



THE DAMASK DRUM - A MODERN NOH

INTERVIEW WITH KAORI ITO AND YOSHI OIDA

You worked together in 2014 on the play *Yumé*. Why did you choose another classic Noh play for your artistic reunion with *The Damask Drum*, of which Yukio Mishima wrote a modern adaptation?

Yoshi Oida: After our collaboration on *Yumé*, I wanted to try dancing, which I'd never done. My dream was to dance with my opposite. I'm an old man and Kaori is a young woman. She's used to abstract subjects; I come from the theatre, I can't dance if I don't have a story to follow. It's also the first time, since I first came to Europe, that I'm working with an entirely Japanese team. So I went looking for a Japanese story in which the characters are an old man and a young woman... and there just happened to be one in traditional Japanese theatre. We weren't necessarily set on Noh, or on Yukio Mishima, but wanted to use them as inspirations. We're trying to break away from the classic image of Japan, even though the show still has some of its aspects. There is of course a sort of Japanese atmosphere, because it is our culture, but it is first and foremost a reflection of humanity.

Kaori Ito: Our musician Makoto, Yoshi, and myself are all in the position of being "migrants by choice" in France, and perhaps we feel we have more freedom to interpret Japan differently. We wanted to share that feeling and to create a show together performed by Japanese people who'd left Japan, a show not only about Japan but about the human in its universality.

Yoshi Oida: The starting point of our reflection was to determine how we could live in the world of the performing arts as foreign artists.

Kaori Ito: Working with Yoshi brings me back to Japan, both in my head and in my body. With every movement, we can imagine the kimono accompanying his gesture. It's a body language I don't have, because I was trained in classical ballet. Paradoxically, it's Europe which made it possible for me to access Japanese culture. The very traditional and codified techniques of Japan are easier to "decode" here in Europe, it allowed us to take more liberties with the story. The idea was to revisit Japan without constraints.

Noh mixes dance, songs, music, and poetic texts. It relies a lot on the body. How did you convey all that in the show? What is this "madness dance" the dancer is rehearsing?

Kaori Ito: It's a traditional dance called *rambyoshi*, which I learnt from a Noh master in Japan. Dance and music are synchronised, and even though there are few movements, it's very intense. On stage, musician Makoto Yabuki uses traditional instruments, like the bamboo nohkan and shinobue flutes, but also the South American quena flute, the Japanese taiko and shime-daiko drums, or the marimba xylophone, most of which he built himself. *Rambyoshi* is full of silences, but as soon as the drums can be heard, I have to accompany them with a movement.

Yoshi Oida: *Rambyoshi* is indeed full of silences. Silence isn't a story or an emotion, but just a situation. The musician, the actor, and the dancer start breathing as one, they breathe in and breathe out together. One might think it would be a challenge for Kaori to remain immobile during those long silences, but even when she isn't moving, she's dancing.

Kaori Ito: I'm using silence a lot in my creations right now. I'm working on clearing everything out so that emotion can come in. I've been reading Zeami Motokiyo, the great Noh theorist, and I've learnt a lot about movements and postures I can see in Yoshi. It's very different from the movements of dance, the position of the body isn't quite the same. With Yoshi, the body is what first creates emotion, he chooses a posture, and then says the text.

Yoshi Oida: The body always reacts before the words can come out. Just as in life, emotion never comes after the words. If my body is afraid, then I'm afraid, and I express it. The body thinks, then uses its brain. We can't get to the truth of the text just by working on it on an intellectual level.

Kaori Ito: What I've learnt from Yoshi, and which I try to apply in the show, is the rhythm of his acting, when to keep silent, when to step back. This traditionally Japanese concept, called *jo-ha-kyū*, is the basis for the rhythm of human life and the changes in the rhythm of a performance. The tempo or the movement begins slowly (*jo*), then unfolds progressively (*ha*) and gains in intensity, until it reaches its final apex (*kyū*). It's a typically Japanese technique...

Yoshi Oida: ... it is, but all good actors know about it. In theatre, the rhythm is different, it's either very fast or very slow, because it isn't organic. In this show, we wanted to try to recreate a rhythm as close to human rhythm as possible.

It's also a show about transmission from one generation to the next. What did you learn from one another thanks to this show?

Yoshi Oida: I no longer think in terms of acting, singing, or dancing, but only of being and living on stage. Of course, the original idea was to dance, but I no longer try to categorise what I do. Kaori is like my "grown" daughter, and to be together on a stage is a great source of happiness.

Kaori Ito: *I dance because I do not trust words* was the first show I created with my father, about filiation. The very warm relationship I have with Yoshi is an extension of this. He's like a second father to me. We see each other often, he knows all about my life. When I'm at his place, I feel at home. To be on stage is also another way to spend time with him... He's very open and he's taught me to project myself. He can talk about everything, from the prewar and postwar periods to the iPad. Exchanging with him and welcoming all he can pass on to me is very rewarding. Yoshi also taught me that speaking a language less than fluently doesn't mean you can't master an emotion.

Ghosts are a recurring presence in Japanese culture, and Noh often invites the dead to haunt the living, as is the case in this show.

Kaori Ito: Yes, in Japan, it's not unusual to live with those who are gone. Noh plays begin with the entrance of a character in human form. They tell the story of their life and of their suffering. After a comic episode, they reveal their true nature as a ghost come to torment the living.

Yoshi Oida: In the ancient beliefs of all cultures and religions you'll find the figure of the revenant, under different guises. Another life after death. What we have to do here is find a way to represent that figure on stage today, in a world which no longer believes in ghosts.

Kaori Ito: The ghost exists between life and death, stuck between two worlds because of unfinished business. In Japanese folklore, ghosts can be funny or evil or even invisible. Which is funny when you think that Yoshi says in one of his books that he started acting to become invisible. And as for me, I'm trying to make the invisible visible on stage...

Jean-Claude Carrière wrote the text of the show. How did you work on adapting this traditional story, modernised by Yukio Mishima?

Yoshi Oida: Jean-Claude based the text of the show on the Noh play Mishima (with whom I was close friends) had adapted. He came to rehearsals and, together, we made a few changes. We've known each other for forty-five years and have often worked with each other. He translated and adapted plays by Peter Brook such as *The Conference of the Birds*, the *Mahābhārata*, and *The Tempest*, which I performed in Avignon in 1979, 1985, and 1991.

Kaori Ito: Getting together to create this show also allowed me to be witness to the reunion of two great names of the performing arts. For them to take part in the Festival d'Avignon, thirty years after the last time they were here in 1991, is remarkable. Yoshi is 87, Jean-Claude almost 89. This was an urgent project to work on. It might be the last show in which Yoshi dances, even though it's also the first!

Interview conducted by Malika Baaziz the 7th January 2020 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach