

**Uchino Tadashi**

## Mapping/Zapping 'J' Theatre At The Moment

### Introduction

The purpose of this article is to draw a cognitive map of what is happening in Japan's theatre culture at present. For the July 2005 issue of the literary magazine *Eureka*, in which little theatre was the main feature, I was asked to supervise the structure of the issue, and I decided to present a map, (see below) in which I would select 40 theatre companies (or 'units,' as they are often called now), individuals and dance companies. As readers of *Performance Paradigm* do not necessarily share historical, cultural, and/or political contexts with readers of *Eureka*, I would like to use the map a little differently, and show the range of Japan's contemporary theatre culture as I see it now. I am not going to refer to all the 40 companies I have included in the map, but I will discuss some representative groups and individuals for the sake of readers who are not at all familiar with any of the 40 entries I chose here.

This map assumes that what I am going to say is only in terms of how I see what is happening and there is no theoretical reason, for instance, for the chosen number of 40 groups. Japan's theatre culture *per se* is now so manifold and compartmentalised, to the extent that nobody can really have a unified image of the field. I was interested in the diversity of performance that we see everyday in Tokyo, and 40 was the number required to give the map a certain degree of validity and reflect my understanding of Japan's contemporary theatre culture. In addition, I deliberately chose to highlight the younger generation of practitioners, most of who were born after the 1970s. I thought that this choice would enable me to cast a certain light on the future of Japan's theatre culture. For the sake of greater clarity, I have decided to add three more entries, all belonging to an older generation of theatre makers who are still active in the contemporary scene.

### Mapping/Zapping 'J' Theatre

The map is divided by vertical and horizontal axes and I have named the four sections divided by those axes: Plane A (top right), Plane B (top left), Plane C (down left), and Plane D (down right). For the vertical axis, I put 'Literary/Text' toward the top and 'Performance/Body' toward the bottom. This means that by going towards the top of the axis, you will see the stronger presence of 'literary' and 'textual' influences in

performances of those designated at a particular place on the map. On the other hand, by reading towards the bottom of the axis, stronger elements of 'performance' and/or 'body' come into play.

For the horizontal axis, I put 'Real (Essentialist=Modern)' toward the right vector, and 'Gadget (Relativist=Postmodern)' toward the left. I chose the word 'real,' because, in Japan's contemporary theatre vocabulary at the moment, the notion of 'real' as opposed to 'fictional' and/or 'fantastic' is supposed to have a positive value. The notion of 'real' as it is currently constituted in Japan also has some resonances with such notions as 'faithful' or 'sincere,' or 'authentic.' This notion also relates to an ideology of 'essentialism,' as when for instance, the transparency of representation—that of the literary text, or that of the performer's body—is firmly believed in performances as belonging to these planes (Plane A and D). Here, the notion of 'originality' is still the key to practitioners.

Moving towards the left on the horizontal axis, a sense of 'gadget' becomes stronger. The notion of 'gadget' refers to postmodern sensibilities of 'playing,' 'borrowing,' 'masquerading,' 'quoting' and 'self-reflexivity.' That is to say, according to practitioners belonging to this plane (Plane B and C), there is nothing new anymore, and all that remains is the question of how to arrange and combine the already known performative elements. Both the notions of 'originality' and 'essence' are obsolete for them. That is why I put the word 'relativist' in opposition to 'essentialist.'

### **Plane A: The Seinen-dan 'School,' or the return to *Shingeki***

In terms of the numbers of events and market share, most of Japan's contemporary theatre practices belong to this plane, and this is where a traditional dialogue-oriented theatrical performance style dominates. For groups clustered around Plane A, the origin of performance is a dramatic text, in which characters enact their stories; thus, we see characters as a linguistic construction. Actors are expected to represent, as faithfully as possible, already- always-written characters in the play. In most cases, the transparency of representation is assumed, and characters are supposed to have a unified psychology; that is to say, a rational interiority is assumed in their mode of presentation. This is a representational theatre, where the modernist myth of 'humanity' is still operating, and—ranging from big commercial theatres to the New National Theatre—most performances we see in Tokyo belong in this category.

