Satô Makoto, translated by Yuji Sone

On Vernacular Theatre[1]

Currently, there are, on average, 40-50 performances every night in Tokyo. [2] These figures only represent the genre of contemporary theatre. If other genres—traditional theatre (such as *nô* and *kabuki*), commercial theatre, musical, and children's theatre—are added to the figure, there are 21,000 performances per year in Tokyo (*Engeki Nenkan 2004*).

As far as these figures go, it is possible to say that Tokyo is one of the most prominent 'theatre cities' in the world. The vivacity of contemporary theatre is particularly noticeable compared to other types of theatre. Out of these numerous theatre activities, I would like to talk, today, about my own experience of communication in terms of theatre and theatre collaboration between Japan and neighbouring Asian countries.

In order to help you to understand the Japanese contemporary theatre scene, I would like to refer to the *shôgekijô/angura undô* (little theatre/underground movement) in the mid-1960s to 1970s. The 'little theatre movement' in Japan had three major characteristics:

- Liberation from the conventional proscenium theatre (e.g., 'black box,' tent, outdoor performance, etc).
- Reinstatement of actors' performance in theatrical expression. Especially, attention given to the actor's physicality (e.g. *Tokken-teki nikutai-ron* [a theory of the privileged body] by Kara Jûrô, the Suzuki Method by Suzuki Tadashi, etc).
- Performances of original plays attached to particular performance groups/theatre companies (e.g., Kara Jûrô and Jôkyô Gekijô, Terayama Shûji and Tenjô Sajiki, Saitô Ren, Satô Makoto and Jiyû Gekijô, and so on).

One such work from the period was *Tubasa wo moyasu tenshi-tachi no butô (The Dance of Angels Who Burn Their Own Wings*, which was a deconstruction of *Marat/Sade* by Peter Weiss. It was the first performance of Kuro Tento (the Black Tent Theatre Company) of which I am one of the founding members. [3] The play text was collaboratively written by the four playwrights (Katô Tadashi, Saitô Ren, Satô Makoto and Yamamoto Sêta).

The 'little theatre movement' of the late-1960s to 1970s had the clear intention of countering *shingeki*, which was the mainstay of the Japanese modern theatre scene for a half-century prior to that period. [4]

Shingeki, or 'new theatre,' is mainly based on the European modern theatre. It has evolved, in the history of Japanese modernisation from the mid-19th century, as a different form of Japanese theatre in contrast to the 'old theatre,' or traditional theatre, in which *kabuki* is central. In this sense, it is possible to consider a direct correspondence between the above three characteristics of the 'little theatre movement' and the three characteristics of *shingeki* as follows:

- The realism of the modern theatre, exemplified by the theory of the fourth wall as compared to outdoor performance (of the little theatre movement).
- Use of European acting methods such as Stanislavski as compared to the restatement of physical performance.
- A repertoire based on translations of mainly European theatre as compared to playwrights who belong to a particular company.

The period of the late 1960s to 1970s was also significant for modern Asian theatre, especially in neighbouring Southeast Asian countries.

In the Philippines, Cecile Guidote, who returned from the USA, established PETA (Philippines Educational Theatre Association) in 1967. The methodology of the theatre workshop, which she brought back from the USA, was later transformed by the young dramatists who gathered around PETA into a more practical model. Later, in the 1980s, this model was used actively as a key to link modern theatre in the region.

One Thai theatre scholar calls the period from 1968 to 1973 in Thai theatre history the age of the writer and playwright. Adding to this, the opening of theatre courses at Chulalongkorn University and Thammasat University, contribute to what he regards as the period of establishing Thai modern theatre.

Putu Wijaya, one of the leading stage directors in Indonesia, regards the establishment of TIM (Taman Ismail Marzuki) Cultural Centre in Jakarta in 1968 as an epochal event in Indonesian modern theatre history. He stated that: 'Indonesian modern theatres distanced themselves from traditional and popular theatres. However, a correlation between the two began to emerge since this period. There were many works produced as a result of interactions between different values: between modern and traditional, between the West and the East.'

I, myself, and Kuro Tento, the theatre company which I belong to, began actively communicating with South-East Asian countries, via the hypothetical notion of 'Asian theatre,' after meeting with PETA in 1980. In each country we visited, the similarities of the theatrical environment that each had experienced during the 15 years prior to

meeting (i.e. the Asian counterpart and us) prompted us to communicate. If I try to summarise those similarities now, I think they were sharing a common theme of 'vernacular theatre.'

