

Today's Theatre in Japan: Being Politically Correct Gender-wise

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On a December afternoon in 1992 most of the audience were women somehow looking feminism-conscious. Like me, they must have felt the wonder of seeing Japanese actresses incarnating Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* in their own unique ways. Doubtless the British director, who had had considerable professional experience of staging Churchill, greatly contributed to the success of the Japanese production of *Top Girls*; yet it was in large part due to the skill of the female actors.

The play has no male characters, though some are occasionally referred to. It seemed as if the women involved in this production, making full use of the situation of the play, were enjoying their all-female association. By that I don't mean like that at a woman's counterpart of a stag-party; these women appeared not to be drowning their dissatisfaction in joyful excitement but to be behaving positively in conscious attempt to create brand-new gender-related codes.

But the fact is that Japanese women theatre artists are said to be neither ideologically radical nor militant, a far cry from some American activists in the theatre who are sexually exclusive in keeping away from males. Even so the ideas concerning conventional sexual roles appear about to be changed in Japan, and curiously enough, it is the women who have been taking the leading role in renewing the old demarcation lines.

More troupes in Japan composed of only women have been devoting themselves to theatrical activities and are flourishing these days. One of these all-female groups called "The Blue Bird," (*Gekidan Aoitori*) for instance, is growing in reputation and is particularly articulate when it comes to gender-focused arguments. As one of their recent works they staged Hamlet in a controversial production, in which, as far as actors were concerned, the sexes of its characters were reversed. "The Blue Bird" had men play Gertrude and Ophelia, which was interesting and worked. These male actors did it in a mock kabuki fashion using the so-called *oyama* style which enables a male player to portray a woman, whether young or old. One of the world masterpieces was subsequently rendered into a sort of pop art piece, where young

actors enjoyed themselves turning a somber tragedy into a frivolous travesty. It almost seems as if one cannot help but caricature a no-nonsense work of art to survive such postmodern times.

However, this somewhat daring performance of Hamlet was less influential than expected. Generally speaking, audiences enjoyed the show more or less, but didn't appreciate what they were seeing. Nor did the production cause catharsis in the traditional sense. What it actually did, one might say, was attempt to rearrange the unfair, though time-honored, gender-related principles. Even if "you can't beat the system" as the saying goes, it's worth a try.

Everywhere in Japanese theatre things have already begun to be in a state of flux, and it is not merely on the part of women that the changing of gender modes can be seen. Since 1987 an all-male theatrical group, "The Flower of the Stage" (*Hanagumi Shibai*), has been gaining popularity among young theatregoers by successfully demonstrating the integration of kabuki into today's theatre; it simply describes itself as 'neo-kabuki.' Such dramaturgy as the unifying the traditional theatre and the modern isn't unprecedented. But in terms of sexual roles the theatricality of the troupe is unique, for its focal point is female impersonation.

In his essay entitled "Hair on the Female Impersonator's Legs," Yukikazu Kanô the general director of the theatre company, states:

The kabuki's *oyama* (female impersonator), when it comes to playing a female role, has the advantage over an actress, I believe. He is expected to manifest the quintessential femininity by making full use of being undeniably masculine in appearance. It took actors a few hundred years to create and develop specific techniques for producing such special effects. These are highly sophisticated techniques that enable men to embody pure femininity instead of seriously mimicking real women.¹

In short, the *oyama*'s glamor is, as Kanô's title reflects, delicately different from the ugliness the masculine body sometimes betrays.

Kanô's theatrical ideology reveals what the sexes are all about and what they are not. Accepted sexual roles in society have turned out to be not fundamental but exchangeable. Sexual division of male and female, it seems, mostly originates in cultural, social, and even political assignments. Kabuki theatre had discovered that as far as the imagination is concerned, masculinity was able to create the absolute beauty of the feminine. Being biologically female cannot provide any conclusive proof of pure femininity for it has almost nothing to do with what is necessary to artistically typify what a woman is supposed to act like. That may be one of the reasons why older

experienced kabuki actors are often said to outperform less skilled younger ones.

