



MAHABHARATA - NALACHARITAM

INTERVIEW WITH SATOSHI MIYAGI

Why choose a text so emblematic of Indian culture and transpose it to Japan?

Satoshi Miyagi: Japanese culture has always been characterised by diversity—since Japan is an archipelago that sits at the extreme end of the Asian continent, many people landed there and ended up settling and living there together, because they couldn't go any farther. Among all the cultures that ran into each other on those islands, it is the two greatest Asian civilisations—the Chinese and Indian ones—that had the largest influence on Japanese culture. For instance, in the *Konjaku monogatari shū*, a collection of tales from the Heian era (9th-12th centuries), you'll find many tales from Indian folklore. They depict India as it was then imagined by the inhabitants of the archipelago. I then tried to imagine what the *Mahabharata* would have been like had it been introduced to Japan at that time. That was my starting point, my first angle of approach when adapting and directing this great text. I've come to realise, through my work, that every culture is the result of the hybridisation of several cultures. To the point that I now think that even this great epic, considered to be the spirit of Indian culture, is probably the product of hybridisations. For instance, in the *Nalacharitam*, the part we chose to adapt, there is a rather strange moment where a woman recognises her husband by the taste of the meat he cooked for her. If this moment can play such an important role in the *Nalacharitam*, it is because the cultures of more ancient people, of people who didn't practice Hinduism, were added to the *Mahabharata*. What I'm trying to say with this show is that there is no such thing as originality in culture. After observing different cultures and numerous works of art throughout the world, I've come to the conclusion that there is no such thing as a "pure" culture that would be free of external influences. All great cultures, all great works of art, evolve from the meeting and combination of foreign elements, or they couldn't reach such a stage of quality and sophistication. Culture only evolves through hybridisation. For the past year or so, I've observed the rise of nationalism throughout the world, especially in East Asia. And nationalism uses culture as one of its most useful tools. It begins with claiming that one's country has an original culture, that it's at the source of something or other, or that it's superior to others because that's where something was invented, etc. This evolution is also a result of globalisation, which has deepened economic inequalities. When you don't have any money or lack self-confidence, it's a normal reaction to look for pride in your homeland. And politicians take advantage of that feeling. This problem will only get worse, as the economy will keep getting more and more global. I'd like to continue going against the tide and say that it's in diversity that resides true worth. I would like to help people feel that it is in the cohabitation of apparently foreign things that we'll find cultural wealth, that it is much more fun that way.

Within the epic itself, why did you choose the story of King Nala, the *Nalacharitam*?

First of all because the *Nalacharitam* acts as a sort of summary of the *Mahabharata* as a whole. In it, princes gamble and lose everything, including Nala, who loses his country. So, in order to console them, a monk tells them the story of a prince. There is however a major difference between the *Mahabharata* as a whole and the *Nalacharitam*: in the latter, there is no war. It was a key factor in our choice. Because the Japanese—those of our generation, at least—may be the people that stand furthest from war in the world. They never see war or soldiers from up close; one could be tempted to say that they don't know what the real world is like. Yet if a Japanese company plays this rare epic that isn't about war, and makes the audience feel something essential about the world, maybe we will have proven that, even though we don't know anything about war, we are still able to understand the essence of the world, of what it is to be human. It seems to me that we have often put war at the centre of our understanding of humanity and of the world, because men needed it to justify their power. And if it turns out that one can understand the world without knowing anything about war, men will lose one of the arguments they use to pose as superior to women. In this *Nalacharitam* that isn't about war, the heroine Damayanti is the equal of men. That's what makes this a unique story within the *Mahabharata* as well. During World War II, Japan received a deep wound, both as an aggressor and as a victim. After the war, the army was rejected in order to offer a new way to be as a nation that one could call "feminised." But as the generations with firsthand knowledge of the war are dying out, more and more people are calling for the State to recover its masculinity. In this context, we would like to show that it is possible to understand the world without having to resort to war, which will highlight those feminine qualities.

Some have said, regarding your work on the *Mahabharata*, that it is a combination of traditional forms of Japanese theatre, *kabuki* and *bunraku*, and of modern techniques. Would you agree with this description?

Traditional Japanese theatre worked a lot on how actors use their bodies, so we always learn a lot from it. That being said, for the *Mahabharata*, we didn't really refer to the methods of *kabuki*, *nō*, or *bunraku*. We have tried to go back to the source of those theatrical forms, which led us to this version of the *Mahabharata*. My direction is characterised by my dividing the actors into three groups: those who act, those who tell the story, and those who play instruments.



This is something you'll find in *nô*, in *bunraku*, in part of the repertoire of *kabuki*, but also in Indian *kutiyattam*. In Japan, there's also what we call *kamishibai*—literally, paper drama—in which there is only one actor who tells stories by showing images, and therefore doesn't have to move or show anything with his body. This most simple means of expression is also the simplest illustration of this division of work. The audience listens to the story while watching those images, and without having to go through a complex process, they find themselves lost in the story in a most naïve way. When looked at retrospectively through the prism of today's theatre, it might seem very complex, very sophisticated. But it is quite the opposite: I think this idea of division of work is what people think of spontaneously when they want to show something dramatic in the simplest way possible. In the *Mahabharata*, we sometimes combine those very simple forms—the division of music, voice, and movements—with those of modern theatre, like “talking while moving” or “acting while playing instruments.” Our goal is not to reproduce ancient theatre, but to show the audience how stimulating it can be to recreate this simplest form of theatre with actors who have modern sensibilities.

You wanted to keep a certain distance with the *Mahabharata*. How does that translate in your direction?

My model would be the humility of the Ancient Greeks and Romans. I want nothing to do with the fantasy of human beings as able to control everything. I think it's arrogant to believe that we can control nature and the Earth, that they should be objects of research. I think we should try to regain this feeling that, in nature and in the world, there are some mysteries that we as human beings will never be able to understand. This humility is at the core of the *Mahabharata*. You can't apply the principle of causality to existence, to people and their actions, let alone to their fates. You can't explain why they do what they do, why they have to suffer the way they do, why they suddenly become happy. The *Nalacharitam* shows a human being laid bare, which rejects any kind of interpretation. You cannot approach this story without humility. As soon as you try to interpret it, you know this interpretation will be rejected. If I said that I wanted to keep a certain distance with the *Mahabharata* and the *Nalacharitam*, it is because of this humility, which forces me to admit that there will always be some part of their meaning my reason won't be able to interpret. Just like it is with the rest of the world.

Interview conducted by Jean-François Perrier and Yoshiji Yokoyoma.

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