The recent developments in theatres along this plane are twofold: one is a modern-realist theatrical revival—the 'Seinen-dan School,' and 'the return to *shingeki*.' Although somewhat updated in the 1990s, this category of theatre dominates the Japanese scene. Seinen-dan's plays, coined 'contemporary colloquial theatre' (*gendai kogo engeki*) by the writer-director Hirata Oriza and journalistically called 'quiet theatre' (*shizuka na engeki*) is the most typical of this genre and has been very influential.

A trend for formerly marginal and innovative works to become mainstream is also evident. Artists associated with the 'the little theatre boom' of the 1980s, like Noda Hideki are now in their 50's and with a few exceptions (such as Kawamura Takeshi and Miyazawa Akio), their performances can be considered to belong to this plane now. Although works by these artists are not in the style of modern realistic theatre (along with Noda, we can include Keralino Sandrovitch and Matsuo Suzuki, for example), they nevertheless exemplify an essentially text-oriented play of characters, albeit with some physicality involved.

Second on Plane A, I chose the word 'Civility.' This reflects the fact that most of the younger generation of theatre practitioners now show a sincere concern for society—however strange that may sound. Noda Hideki, for example, was known for his fantastic and playful little theatre extravaganzas up to the year 1990. Since then, however, he has been taking-up so-called 'national themes' in his work, themes such as the war on Iraq, Japan's Emperor System, and the Atomic Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Even in the field of sexual politics, which is hardly manifested and/or debated in the public domain, there are now at least two sexually identifiable theatre companies; one is Pink Triangle, and the other is Flying Stage. The former explores issue of lesbian identity, and the latter of male homosexuality.

### **Plane B: Re: Little Theatre**

Plane B is where new voices are heard. They show a marked characteristic of what I call 'J' theatre, especially those who started working in the last 5 years. The 'J' here stands for 'Japan as Junk' where the notion of 'art' is always already elusive. That is to say, from the perspective of 'high art' in the Euro-American context, where certain universal aesthetic values and methodologies are supposed to be shared, these performances only look like junk. Lacking value as either economic or cultural capital, they appear to be 'artistic garbage.' Whether consciously or not, 'J' theatres defy and ignore history, shared values and 'common sense.' Their frames of reference and of knowledge are deeply subsumed in the sub-cultural genres of *manga*, *anime*, computer games, midnight TV programs, B-grade movies, and V cinemas (films especially made for video release). In short, they are self-admittedly sub-cultural.

Historically speaking, the *angura* (underground) theatre movement from the late 1960s and early 1970s—including practitioners such as Terayama Shûji, Kara Jûrô and Suzuki Tadashi—belonged in this quadrant, though their frames of reference were much richer. As noted above, the early work of artists such as Noda also belong here. However, as the sense of newness and outrageousness of this work came to be accepted by a larger population, then these events can be said to have turned mainstream.

In any case, this is not of concern to the contemporary 'J' theatre practitioners and one of the most interesting characteristics of their generation is that they do not seem to have a sense of antagonism. [2] Unlike early periods of contemporary theatre, 'J'

theatre artists do not seem to explore notions resistant to authority and mainstream power structures. Yet, in a strangely original way, such artists are trying to make performances that suit the taste, sensibilities and aesthetics shared among a community of urban youth. Their frame of reference is extremely limited if looked at from outside, although—as expressed by the term ‘Re: Little Theatre’ for Plane B—the frames of reference for ‘J’ theatre inevitably fall into a rich resource of theatrical vocabulary. This is the very same vocabulary that little theatre practices kept exploring after the 1960s. Hence, at this axis, we may encounter so-called *neo-angura* companies such as Gokiburi Comibnat (Cockroach Industry Complex), and Kegawa Zoku (Fur Tribe), where images of *angura* are appropriated and (mis)used for their own purposes. At the same time, because of their naiveté (and embracing this naïve approach), ‘J’ theatres are extremely sensitive to their immediate living environments and contexts, wherein, as the mass media proclaim: ‘the Japanese society is terribly sick.’ In other words, ‘J’ theatre performances have a certain degree of resonance with the sensibilities and psyche of youth, who sometimes withdraw from society to a pathological degree (*hikikomori*), or may engage in acts of self-mutilation such as cutting their arms and wrists. This is why I refer to the Lacanian notion of ‘*jouissance*,’ in connection with these activities. That is to say, not a simple joy, but more complicated, even pathologically critical aesthetic sentiments are suggested here.

Yubiwa Hotel is one such company, whose work always deals with the image of *shojo*, an image of teenage girlhood. *Shojo* themes are an important phantasmagoric site for Japan’s popular culture, including the now famous *otaku* culture. For groups and artists gathered along Plane B, there is room, therefore, to tackle important issue such as the politics of representation. In fact, most of these companies, or units, are dealing with such questions, though they often remain unconscious of the political implications of what they do. At the other extreme, there are companies like Tetsuwari Albatrosscket (untranslatable), which makes purely junk and meaningless short performances, as if to say there is nothing ‘meaningful’ the theatre can do in the postmodern world.

### **Plane C: Contemporary Dance**

‘Contemporary Dance’ is a term designating newer kinds of dance in Japan, which came to flourish during the 1990s. Influenced by such choreographers as Pina Bausch and William Forsythe, a younger generation of dancers started to make completely different and diverse kinds of dance. Their work decisively broke with the traditions of classical ballet and modern dance. Such artists were not interested in telling a linear narrative, or in expressing their inner emotions and personalities. Contemporary dance was geared toward exploring an idiosyncratic movement vocabulary and was a peculiar kind of postmodern dance: not postmodern as an historical genre, but decisively a ‘J’ kind of postmodern dance culture.

Basing their work in their everyday life, and incorporating/zapping diverse kinds of movement from ballet, modern dance, jazz dance and the like, these artists were successful in establishing a new aesthetic category, which can only be called ‘junk’ in

a positive sense: a 'junk' aesthetics of movement. The genre of 'contemporary dance' became an interesting site for reading and analysing trends in performance and a younger generation of critics are now interested in writing about 'contemporary dance' as Japan's cutting edge performing culture.

Characteristic of the work of Nibroll, for example, the most celebrated young dance company in Japan today, is an erratic and sometimes violent relationship among young people and their everyday existence. Violence is expressed in Nibroll's dancing bodies and their pedestrian kind of movement.

Deepening this interest in everyday life, Okada Toshiki of Chelfitch has begun a provocative experiment in form (perhaps moving toward Plane A and D). Okada is a young playwright who won the prestigious Kishida Playwrights Award in 2004, and he is also a director who is interested in creating a vocabulary of physical gesture, which is at once mundane and fictional. His performance *Three Days in March* (2004) is revolutionary. Rejecting traditional ways of unifying word and body (as in modern realist theatre), Okada was successful in capturing, quite methodologically, the relationship between contemporary spoken language and physical gesture. In *Three Days in March* contemporary bodies are shown in ceaseless conversation, meanwhile their movements unfold as if operating with an alternate, estranged and unknowable corporeal logic in mind. A physical stammering contrasts with the flow of dialogue and the combined effect is everyday and uncanny.

#### **PLANE D: Return to Angura?**

This is the plane that is most under-populated at the moment; where physical expression is the main resource for performance. We have seldom seen newcomers working in this field over the last ten year. However, two notable exceptions that have chosen to work in on the 'plane of physical theatre' in recent times are Image Opera and ARICA.

