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## Performing Shakespeare in Contemporary Japan: The Yamanote Jijosha's *The Tempest*

**Abstract:** In considering the Yamanote Jijosha's *The Tempest*, this paper explores the significance of performing Shakespeare in contemporary Japan. The company's *The Tempest* reveals to contemporary Japanese audiences the ambiguity of Shakespeare's text by experimenting with the postdramatic and a new acting style. While critically pursuing the meaning and possibility of theatre and performing arts today, this version of *The Tempest* powerfully presents a critical view of the blindness and dumbness of contemporary Japan, as well as the world represented in the play.

**Keywords:** An additional ending, delusion, magic, violence, the 11 March 2011 disaster

Good books and papers on Shakespeare in modern Japan and Asia have been published (Kawachi; Kennedy and Yong; Kishi and Bradshaw; Minami, Carruthers and Gilles; Sasayama, Mulryne and Shewring; Trivedi and Minami)<sup>1</sup>; therefore, this paper does not discuss Japanese and other Asian theatres' various attempts to perform—adapt, appropriate or acculturate—Shakespeare to their respective times and locations. Instead, this paper highlights their early imitation and later radical criticism of (possibly anachronistic) Western realist productions of Shakespeare's plays, originally written and performed in early modern England. This paper considers as case material the Yamanote Jijosha theatre company's *The Tempest* performed at Theatre East, Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre in January 2015. At that time, Japan mourned the victims—18,475 dead and missing persons—of the 11 March 2011 great earthquake and tsunami in the Tohoku district and meltdown of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, unprecedented disasters which the media often showed and reported. In this context, this paper critically explores the significance of performing Shakespeare in contemporary Japan.

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<sup>1</sup> See also Hamana, "Contemporary Japanese Responses to Shakespeare: Problems and Possibilities" and "This Is, and Is Not Shakespeare: A Japanese-Korean Transformation of *Othello*."

Numerous Japanese theatre companies, both mainstream or not, have frequently performed Shakespeare's plays. Among these, the Yamanote Jijosha, a small company based in central Tokyo, deserves special consideration as it has experimented performing Shakespearean plays (e.g. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, etc.) in a variety of ways since 1995, partly inspired by Polish avant-garde theatrical theory and practice. In 2006, the company invited Piotr Cieslak, art director of Theatre Dramatyczny Warsaw in Poland, and Julia Kijowska, an actress, to produce *Ivona, Princess of Burgundia*, written for the theatre company in 1938 by the famous Polish émigré novelist and playwright Witold Gombrowicz (1904–1969) (Yamanote Jijosha n.p.). Interest in Gombrowicz's plays, which anticipated the theatre of the absurd, revived in the 1960s (Krzyzanowski n.p.). In particular, the Yamanote Jijosha, while performing in East European countries including Poland, has developed a special relationship with Polish theatre, from Yasuda's continuing interest in Jerzy Grotowski's acting training and theatrical experiments to his appreciation of Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (first published in English in 1964 and translated into Japanese in 1968).

Masahiro Yasuda and fellow Waseda University students founded the Yamanote Jijosha in Tokyo.

Since its foundation, the company has sought to create an acting style that expresses the way of living of contemporary Japanese through group creation. One of its early experiments was called "hyper-collage," simultaneous enacting of different stories on the stage. Now it is well-known for its unique performance style (known as "yojohan") and highly evaluated original reinterpretations of the classic texts of Japan as well as the West. (Yasuda, *Yamanote Jijosha* 1984 2)

In addition, the company is acclaimed for its original reinterpretations of classic Japanese and Western texts. Its recent productions include a retelling of a famous *Noh* play, *Dojyoji* (2004), based on three different sources of the same name and performed in Japan and later abroad; *Titus Andronicus* performed at the 2009 Sibiu International Festival, Romania; and *Hedda Gabler* (2014).

Discussing the company's *Titus Andronicus*, Mika Eglinton points out that Yasuda's trip to the 1997 Avignon theatre festival in search of an alternative style of acting not only led him "to explore territory outside the confines of Western realism, but it also prompted the director to question his cultural identity as a Japanese theatre practitioner" (16). Yasuda subsequently developed the *yojohan* acting method. Deeming so-called Western realist acting insufficient to reflect the realities of life in contemporary Japan, he hoped to radically deconstruct "the conditions that characterized the acting styles of Japanese traditional theatre" and confine "the movements of actors to the space of a

typical Japanese tearoom size, *yojohan*” (Yasuda, “*Yojohan: Japan is Right There*”). Yasuda believed that *yojohan* physically defines the movements of the Japanese, symbolizes the sense of constraint that many Japanese feel when caught between duty and desire and relates to the state of high mental concentration required of participants in tea ceremonies. Based on this theory, Yasuda lays out rules that actors should observe as they perform:

While standing still, pull away from the center of gravitation in your body; while moving, imagine as if you were going along a narrow path; when spoken to by another actor, freeze on the spot and listen to his/her lines attentively; when no one speaks to you, continue your movement in a slow motion. By imposing these restrictions on the movements of actors, they can express how modern Japanese people sensitively and even neurotically react to their surroundings and other people. (Yasuda, “*Yojohan: Japan is Right There*”)

Yasuda’s company might seem to employ an extremely localised and constrained acting style called *kata*. This style clearly is rooted in a contemporary urban Japanese sense of life, but its sense of concentration and restraint is felt by many contemporary people living in cities throughout the world. This style originated from physical acts commonly performed by Japanese people conditioned by a high population density and narrow spaces. It produces highly dramatic energy which appeals to audience members, awakening them to strange, beautiful impulses and drives hidden in their bodies. Yasuda’s concept of *kata*

goes against the term’s traditional meaning, which is a set of predetermined, refined, and imparted to an apprentice by a master, as in the case of *kabuki* actor training. (Eglinton 18)

Instead, *kata* is “constantly subject to revision as social structures and expressions of cultures evolve” (Eglinton 18). *Yojohan*, therefore, is both local and global, strict and flexible.

