never arrives, or like the “intruder” in the play by Maurice MAETERLINCK. Make no mistake, *The Cherry Orchard* is not a story of hopelessness. Although it depicts a hopeless situation, each character sets out on a new path, and in doing so, their “bewilderment and discomfort” is the very mirror image of our panic amid a pandemic.

Entry and Exit Procedures amid the Global Pandemic

Thus, *The Cherry Orchard* finished its run in Shizuoka, and the France staff members sequentially returned to their home country. The play is scheduled to be performed in France next season (2022-2023), but for now, in my report, I would like to summarize production under the “extraordinary circumstances” of the past six months. Ahead of the performances in November and December 2021, the French actors and staff first arrived in Japan in late July. Their six-month entry/exit schedule was as follows.

▼ Rehearsal, Phase I: Jeanneteau, Mammam BENRANOU, and the five actors

Wednesday, July 21: Departure from Charles de Gaulle Airport, Paris

Thursday, July 22: Arrival at Haneda Airport and entry into Japan; travel to Shizuoka via chartered bus → Isolation until Thursday, August 5 (14 days)

*Only Aurélien ESTAGER entered Japan on Thursday, July 29 and was in isolation in Shizuoka until Thursday, August 12.

Wednesday, September 1: Two of the actors (Nathalie KOUSNETZOFF and Estager) return to France

Wednesday, September 8: Jeanneteau returns to France (due to a family matter)

▼ Rehearsal, Phase II: Jeanneteau, two of the actors, Isabelle SUREL (sound), and Juliette BESANÇON (lighting)

Saturday, September 25: Departure from Charles de Gaulle Airport, Paris

Sunday, September 26: Arrival at Haneda Airport and entry into Japan; travel to Shizuoka via chartered bus → Isolation until Sunday, October 10 (14 days)

▼ Return to France

Surel & Besançon: Left Japan on Tuesday, November 16

Jeanneteau: Left Japan on Wednesday, November 24

Benranou and the five actors: PCR test at clinic in Tokyo on Thursday, December 16; left Japan on Friday, December 17

Amid the special circumstances of a global pandemic, cooperation with government policy (border control measures) was necessary with regard to (1) entry, (2) isolation, and (3) exit. The first obstacle was (1) entry. As I briefly mentioned in my first report, the performances were extremely significant in terms of creating a model for inviting artists to Japan from overseas despite entry restrictions.

Conversely, SPAC took responsibility for (2) isolation. As of the summer of 2021, entrants and returnees from overseas (those who had tested negative upon entry/return) were restricted from using public transportation when heading to their homes, accommodation facilities, or other quarantine locations. Accordingly, a bus to Shizuoka was chartered. The fact that SPAC’s headquarters are located about four hours from Haneda Airport by bus and the accommodation facilities were so far from the Tokyo area appears to have been a factor in greatly reducing the stress of staging an “international coproduction” amid a pandemic. The situation might have been different had infections emerged, but fortunately, none of the visitors tested positive or were identified as a close contact.

Finally, with regard to (3) exit, trouble occurred due to changes in the domestic situation. First of all, because there was a reduction in the number of flights and there were no daily direct flights between Paris and Tokyo, the travelers had to deal with cancellations of their tickets (or changes



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to flights) even after booking depending on the number of reservations. Second, as of December 2021, all travelers were required to take a PCR test before boarding (regardless of vaccination status), but there was no hospital or clinic in Shizuoka that could issue proof of a negative test on schedule. Accordingly, it was also necessary to make bookings with testing clinics and make travel and accommodation arrangements on a tight schedule, just before departure and during the performance period. It may be difficult, as this is a case-by-case issue, but with regard to flexibility for schedule changes, the possibility of institutional design to reduce confusion on the ground might be something to examine in the future.

Role of The Japan Foundation and Future Prospects: Relationship with SPAC

The past activities of The Japan Foundation focused on disseminating Japanese culture overseas and not on “inviting” foreign culture to Japan. However, this has changed since the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic. The foundation’s project to support international co-productions is one such endeavor.