In his essay Kanô refers to the late actor Kazuo Hasegawa who was highly famous for his striking good looks and charm in acting, exclusively in impersonating women in kabuki-style films. Though it has been said that actors do much better in female impersonation in their twenties than in their fifties, Hasegawa, while apparently having been put at a disadvantage by his middle-age spread, nevertheless was even more incredible than before. This suggests that delicately discordant elements of both femininity and masculinity can help create theatrical glamor irrespective of ordinary physical attractiveness.

Kanô and his group must have studied kabuki a great deal and so ingeniously modified its performing techniques enough to appeal to a contemporary audience. With regard to female impersonation, they have devised unique artistic principles for themselves to conform to. Their costumes represent both sexes in a much less exclusive way. Actors playing women don't dedicate themselves to deceiving an audience by false appearances; instead, while attempting to look (and sound) feminine, they seem to remain sexually ambiguous on purpose. One might say they are more androgynous than female. In their plays the long-accepted sexual distinction between man and woman is made less firm with regard to female characters in particular. Thus quite different kinds of conflict can be seen in terms of sexual distinction; conflicting gender-related signs flicker on the stage that gradually develop into intriguing tensions among themselves.

What has been said so far might lead one to believe that Japanese audiences are so progressive that they are willing to look at gender issues in an unusually fresh perspective; but, on the contrary, they seem to still prefer holding on to the orthodoxy. Such audiences, usually composed of young men and women between their late teens and early thirties seem, along with the artists, sexually biased, regardless of their sex, against women in some way or other. One of the most highly acclaimed playwrights today, Ryo Iwamatsu, recently wrote and produced a play called *A Man Breaking Down* (*Kowareyuku Otoko*) which, as in the case with his preceding works, received much critical attention. Contrary to the popular response, however, I found there to be something unsavory in the play: the women in it were apparently subordinate to men, for they were made to be spiritually impoverished by nature. This was typically shown by two women working in a firm always rushing to clean the table as soon as male colleagues were finished with tea and being ready to be somewhat easily available objects to be made love to. The way the audience completely accepted such a portrayal makes it seem like this

sort of sexism is quite prevalent among even young people.

Unfortunately a regression can apparently even occur on the part of female artists. In February, 1994, some self-proclaimed feminism-conscious theatre artists produced *Shakespeare's Twelfth Night by Women, of Women, for Women* (*Onnatachi no Jūniya*), where women played all the major characters. To my disappointment they proved not so much feminists as entertainers in the usual sense and were ideologically much less exciting than expected

To return to *Top Girls*, Japanese women admire — even adore — the play. Women in Japan, obviously the actresses in this production included, have traditionally suffered sexual discrimination. This has caused them to act artificial. Women here are still supposed to be conventionally feminine. They are brought up to be 'women': that is one of the prerequisites for them to be admitted into society. Although the players in this production have, it is said, committed themselves to feminist ways of life, being, in reality as well, "top girls," even so they must still feel pressured by society to behave as women are expected to behave.

Particularly interesting is the fact that these actresses seem to have created a style of their own; that is to say, they evade falling into the conventional female roles imposed on them. It is not that they reveal what they naturally are, but that they choose to appear even more artificial in terms of gender.

Another alternative to playing feminine has been found: they act as if they were of that sort of neutral gender that girls in their pre-womanhood can seem to belong to, who have yet to fulfill their femininity by maturing.

The opening scene in this production has a great poignancy, one that reminded me of the mad tea party of *Alice in Wonderland*. These model top girls from temporally and spatially different worlds assert themselves in self-indulgent manners, as if trying to 'outweigh' or outwit the other persons at the table. In doing so they seem more Carroll-esque girls than amazing figures in history and literary works. One might say these Japanese actresses make an attempt to scale down, as much as possible, conventional femininity by putting on the masks of such unsensual Alice-like girls.

