



Theatre Reviews

***New Hamlet.* Dir. Aya Hayasaka. Toga-Sanboh Theatre, Toga, Toyama, Japan.**

Reviewed by *Takehito Mitsui**

In the summer of 2022, while the number of people infected with COVID-19 reportedly hit the daily record with over thirty thousand in Japan, to attend a theatre festival, I travelled to Toga, a small village surrounded by the mountains in Toyama, situated in the northwest part of the country. The normal journey from the capital is approximately four hours—thanks to the newly built bullet train line between Tokyo and Kanazawa via Toyama—, but the same trip took almost a day when Tadashi Suzuki, the acclaimed Japanese stage director, first arrived at the nearly abandoned village covered by more than three-meter-high snow in the winter of 1974. Since then, it has been the home of the theatre company SCOT (Suzuki Tadashi Company of Toga) and has also hosted the international theatre festival every summer since 1981. Many distinguished artists such as Tadeusz Kantor, Robert Wilson and Theodoros Terzopoulos have presented their works in past festivals—besides, the ninth Theatre Olympics, of which Suzuki is also one of the founding members, also took place in the village in 2019. Suzuki explains why he has chosen Toga as the base of his creation as follows:

As the rest of society—in fact the rest of the world—was following the credo of “bigger is better,” [...]. We did not believe that high budgets, immense venues and large audience turnout naturally led to artistic success. On the contrary, it was apparent to us that increasing the financial, physical and social scale of a production often severely diluted its artistic quality and impact. I found that to understand the world, both a central and a marginal point of view were necessary. (Suzuki 87)

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With the global recognition and success of SCOT, having been based in the village, suffering from ageing and a decline of its population, for over fifty years, Suzuki has certainly proved that performing arts with a firm artistic ideology can successfully flourish while rejecting urbanistic commercialism.

Despite their artistic capability and resilience having been long accumulated by the leadership of Suzuki, the global pandemic has prevented even this outstanding art establishment from organising the annual international summer festival. Yet, they did not abandon their attempt to present high-standard stage works to eager audiences who longed to attend live performances. So, instead of inviting artists outside of the country, they offered four young Japanese artists performance spaces to present their works during the summer festival, at a time when many theatre practitioners were struggling to find opportunities to perform their works in front of audiences, as the strict rule the government introduced to prevent the spread of the virus forced to shut many performing art venues. Among the pieces presented at the Toga summer festival in 2022, this paper will analyse *New Hamlet*, directed by Aya Hayakawa, with the supervision of Oriza Hirata, one of the prominent Japanese stage directors and the head of the theatre company called Seinendan, based in Toyooka, a small city, situated in the middle of Japan, where he also organises a theatre festival every autumn in following the anti-urbanistic ideology advocated by Suzuki.

New Hamlet, first published—instead of performed—in 1941, is a closet drama written by Osamu Dazai (1909-1948), a prominent Japanese writer who produced numerous popular novels such as *A shameful life* [*Ningen Shikkaku*] and *Run Melos!* [*Hashire Melos!*]. His works are not only recognised as modern classics in Japanese literature today but also have been transformed into TV dramas, films and stage productions; for example, the stage adaptation of *Good-Bye*, his unfinished novel, directed by Keralino Sandorovich and first performed in Tokyo in 2015, was reproduced in 2020 due to popular demand. However, in contrast to those novels, *New Hamlet* is certainly categorised as one of his less known works; moreover, this piece is in fact rarely performed on stage, even though it is written in a form that seems to set a lower bar for itself to convert into a stage work—I will later discuss the issues of the theatricalisation of Dazai's *New Hamlet* while examining this stage adaptation.

Hayakawa's adaptation opens with the author Dazai Osamu (Tao Kurosawa) himself instead of Barnardo's famous line during the night watch.

[...] My work is not a commentary book nor a new version of the Japanese translation of Shakespeare's Hamlet, [...] I just wrote the story of an unfortunate family while borrowing some ideas from the setting and characters in Shakespeare's original work. I, therefore, have to stress that this piece neither does contain any academic nor political messages. I only wrote this story as a part of a psychological experiment. [...] (Dazai, *Shin Hamuretto* 174)

This sudden appearance of the author of the original text might strike many audience members familiar with Shakespeare's tragedy with a simple question, 'who is there?'. The lines are extracted from the preface of *New Hamlet*—this part is curiously omitted in the English translation of *New Hamlet* by Owen Cooney, which seems to be currently the only available English translation. This explicit reminder for the spectators, in fact, is an effective—or possibly essential—theatrical device inserted into the stage version by the director in order to extricate them from the shadow of the Shakespearean play, as the story they are about to witness is not another adaptation but a new creation; otherwise, constantly comparing and contrasting it with the Elizabethan piece in one's mind, one would be puzzled or confused by its twisted storyline.

