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Yukio Ninagawa's Shakespeare Contributions

Yukio Ninagawa was and continues to be an influential director of Shakespeare. His contributions revolve around the blending of traditional Japanese cultural elements with Shakespearian texts, both translated and in English. By doing so, he both makes Shakespeare accessible to Japanese audiences, and gives Western audiences a new way to see Shakespeare. Ninagawa's talent for creating stunning visual images on stage combine with the power of Shakespeare's rich story telling to create truly effective theatre. He has shown through his many theatre troupes and studios that, even when his actors are performing in a language they do not understand, he has the power to produce popular and thought provoking theatre with almost any cast of actors, anywhere in the world.



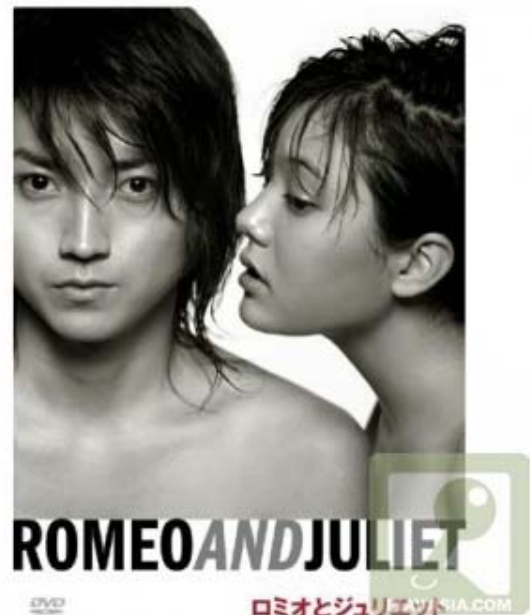
Yukio Ninagawa was born on October 15th, 1935 in Kawaguchi, Saitama Prefecture. He was the son of a tailor. He made his debut in the theatre as an actor in Seihal (Green) theatre company in 1955 at the age of twenty. Ninagawa acted professionally until 1967. At that time, he formed the small theatre company Gendaijin Gekijo (meaning Modern People's Theatre) as a director. In 1968, Gendaijin Gekijo

opened its first play directed by Ninagawa, *Shinjo Afureru Keihakus* by Kunio Shimizu. Gendaijin Gekijo disbanded in 1971.

During this time, the underground theatre movement in Japan was reaching its peak and would continue to be very popular into the 1970s. The movement of mostly small, innovative theaters undoubtedly influenced Ninagawa's directing sensibilities. In turn, Ninagawa influenced the underground theatre as one of its leading directors until he moved into commercial theatre in 1974.

The theatre company Sakura-sha (Cherry Blossom Company) was founded by Ninagawa in 1972. This company led the small theatre movement of Japan until its disbandment in 1974 two and a half years later. Sakura-sha was the last company with which Ninagawa did experimental theatre until the founding of the Gekisha Ninagawa Studio in 1984, ten years later. Ninagawa focused on commercial theatre during this ten year period, with great success.

The first commercial production Ninagawa directed was also his first Shakespearian production. The play he directed was *Romeo and Juliet*. His staging, produced by Nakane Tadao with the Nissay Theater, opened in 1974. Ninagawa portrayed Romeo and Juliet as young lovers for whom everything is moving at breakneck speed. Ninagawa was quoted as saying "In just a few days, Romeo and Juliet fall in love, marry, and die. This play



is a whirlwind. I wanted to show just how fast youth speeds by.” (Horowitz 2004)

After directing *Romeo and Juliet*, Ninagawa gained international acclaim for many productions of other western classic plays. The first of these to garner large amounts of international attention was his production of *Medea* which opened in 1978. This production played to full houses all around the globe, even in Athens, the place where *Medea* was written in 341 BCE. Ninagawa’s *Medea* was so popular that it was revived many times successfully until 1999. Ninagawa has been quoted as saying that he chose to produce *Medea* because he wanted to show the traditionally passive women of Japan that they could assert themselves. This shows that, even while working in commercial theatre, Ninagawa directed plays that he felt were timely and important to his audience.