Image Opera is a producing unit in which a very young *butoh* dancer, Wakikawa Kairi, is the main performer, director and choreographer. Although he has only presented three works until now, Wakikawa has shown a keen interest in working with influences from the western avant-garde tradition while also presenting his formally disciplined *butoh* corporeal presence as a cornerstone of the work as whole. ARICA was founded in 2001 and its members include a poet, actor, director/designer and musician. Their most well-known and main performer is Ando Tomoko, who was one of the main actors in Ôta Shogo's Tenkei Gekijô (famous for their work *Mizu no Eki* [Water Station]). By updating the legacy of *angura's* theatrical vocabulary in their work, ARICA's collaborations have shown new ways of thinking about the notion of physical theatre.

And while somewhat in decline, a physical theatre tension between Plane A and Plane D is indispensable for a 'healthy' theatre culture. From an historical perspective, this

tension was associated with the spirit of anti-establishment experimentation of *angura*. Yet, at the moment, it is obvious that Plane D companies are losing their audience. Some critics would say that this is because audiences have become more conservative. [3]

### **On the Border: The Possibility of Change**

While we have only briefly discussed each plane of my 'J' theatre map, what is most interesting are those groups working at the borders of each axis—groups that are not satisfied with inclusion in a particular plane. Among those I have already mentioned, are Chelfitch and Yubiwa Hotel. Also resisting in this way is Miyazawa Akio of Reviving Amusement Park Agency, who I have placed at the centre of my map.

A novelist, playwright, director and filmmaker, Miyazawa was one of the leading little theatre figures of the 1990s. He is currently struggling to update his established method of performance making. In his latest work *Tokyo/Absence/Hamlet* (2004-2005), taking his novel as a starting point, Miyazawa moved through several layers of experimentation. In this work, he was trying to find a kind of contemporary body and body gesture, along with different ways of presenting theatrical images, which can speak to an audience, through different channels and registers. Nor is Miyazawa attracted to the notion of 'good acting' or straightforward ways of representing dramatic text. In a recent production, he asked Yanaihara Mikuni of Nibroll to work with him, and interestingly, the performance became a site for showing the difficulty artists' face in updating the notion of 'acting' in a postmodern age. At the same time, Miyazawa's urgent need to update theatrical vocabulary was critically provocative and an important gesture if, as we hope, Japan's theatre culture will survive as important cultural capital.