In terms of the originality of the work distinguishing from the original play by Shakespeare, as the writer also mentions later in the preface, his aim for writing the piece was to create a domestic drama regarding two families—when Danish royal household and Polonius's family. The author's intention—to conduct a psychological experiment in his writing—becomes apparent in the second scene soon after Dazai's soliloquy. Since the ghost scene is initially omitted in the closet drama, the story of the Danish royals begins with a descriptive speech by Claudius (Hiroshi Ota) explaining the reason why he has become the king of Denmark and the husband of Gertrude after the sudden death of his bother before his family members, Polonius, and Laertes.

Claudius: I want to thank you all for your help during these trying times—surely, you must be exhausted. Due to the sudden nature of the King's death, I've been forced to take the throne and hold the ceremony of marriage with Gertrude before our tears have even dried. [...] Denmark has lately been at odds with Norway, and war could break out at any moment. How could we leave the throne empty of a king, even for a day? As Prince Hamlet is too young, I acquiesced to the unanimous urging of all of you that I take power. [...] Since I'm such an inexperienced king, I would appreciate it if you would all continue to show your loyalty to me in the future and comfort my poor soul. Oh, yes, I almost forgot. Laertes, you wanted to ask me something, did you not? What is it? (Dazai, *New Hamlet*)

Claudius humbly portrays himself as a weak leader trying to earn his family's and attendants' compassion. In other words, the new king's eyes are only on building domestic concord in the castle. There is no display of a macho king with strong leadership dealing with the threat of the neighbouring enemy—i.e., ordering his attendants to send a diplomatic letter written by the king himself to Norway. This domestic theme is, as the author insists, strictly kept through the performance by the final scene in which ill-considered Claudius determines to wage war against Norway after being informed of the incident that the merchant

ship of which Laertes was on board has been attacked by the navy of the neighbouring country. Furthermore, the majority of acts in *New Hamlet* take place inside the castle. The events that happen outside are hardly enacted on stage, and the audience members become aware of them when the news is delivered to people in the castle. This domestic setting is represented by the large unbalanced wooden frame (designed by Itaru Sugiyama), seemingly reflecting the blur and wobbly relationships between the characters, on which the actors stand, sit and walk on the intimate stage painted wholly in black in the mountain cottage called Toga-Sanboh theatre.

In the performances of the Shakespearean tragedy, Hamlet is typically depicted as the only character with extreme sensitivity and a self-centred mentality. On the other hand, in this production, everyone reflects Hamlet's mentality to some extent. It can be observed that every character appears to have their own cynical view towards each other, and no truly trusted relationships are comprehensively depicted on stage. Thus, for the spectators, it seems unreasonable to depend on the remarks made by those egocentric characters. For instance, in Dazai's work, Ophelia (Yurika Seto) reveals to Gertrude (Soge Shin), who is strongly discontented with her affair with Hamlet (Morihiro Matsui), that she is expecting his baby.

Ophelia: [...] I would be happy if I could somehow feel any kind of connection to your grace. I have given up all else. For now, I only look forward to safely giving birth to Your Highness's grandchild and raising him or her to be strong and healthy. I think of myself as a happy woman. Even if Lord Hamlet abandoned me, I could still live every day of my life with joy because of my child. Your Grace, Ophelia has her own sense of pride. [...] (Dazai, *New Hamlet*)

Because of her individualistic characterisation, it may be inevitable that Ophelia's sudden confession is received with surprise—or rather confusion—by many audience members, since the firm mental connections between Hamlet and Ophelia have been merely displayed in the previous scenes. In other words, while the characters in Shakespeare tend to play their roles in bringing forward the narrative in which they exist, the characters in Dazai's work tend to prioritise their individualistic desires driven by their pure will. This might not only hinder the audience members from recognising or understanding the psychological connections between the characters through the story, but it is also almost impossible to sympathise with the characters. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons why this closet drama has rarely been performed on stage.

In order to solve this issue, Hayakawa cleverly devised the several appearances of the author himself during the show to remind the audience that the characters on stage were almost purely the creations of Dazai and

not Shakespeare. In fact, Dazai is publicly known to have had a quite cynical personality, constantly declaring his lack of self-confidence as a professional writer, even though he was one of the prominent literary figures when the piece was published. His unique personality is apparent as it is one of the main themes in his works, such as his autobiographical novel *A shameful life*, one of his best-known works. In addition, his creative intention for writing *New Hamlet* is revealed in his letter to Masuji Ibuse, a contemporary writer: “I want to write about my past life and my wounded feelings. This may be an ‘I’ novel, but it has a dramatic form. I intend to write a novel in a new style” (Okuno qtd. in Kawachi 128). What ‘a new style’ implies is that he would try to create an autobiographical story in the manner of a dramatic text. In addition, this remark may also suggest that Hamlet is not only the protagonist to play the critical role which represents the author’s personality, but all the principal characters, such as Claudius and Gertrude, Ophelia also embody Dazai’s unique disposition. Namely, the aim of his psychological experiment may have been to write a story with the main characters directly reflecting Dazai’s personality. In Hayakawa’s stage work, the frequent presence of Dazai on stage alongside those characters—see the picture of Ophelia and Dazai below—also reminds the audience members that the untrustworthy characters represent the author’s notion in parallel. With this theatrical effect, the spectators can be logically led to consent to constant scepticism displayed through this stage work in the same way as they read another autobiographical novel by Dazai.