Ninagawa directed King Lear and Hamlet along with many other plays, both western and Japanese, in the 1970s. His next major Shakespearian production was titled *Ninagawa Macbeth*. This production was wildly popular world wide and is considered his definitive international work. It made such an impression on the theatre world that entire journal articles have been written comparing it to a later production of Macbeth that Ninagawa directed in 2001 (Suematsu 2003).

Ninagawa Macbeth took place within a huge, stage sized, *butsudan*. A *butsudan* is an altar for home worship used by Buddhists. They are usually about the size of a western medicine cabinet. This framing device was meant to imply that the characters were the audience’s ancient ancestors. This idea was further fleshed out by two older female actors who opened the double doors of the *butsudan*, knelt on either side of the stage, and observed the entire production. Within the *butsudan*, a large cherry tree with

petals that fall at dramatically appropriate times sits center stage. This is an example of Ninagawa's propensity for creating elaborate, uniquely Japanese images on stage, even before any main actors appear on the stage.

The time frame of the distant past was reaffirmed by the costuming which indicated 16th century Japan. The opening scene was a dance by the witches. The witches were portrayed by *onnagata*, male actors who specialize in playing female Kabuki parts. This is appropriate because Macbeth questioned the witches' gender when he first encounters them.



The *onnagata* danced amid a swirling mass of cherry petals. This is a scenic device well known in Kabuki theatre. These uniquely Japanese details show Ninagawa's ability to marry Western and Eastern traditions.

The acting style of the actors in *Ninagawa Macbeth* was very stylized. This choice was considered by some to be stealing from traditional Japanese theatre styles such as Kabuki and Noh, but many others enjoyed the practice. While linking his production with those popular and historical traditions may have been Ninagawa's



intention, doing so had some interesting effects. For example, there is a tradition in Taishuengeki, a popular form of traveling theatre in Japan, that when the tragic hero dies,

the audience is expected to applaud. Because the acting style, set, and costumes of *Ninagawa Macbeth* reminded the audience of this type of theatre, many audience members burst into applause when Macduff defeated and killed Macbeth under a cherry tree. To a Western audience, this would have been a totally unexpected response. This, perhaps, is evidence that Ninagawa truly was aiming his production at a Japanese audience more than an international one.

Ninagawa's second staging of *Macbeth* had the goal of being different from his first production. This new *Macbeth* was closer to abstract in terms of set. Mirrors dominated the stage, reflecting the audience as well as the actors. This was probably meant to pull the audience into the world of the play by making them feel that they were connected to the actors. Sound effects of helicopters and dried lotus stalks on the stage implied a setting somewhere and sometime during the Vietnam war, but overall, the set did not set the action in an exact time or place.

The acting style of this 2001 production was also very different from the grand presentational style of the 1980 staging. Younger actors in simple, nondescript robes acted in very understated, naturalistic manners. The overarching performance that was created had, according to Michiko Suematsu, a "subtle beauty" (Suematsu 2003). However, also according to Suematsu, this later production was significantly less interesting than the original *Ninagawa Macbeth*.

Skipping backward in time to 1988, Ninagawa's production of the *Tempest* shows a third scenic approach to Shakespeare. While still influenced heavily by Japanese theatrical tradition, particularly those of Noh, Ninagawa's *Tempest* adds a layer of meta-theatricality to the mix of styles used. Prospero is the director, clapping his hands to

initiate scene changes and reading from a play book. The rest of the characters are the actors in his troupe who follow his gestural instructions. A lavish set and entrancing special effects counter the rehearsal like feeling of the production. This third broad range of Shakespeare interpretation shows another of Ninagawa's talents.

Another production directed by Ninagawa that made use of meta-theatrics was the 1998 production of *Hamlet*. Set backstage in a theatre, complete with dressing rooms, Ninagawa's production of *Hamlet* played off the script's themes of hiding truth and of appearances that do not match reality (Brokering 2007). Thirty minutes before curtain, the actors are seen getting ready in their cubicle-like dressing rooms that make up the set (Brokering

2007). As the play begins, the dressing rooms become the chambers of Elsinore castle. Ninagawa has said that he put framing devices like the one used in *Hamlet* onto



Shakespearian plays because he strongly disliked the trend in Japanese theatre of imitating Western theatrical practices. They sometimes went to the extremes of putting the actors' noses to make them appear more Western (Brokering 2007).

Ninagawa has directed *King Lear* four separate times. He considers the first two productions to have been failures. While in rehearsal for the third staging he said "I was beaten by the text [the last two times]. But this time, I'm going to win." (*King Lear* 1999)

This was the first time Ninagawa had directed an english speaking cast. Only Hiroyuki Sanada, who had played Hamlet the year before and was cast as the Fool, spoke Japanese. The rest of the cast worked with Ninagawa through his pidgin English,



translators, and creative directing.

The set of Ninagawa's 1990 production of *King Lear* was almost bare. Set up to evoke thoughts of the shade under a giant pine tree, the it was in the

minimalist style of many Noh sets which tend to lean in the opposite direction of lavish Kabuki sets. In contrast to the bare set, the acting style that Ninagawa strove for in this production was "animalistic" and wild. Reviewers disagreed on how successful this approach was. This production was another example of Ninagawa taking a Shakespearian play and giving it an Oriental flair.

When theatre reviewers and scholars think about *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, they think of circus acrobats swinging through a white room. Ninagawa wanted to change that. He chose to set his 2002 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the farthest possible way from Peter Brook's flying trapeze artists. He set it in a zen garden. Brook's concept defied ideas such as location. Ninagawa's setting was not just any garden, but specifically the rock garden at Ryoanji in Kyoto. Ninagawa said his production was meant to remind audiences of times they had done or said things in the middle of the night that, in the light of the following day, seemed absurd and embarrassing. This approach was meant to counteract the logical cognitive approaches Ninagawa had seen while in England. (Nakamura 2002)

Ninagawa's 2009 production of *Twelfth Night* took the idea of gender confusion to a new level. Ninagawa staged it in true Kabuki tradition. This meant male *onnagata* played all of the female roles. Full Kabuki white face makeup and elaborate silk costumes with fantastical ancient Japanese hats and hair pieces gave Western audiences the feeling that they were watching "some delightfully alien, highly stylized sit-com." (Hutere 2009) There was also a large amount of doubling with one actor playing both Viola and Sebastian, and another playing Malvolio and Feste. This show gave Western audiences a chance to experience some of the joy of Kabuki from the familiar safety of a Shakespearian story.



Ninagawa started The Gekisha Ninagawa Studio in 1984. He has changed its name several times over the last several decades, but it is still essentially the same organization that it was when it started. The focus has shifted away from performance and toward training for the actors. Many of the young actors who Ninagawa has worked with in what is now called the Ninagawa Studio have become huge successes.

Ninagawa's main goal in direction at the Ninagawa Studio is to create theatre. he said in an interview after 2004 that if he had "That place [Benisan, where the Ninagawa Studio meets], myself, and one actor - then we could create the theatre." Even through the rough translation from Japanese to English, the point is clear: for Ninagawa, theatre is about art, not ticket sales. More recently Ninagawa has started a theatre/actors studio for senior citizens. Called the Golden Theatre, this group works with Japanese seniors in the Saitama Arts Theatre.

A reporter for *The Japan Times* interviewed Ninagawa in October of 2002. During the interview, the reporter asked Ninagawa what theatre meant to him. Ninagawa replied "Theater provides me with a framework for communication -- I feel liberated within the fictive world of theater. It's the only way in which I feel I can truly express myself, and be myself." (Nakamura 2002)

Yukio Ninagawa is still incredibly active in the theatre profession. He is working on a project with the Royal Shakespeare Company in London to direct all of Shakespeare's plays. He has directed four films and is working on a fifth. He works with the Golden Theatre and Next Theatre, a group for young actors. At the age of seventy-five, he directs at least six productions professionally every year because he has set that goal for himself. Yukio Ninagawa is truly an international Shakespearian director.

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