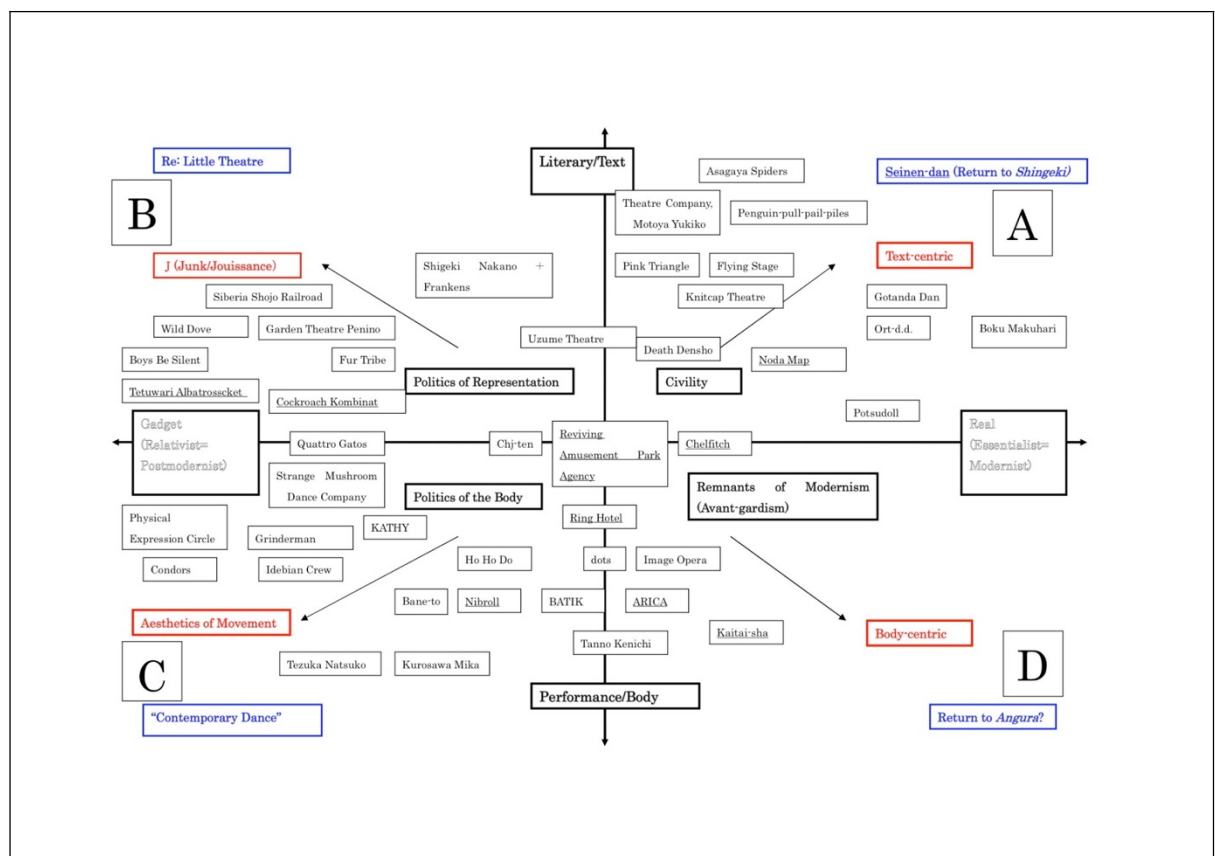
### **Conclusion**

Ten years have passed since Aum Shinri-kyo—a cult group sometimes dubbed 'the last underground theatre company,'—attacked Tokyo's subway lines with sarin gas in 1995. In the same year, Japan also experienced the Hanshin Awaji Great Earthquake. Many cultural theorists are currently looking at 1995 as an historical watershed in Japan's socio- psychological milieu. For some critics these events have become a *zeitgeist* for the 1990s.

They apply such terminology to the decade as: 'the age of impossibility' (Osawa Masachi), 'animalizing the postmodern' (Azuma Koki), 'romantic cynicism' (Kitada Akihiro), and Japan as the 'psychologizing society' (Saito Tamaki). Although with differing emphasis, such theorists share the same understanding of the last decade. As Azuma's suggests, we are now living with a sense of 'pervasive postmodernity.' The 'age of enlightenment' has finally ended and a Lacanian symbolic order has lowered its threshold as well. These factors have brought about the unbalancing of the triptych of the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

The last ten years is also characterized by an unprecedented increase in public funding for the performing arts in Japan. This has meant that performance culture, including theatre and dance, for the first time in Japan's history, was finally 'officialised' by the state. The relationship between this officialisation of performance culture and the aforementioned postmodern socio-cultural-psychological formations is very complex and obviously beyond the scope of this short article. But there are many reasons for us to read Japan's contemporary performance culture as symptoms of a 'sick,' 'psychologizing' society as its inhabitants are living in the 'Age of Impossibility.' Sociology and psychoanalysis, rather than aesthetics and literary theories, are more appropriate methodologies from which to begin to understand what is happening here. This article, I hope, would be the first step toward that kind of sociological and psychoanalytical exploration of Japan's performing arts culture.

### Mapping/Zapping 'J' Theatre



### Notes

[1] The original version of this article was read as 'Mapping/Zapping 'J' Theatre', at Asialink Annual Forum, 'Sun Rising: Japanese Culture Today,' Sidney Myer Asia Centre, the University of Melbourne, July 21, 2005.

[2] Unlike the former generations of artists who were always responding to the work of elder peers with a sense of antagonism and frustration.

[3] Although we see quite a few companies from an earlier generation of artists in Plane D that are still very active, including Gekidan Kaitaisha, OM-2, DA-M, and Storehouse Theatre Company.

*Dr Uchino Tadashi is a Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Tokyo. His research interests include Japanese and American theatre and performance.*

### 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:

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