correspondents at large

Interview with Miyagi Satoshi

MAE J. SMETHURST

ON 30 SEPTEMBER 2013, I INTERVIEWED THE JAPANESE DIRECTOR MIYAGI SATOSHI AT THE SHIZUOKA PERFORMING ARTS CENTER (SPAC), in full view of Mount Fuji at the Shizuoka Performing Arts Center (SPAC). In addition to his own works, Miyagi has staged works from around the world that deal with contemporary issues and themes and has launched programs for the young people of Shizuoka as part of his overall attempt to make the theater a window to the world.

Ku Na'uka, the name of Miyagi's theater company, means "toward science" in Russian, which in his view has captured the company's policy since its foundation. While serving as Ku Na'uka's director and playwright, Miyagi has developed a style in which two actors play one role. One actor does the storytelling while the other moves on the stage along with the story, like a puppet. Miyagi thinks that the suppressed energy of both roles creates dynamism beyond reality. As he states:

> Word and body (Logos and Pathos), which are torn apart on stage, show us to what extent they are vital to each other. One could say that there is a fervent courtship between word and body, and, beyond it, a moment of bliss where these two overcome their alienation and fuse together.
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> Thus, the primitive image of the human being will manifest itself on stage.

He elaborates on this approach:

> The highly developed information society of today which brought us various conveniences, at the same time, gradually made us lose confidence in the human being.
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> Thus, [in] our social, economic and even our leisure activities, we no longer feel the need to maintain face to face contact with others. Everyone is reduced to being nothing more than part of the system and a lot of us feel like parts of a cogwheel. In other words, each person simply plays the part expected of him; a role decided by the different situations of daily life, for example work, family, school, etc.
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> We rarely have the opportunity to experience ourselves as whole beings, to be able to say "This is me!" We are victims of a loss of

In 1990 MIYAGI SATOSHI established the Ku Na'uka Theatre Company, whose repertoire consisted mainly of Greek tragedies, Shakespeare's plays, and other classics of world drama. He became the general artistic director of the Shizuoka Performing Arts Center in April 2007. His productions have been performed in France, Italy, Spain, the United States, China, Korea, and India. With Suzuki Tadashi he codirected *Electra* in 1995 in the First International Theater Olympics, in Greece. His works won the third Asahi Performing Arts Awards Grand Prix, in 2004, and the second Asahi Arts Prize, in 2005.

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> confidence in the human being, a doubt in our unique value, a feeling of personal powerlessness, and a lack of conviction that "My being can affect others' lives."

I asked Miyagi a series of questions about his choice to direct Greek tragedies in Japan. He began by explaining how prewar modern Japan and ancient Greece shared cultural similarities. In his view the Greeks had the same relationship to Asia as the Japanese did to China and Korea, and even though, or maybe because, the Greek and Japanese cultures were shaped by these outsiders, both had "a psychological complex" toward them. Just as the Greeks gained philosophy, Dionysus, and "civilization," including their writing system, from Asia (including Egypt), the Japanese owed aspects of their religion, government, political philosophy, art, and writing systems to Chinese and Korean influence. Greek and Japanese xenophobia led to military action against the influencing cultures: the Greeks fought the Persians; the Japanese fought the Chinese and Koreans. In the wake of the wars, the Greeks became more powerful militarily than Asia. Similarly, after the Meiji Restoration, in 1868, Japan became the greatest military power in East Asia and stronger than the countries from which it had learned. The inferiority complex became a superiority complex. A feeling of superiority following military victories can be seen in the Greek tragedies, Miyagi concluded, and that is why he produces them.

In the Greek tragedies that he directed with the Ku Na'uka Theatre Company—*Medea*, *The Trojan Women*, and *Antigone*—the superiority complex emerges in full force. In *Medea* it is manifest in the character of Jason, who, after being helped by Medea, a for-



Mikari performing the role of Medea in Miyagi Satoshi's production of *Medea*. Photo by Uchida Takumi. Courtesy of Ku Na'uka Theatre Company.