Traditionally, or since the late 1800s at least, when after her long self-imposed isolation Japan sought anew participation in international affairs, girlhood in Japan has had a remarkable connotation. It has been said that female juveniles in their late teens in the upper-middle class and above are permitted to enjoy a certain camaraderie among schoolmates, where they can be unfettered from assuming the manners of young women, and their own communal code will not disturb society.² The whole idea of such a privileged girl-

hood is in reality hypothetical, however; one may wonder if any group of girls has ever led such a way of life, and it may merely be personified in literary writings as a very popular motif. Nevertheless, the image still remains almost intact in today's Japan. An ingenue's coquettishness, even if disagreeable, for instance, is tolerated, and is very typical of advertisements in the media. Advertising has recognized the ability of female youngsters to be appealing and the great majority of models in commercials are girls. Indeed, such young women receive perhaps undeserved great acclaim.

This generally accepted idea of femininity in the teens and early twenties is reflected in the wonder women's reunion scene in the Japanese production. The striking feelings of sorority in them may be said to suggest a unique subterfuge that they have concocted. Shrouded in fresh youthful gaiety, these top girls have searched out the most sheltered spot in a restaurant in order to shun sexism. While the director has obviously expected them to make every effort to embody Churchill's text as it is, the actresses have subconsciously resorted to the privileged status of pubescent women, which works to undermine their camouflaged assault on male supremacy. Secluded in a *no-man's-land* they enjoy being what they are and behaving as they like to. Since men are supposed to tolerate this behavior peculiar to female youngsters, the Japanese top girls could, even when denouncing the overwhelming phallocracy of their society, be left unhampered by it. In the final account, however, the freedom that society has bestowed on its girls seems to be destined for restriction. One may doubt whether even these 'top girls' will be able to breach the future regulations on them in order to achieve their independence. It will still be terribly hard for them to tackle the sexually biased principles prevailing in the male-led society.

Thus the actresses' seemingly tactical use of the peculiarly advantaged status of girlhood in Japan doesn't work, in reality, for this will not enable women here, whom the actresses represent after all, to survive later discriminatory entanglements. The question as to whether they will achieve freedom remains as much an open question for them as it can for their Western counterparts.

As importantly, women also have to face a crucial impediment--the obstacles within themselves; Angie typifies this, whom 'top girl' Marlene gave birth to and, to seek her fortune, unmercifully but reluctantly left with her sister. This mentally retarded girl is deprived of what opportunities she might have. Rather she seems confined in a weird world where people are frozen, petrified in jeopardy, as it were. She reminds me of the girls Balthus [Balthazar Klossowski] paints, in particular when Angie talks to Kit her only friend, though

four years her junior, in the backyard scene. The plight she is in betrays how vulnerable, or one might say sensitive, she is. Marlene cannot help but sacrifice this other side of herself for the sake of the pursuit of her career; if she didn't assert her independence like this, it would leave her too susceptible to male chauvinism. So far, unfortunately, women may have often failed to do the right thing when it comes to coping with such a predicament.

It is obvious that the conventional gender paradigm has for some time been in a state of flux in the theatre. Once the long-cherished ideas of gender are put in a different light, they can be expected to be drastically revised. The recent heated controversies over David Mamet's *Oleanna* suggest that the old sexual beliefs are destined to even perish some day. We are now in the times when a female scholar can analyze in her recent book titled *Woman Is Contagious* the persistence of men in believing that femininity badly contaminates masculinity.³

Notes

¹Yasô [*The Nocturnal Meditation*] No. 32 December 1993: 52-53.

²In this connection Masako Honda has written interesting books such as *Edo no Musume Gatari* [*What Young Women in the Edo Era Wrote About*] (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbunsha, 1992) and *Jogakusei no Keifu* [*A Genealogy of Girl Students*] (Tokyo: Seidosha, 1990).

³Yoshiko Tomishima, *Onna ga Utsuru* [*Woman Is Contagious: Literary Criticism Activated by the Idea of Hysteria*] (Tokyo: Keisô Shobô, 1993).

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