In terms of writing the closet drama, Dazai also stresses, in the preface, that this work is not a play-script but a novel because he is not a professional playwright and does not know an appropriate style to write a play. As he argues that the piece is a novel, the lines allotted to each speaker are intended to depict the emotional exchanges between them for his readers. Overall, those dialogues tend to be rather lengthy and over-descriptive as a play-text—a stage work based precisely on the closet drama would possibly require over five hours to run through, according to Hayakawa’s direction notes (2022). In other words, if those lines are delivered by a single actor, they will stand out as a prolonged and dull speech instead of forming lively verbal exchanges. Meanwhile, the other characters on stage would have to become his/her listeners, as if they joined the audience members in the auditorium, since the other characters merely intervene in those speeches. As a result, even though the author’s intention is to create a family drama, it seems to be a fact that the descriptive lines would fail to display the dramatic tension between the characters. In so doing, it would leave very little space for the audience members to take their own interpretations of the characters’ emotional transitions into their own accounts. On the other hand, avoiding itself becoming a simple text-reading performance, this stage work has been sharply edited to fit under eighty minutes. In this way, the story, still

consisting of Dazai's original dialogues, moves at an adequately swift pace for the theatre audience without losing the quality of the intense psychological drama represented in the original writing.

This swift tempo especially serves the stage work for producing the dramatic final scene in which Claudius makes up his mind to move into a war against Norway. In terms of the story-building towards the climax, Graham Bradshaw and Tetsuo Kishi argue that this astonishing turn abruptly widens the scope of the narrative, whose theme has mainly appeared as a domestic matter in the previous scenes, whilst most of the readers presumably do not remember the hostile relationship between the two countries which is briefly discussed in the first scene (Bradshaw and Kishi 120). In other words, since the hostility against Norway is very concisely mentioned by Claudius in his opening speech, it would be difficult for the readers of the closet drama to recall. However, Claudius's decision would have been received as an actual and serious concern by the audience who has recently witnessed that a war between two countries in Continental Europe began so instantly.

Furthermore, when Dazai wrote the piece, the Japanese army was already at war with China for several years, followed by the attack on Pearl Harbour. In terms of the author's view on the war, Yoshiko Kawachi insists that *New Hamlet* should have been written on the basis of an anti-war ideology, as the dialogues between the characters express his psychological discord and his terror toward war, and a deep concern for fate is also demonstrated through them (129). This anti-war message is obscurely hidden in his writing because anti-governmental speech was prohibited by the Japanese authorities when the work was published. In other words, covering his anti-war ideology under the thread of the dialogue was an inevitable choice for the piece to be published safely without being the subject of strict censorship. In so doing, it can be assumed that the rapid, dramatic transition in the last scene resulted from the construction of the narrative that intentionally avoids heavy association with the topic of war.

On the other hand, believing that people's lives and art can coexist during wartime, Hayakawa, in the direction notes, also admits that her deep concern over the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine is reflected in her creation of the work (2022). As she suggests, unlike Dazai's closet drama, war is depicted as another central theme alongside a family drama in this stage production, and its anti-war message has indeed been received as an actual and current issue by the audience members. Reflecting Dazai's resistance to wartime censorship, it also reminds us how valuable it is to maintain the freedom of speech to enjoy the arts sincerely. Especially during the lockdown caused by the pandemic, we have suffered—or are still suffering—from the closure of the majority of arts venues. There is a considerably large number of people who have been concerned about the actions taken by the authorities and viewed them

a restriction on the freedom of speech in arts in our modern times; nevertheless, they have been inevitable measures to prevent the virus from spreading.

Finally, having experienced such a hard time for the performing arts society, the theatre festival in Toga enabled me to rediscover the joy of attending live performances. Moreover, since my visit to the village was during the time when many art venues in Tokyo were operating under strict measures introduced by the government to reduce the high number of infections, I have become thoroughly convinced by Suzuki's creative ideology, which argues that performance artists should keep a certain distance from a densely populated urban society driven by commercialism for maintaining the stability of their artistic creations and enhancing the quality of their artworks.



Ophelia and Dazai Osamu
Photograph by Rokudo Tatsuro



Hamlet (centre) and the main characters
Photograph by Rokudo Tatsuro



Dazai Osamu (second from right) and the main characters
Photograph by Rokudo Tatsuro

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