The foundational idea for establishing PETA in the Philippines, clearly, states the importance of the creation of modern theatre in Tagalog, instead of the English and Spanish languages that were the languages of the intelligentsia.

I would like, however, to see a wider meaning across theatrical idioms for the term 'vernacular theatre,' rather than the literal translation of it.

According to Putu Wijaya, the Indonesian tradition, instead of being worshipped or negated, has facilitated development of directing styles, expressions, ways of writing plays, structural skills, design, decoration and acting skills.

If I add one more to Putu Wijaya's list of things one can learn from tradition: it is the mode of the audience's reception through which you may be able to see the furthest extent of the meaning of the term 'vernacular theatre.' Putu Wijaya's work is based on *wayang kulit*, the traditional shadow play, and yet is an excellent achievement in the experiment of 'vernacular theatre.' 'Vernacular theatre' therefore does not simply mean retrogression into ones own culture.

Kuo Pao Kun, a Singaporean dramatist who unfortunately died in the autumn of 2002 talked about the influence of Japanese *shingeki* in relation to the importing of European theatre into Chinese-speaking countries. He emphasises the historical significance of realist theatre in modern Asian history in terms of the following three points:

- (In realist theatre), the struggle of living can be described realistically.
- Issues can be discussed clearly.
- The public can be mobilised effectively.

At the same time, he shows his deep insight and understanding of 'vernacular theatre'—which Asian dramatists, including him, have pursued since the world-historical changes to values in the 1960s—which strove to restore these three points.

His consistent view was to regard 'vernacular theatre' as a newly developed form of European theatre. His theatre theory—which oscillated between the European notion of realism from which, more or less, representation is drawn, and the Chinese word *xie yi,* from which, roughly speaking, presentation is drawn—is very suggestive.

Finally, I would like to point to three collaborative works in order to survey the current phase of 'vernacular theatre' in Asia.

The first is a collaboration between young Thai artists and Noda Hideki, one of the most active dramatists in Japan. The name of the piece is called *Aka Oni (Red Demon)*, and it portrays an alien other in a small community. In its premier an English actor played the role of the red demon. In the London performance last year, Noda himself played the role amongst English actors. Now Japanese and Thai actors are working together. [5]

The second piece is Kuo Pao Kun's play *Lao Jiu* directed by a female Indian director, Anuradha Kapur. This is a story of a boy who is the ninth and youngest in his family and who joined an old puppet theatre company instead of pursuing the path of the elite. While it is describing contemporary Singapore, the story has an open structure, so it can be remade into a modern theatrical production in each Asian country. Anuradha Kapur's direction is based on this structure, and she actively reinterprets the story as Indian modern theatre, going beyond previous styles that merely introduce and adapt foreign plays.

The last work is my own recent production of *The Threepenny Opera* by Bertolt Brecht, which was performed at a tent theatre.

However, instead of me talking about the relationship between the theme of 'vernacular theatre' and this work, I would like to invite your questions and critical comments. Thank you.

Notes

[1] This is an edited version of a talk given by Satô Makoto at the 10th Performance Studies International Conference, Singapore, June 2004. Satô included several video excerpts of performances during his talk and we have adapted his references to them.

[2] This is based on the figure of 16,371 performances per year provided by *Engeki Nenkan 2004*, the official report of the Japan Theatre Arts Association (Nihon Engeki Kyôkai). *Engeki Nenkan* does not include figures for *nô* or *kyôgen*.

[3] The initial name of the company was Engeki Sentâ 68/70 (Theatre Centre 68/70).

[4] Kôki Bungê Kyôkai (the second phase of the Literature Arts Association) was established in 1909 with Tubouchi Shôyô as its main figure. (Translator's note: This initiative laid the foundations for the *shingeki* movement.)

[5] A Korean version with Korean actors and directed by Noda was produced in Seoul in 2005.

Satô Makoto *is a playwright and director active in Japanese theatre since the 1950s. He was a founder of the Black Tent Theatre and more recently the first artistic director of the Setagaya Public Theatre. He is author of many well-known plays and continues to work with Black Tent and many other groups.*

Editorial Note

Performance Paradigm issues 1 to 9 were reformatted and repaginated as part of the journal's upgrade in 2018. Earlier versions are viewable via Wayback Machine:
http://web.archive.org/web/*/performanceparadigm.net