Since the time of its first General Artistic Director, Suzuki Tadashi (1997-2007), SPAC has possessed a creative theatrical environment unlike any other in Japan (Shizuoka Arts Theater, Performing Arts Park, and SPAC theater company) and established a history as a venue for inviting and presenting theatrical works from around the world. In particular, its international theater festival (now “World Theatre Festival Shizuoka”) launched following the success of “The 2nd Theatre Olympics” (1999) has become one of the pillars of its activities. SPAC has especially close ties

to France, with major achievements including the invitation of Olivier PY (first visit to Japan in 2008), who served as director of the Festival d’Avignon until this year, as well as the production of *Interior* directed by Claude RÉGY (premiered in 2013).

Miyagi directed *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* (*The Real Fiancée* and *The Girl, the Devil and the Mill*) written by Py in 2012. In 2014, while Py was the director of the Festival d’Avignon (held every year in July), Miyagi staged *Mahabharata – Nalacharitam* in the Boulbon Quarry, where Peter BROOK had previously staged that same work. Later, in 2017, Miyagi staged *Antigone* in the festival’s main venue, the courtyard of the Papal Palace. These performances became important “incidents” in Japanese theatrical history in the 2010s. However, it goes without saying that those “incidents” were based on the accumulation of various events. Although there were major differences between the two, the prototype for the SPAC version was the Ku Na’uka Theatre Company’s version of *Antigone*. It premiered at the Ancient Stadium of Delphi, Greece, in July 2004, 2,500 (!) years since the birth of its author Sophocles, one of the three great Greek tragedians. The value of a single work can paradoxically only be discussed from medium- and long-term perspectives measured in terms of five or ten years.

Varying degrees of “incidents” undoubtedly occurred within the process of this production of *The Cherry Orchard* as well. My report was only able to track a few of those many “incidents.” That is why when I wrote the four reports, I envisioned the role of myself, a single critic, as a “Process Observer” to be reporting on the path of a single work to its performance onstage (not only that, but amid the unusual circumstances of entry restrictions and measures against infections) from as many different angles and viewpoints as possible, while also placing it within a historical context.



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Because of the designated length, I was unable to avoid bias. However, that is due to my own lack of ability, for which I hope you will forgive me.

Although it may be redundant, I would like to add at the very end of my report that “dissemination” by The Japan Foundation is expected by theaters to play an enormous role. In particular, the “STAGE BEYOND BORDERS” online distribution of performances launched around the same time (a free distribution project launched in February 2021) has the reach to deliver performance footage to various viewers beyond the “built-in audience” of each theater and company through platforms such as YouTube, where its channel has 21,100 subscribers (as of January 2022). The SPAC productions currently being distributed are the previously mentioned (1) *Grimm’s Fairy Tale – The Girl, the Devil and the Mill*, (2) *Grimm’s Fairy Tale – The Real Fiancée*, and (3) *Antigone*. The view counts are about 48,000 for (1) (released February 2021), about 35,000 for (2) (released May 2021), and about 64,000 for (3) (released October 2021). The distributed videos may also be used for lecture presentations and lessons. Most of all, the fact that they are accessible from anywhere in the world as an archive makes them of great benefit to the public.

Needless to say, The Japan Foundation’s international creations must provide a high degree of public contribution. However, this is achieved not only through their position within history as described in this report, but also through their comprehensive approach to the contemporary receiving environment. Accordingly, it may be advisable for The Japan Foundation, which leads Japan’s cultural sector, to develop medium- and long-term receiving platforms for the performing arts while exchanging opinions with theater and company producers. Furthermore, from the perspective of audiences, the method of attending performances is ceasing to be limited to just “sitting in the theater across from the stage.” Despite the circumstances of the pandemic, it is important for the parties concerned in each cultural sector (national, prefectural, and municipal) and on the ground (theaters, companies, artists, producers, and critics) to widely share the fact that the time has come to explore and examine new ways of “disseminating” Japanese creativity in the performing arts.

Note

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