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eigner, abandons her for a Greek woman. In *The Trojan Women* the allied forces in World War II are victorious. Douglas MacArthur, Winston Churchill, and Franklin Roosevelt appear as gods at the beginning of the play and, according to Miyagi, design and determine the outcome. This 2005 production in Udo, the open-air theater at SPAC, was performed by Japanese and Korean actors speaking their own languages. Miyagi directed the first act and Yang Jung-Ung, of the Yohangza Theatre Company, in South Korea, directed the second. In the light of Japan's colonization of Korea, the directors agreed to make the defeated Trojans, in all their hopelessness, represent the Koreans and to make the Greek conquerors, in all their arrogance, represent the Japanese. In his *Antigone* Miyagi again portrayed King Creon victorious in the war against Thebes, arrogant but destroyed by the end of the play. Miyagi thought the gods did not play a role in this tragedy. In his view Sophocles places responsibility squarely on the human beings.[1]

Miyagi then noted a second similarity between ancient Greece and early modern Japan. Greece had a democratic form of government, but only for men. Only men fought, which gave them the authority to rule. Early modern Japan (Edo or Tokugawa era [1600–1868]) was ruled by male samurai. When Japan established its democratic form of government, an electoral system in the Meiji period, only men received the right to vote. Under the Meiji conscription system, only men could serve in the army. As a result, every man, even those from subsamurai classes, was considered a samurai (国民皆兵 ["all the people are soldiers"]). Fighting and taking part in politics were two sides of the same coin. The words of *Antigone* and *Medea* resonate with this view.

To set the dramatic action of *Medea* in the late Meiji period, just after the Russo-Japanese War, Miyagi lined the back of the stage with woodblock prints depicting this period. To set the dramatic action of *Antigone* in the 1930s, concurrent with the rise of militarism, he produced the play in front of the National Art Museum, a building constructed for the coronation of Emperor Hirohito, although not completed until ten years later. Miyagi said that to extract the power from the spaces and make the best use of their peculiarities, he planned the stage sets in detail. The selection of the theater was one of the most important considerations.

Another similarity between the ancient Greeks and the early modern Japanese was their attitudes toward women. Citing the words of Jason in *Medea*, Miyagi maintained that Euripides disliked women and that his plays react against shamanism, a female-dominated religious form from an earlier era. In the eyes of Euripides, Miyagi said, shamanism has to be eliminated because of its connection with women. "Civilization" rejects it. The new "civilization" has to be controlled by men. After Japan's victories in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) and Russo-Japanese War (1904–05), the Japanese came to see themselves as more modern than and superior to the Koreans and the Chinese, with their shamanism. Miyagi's *Medea* is set after the Russo-Japanese War, at a time when Japanese men thought they could and should rise above shamanism by joining the European way. The phrase "Out of Asia, into Europe" was coined by Fukuzawa Yukichi, founder of Keio University and an important theorist of westernization in Japan. Japanese men regarded women's magic with 畏, awe, almost a fear of something greater—such as the feeling one has toward Mount Fuji. But men thought they could control society and nature. This is the arrogance of modern man. The current nuclear reactor problems are an example of the crises this attitude can cause. In Greek tragedy this is the arrogance of Jason, Creon, and the Greeks in general. In *Medea* Miyagi effectively placed the men in control with his technique of separating each role into two parts: the words of Medea and

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the other female characters were spoken by men and enacted on stage by women. At the finale these male voices died at the hands of the female actors.

In Miyagi's view Japan (and the rest of the world) needs new ideas. Male thinking doesn't work. Japan needs another way of thinking, in which shamanism and women's thinking play an important part. Greek tragedy is a good way to make this point to the Japanese. In 1945–46, after World War II, Japan threw away its army, rejected the way of men, and chose to become female. Miyagi agrees with those who say that "Japan" knew it would lose the war but fought anyway to prompt the necessary transformation of the Japanese people. The right wing today says the Showa Constitution was an American creation and must be changed. Miyagi disagrees. Japan after World War II chose its system, a woman's one, eliminating its military power and masculinity and maintaining its economic and educational power and femininity. This did not mean that women were in charge under the new system; rather, men became female in their outlook.

Miyagi said that people today forget the destruction of World War II and the dangers of abandoning female thinking. The attitudes of the Japanese toward China and South Korea are changing, especially as they see those countries experience rapid economic growth. Young people fear that China is becoming superior to Japan. Thus, they think Japan needs an army. The transition from a female back to a male Japan is under way. This development is making Asia fear Japan. Miyagi worries that there could be war again. By continuing to produce Greek tragedies, especially *Medea*, along with such plays as *Peer Gynt*, Miyagi hopes to remind the Japanese by analogy of their history and to caution them so that they do not repeat the past. To express the depth of human emotions, he chooses classics from the East and the West. By taking elements from traditional Japanese arts such as Bunraku, Kabuki, and Noh and combining them with technology developed since the 1990s, he has found a new style that represents Japan today.

Note

1. For further discussion, see Smethurst.

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