In addition to *yojohan*, the Yamanote Jijosha has developed the method of training actors, which includes body exercise through free improvisation and RPAM, or

the combination of rhythm, play, acting and movement [and] a kind of dance specially designed for modern Japanese actors who lack movement literary such as ballet and Japanese dancing. (Yasuda, *Yamanote Jijosha 1984* 18)

In *The Tempest*, the company’s actors performed sophisticated versions of RPAM, which they choreographed themselves and entitled “the tempest,” “the

island,” “nostalgia,” and “illusion.” When successful, the Yamanote Jijosha’s unique method and underlying philosophy create magic in theatre, or an “efficient and intangible vital force” that is

to some extent similar to what is referred to with the magical nature of Mana, which specialists in the field defines as the energetic of immaterial substance of a human body or object. (Maniutiu 244–45)

As suggested by the company’s engagement in improvisation and RPAM, its director Yasuda is aware of the postdramatic shift from work to event, or from text-based performance to performance event, in contemporary theatre and the performing arts, including Shakespeare performance and studies (Worthen 3–29). His company has experimented with the intensely dramatic and the postdramatic while attempting to emancipate generally passive spectators into participants.

Reviewing the Yamanote Jijosha’s *The Tempest*, Tetsuya Motohashi (n.p.), a Japanese postcolonialist theatre critic, argues that its presentation of the violence of representation inflicted by the West on natives stems from the director’s understanding of postcolonial criticism. Although Motohashi did not mention the Japanese elements of the play in his review, the company performs *The Tempest* not only as a postcolonialist work but also as a play to which contemporary Japanese audiences can relate, as discussed in this paper, particularly section 3.

### **1. *The Tempest* as Prospero’s Apocalyptic Delusion**

Following his usual practice, Yasuda composed a script for his company’s performance of *The Tempest* using Japanese modern translations by Yushi Odashima, Kazuko Matsuoka and Minoru Toyota. When effective, he also cites or mixes lines from Shakespeare’s other plays and other playwrights’ works. In *Titus Andronicus*, he conflated Shakespeare’s play and Heiner Müller’s *Anatomie of Titus: Fall of Rome*, rearranged by Yasuda and translated by Eglinton (24). In *The Tempest*, Yasuda quotes famous lines from *Hamlet* and adds a Japanese traditional folk song and a popular song, making the performance hybrid and multicultural. Shakespeare’s text is deconstructed, and the company performs drastically grotesque—at times obscene and comic—physicality and theatricality to present the world driven by sexual desire, political power struggle and violence among Prospero, Miranda and Caliban; Prospero, Miranda and Ferdinand; Caliban, Trinquilo and Stephano; and Jovanna (Queen of Naples), Sebastian and Antonio.

In the director’s note in the *Programme* of *The Tempest*, Yasuda writes that the play is often said to be about “pardoning humans” (n.p.); however, when

so read, it becomes boring. Therefore, his company presents the play as demonstrating that “humans are not pardoned” (n.p.). The play shows Prospero’s growing awareness that he cannot be pardoned. All the persons of whom Prospero has taken care—Miranda, Ariel and Caliban—betray him, letting him see his true self. He finds in Caliban the detestable aspect of himself that he has repressed, in Ariel the disorder of his own delusion and in Miranda the vulgarity of his own blood. The tempest in this play is neither in the sea nor on the island but in his own mind.

The man who cannot forgive himself neither can forgive nor cannot forgive others; rather, from the start, it is clear that he will forgive the Queen of Naples (not the King of Naples in this production) before he creates the tempest. Yasuda (*Programme* n.p.) writes that his company hopes to perform the sight that the self-unforgiven man comes to see. This bitter, distressing condition is the *mise-en-scène* of the Yamanote Jijosha’s bold reinterpretation of *The Tempest*.

Miranda, in particular, is reinterpreted in this production. She does not look like Prospero’s daughter but is middle-aged and resembles his wife or a prostitute. Although realistically she could not have grown to middle age in twelve years since she, as an infant, and her father were exiled from Milan, this production liberates her from the fixed, boring image of a pretty, chaste girl; she has her own desire and expresses it aggressively. Whether for good or ill, the spectators see a completely new image of Miranda; she is sensuous, clever and at times comic, possessing her agency. Disdaining Caliban’s lust for her, she sometimes enjoys comically having incestuous intercourse with her father on stage. When courted by Ferdinand later, she treats him sadistically.

Prospero fears that he cannot be pardoned because of his past crimes and his persistent dark desire. His painful memory and hopeless vision of the future afflict him. Despite his great sense of crimes and despair, he is far from a Renaissance magus but has become transformed into an ordinary street magician or quack. His contradictions and limitations aggravate his distress.

The play-within-a-play scene (masque) in Act 5 reveals Prospero’s limitations and contradictions. This scene performed by fairies is radically deconstructed and enacted as Prospero’s nightmare. In the middle of the masque, the lights grow darker, and he falls into a nightmare that exposes his fear and obsession. In that nightmare, he is killed by Caliban, Trinculo and Stephano and put into a coffin filled with books. Prospero then throws away the books and, quoting Hamlet’s suicidal soliloquy, says with a frown:

To be, or not to be, that is the question ... To die—to sleep,/No more ... To die,  
to sleep;/To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there’s a rub;/For in that sleep of  
death what dreams may come. (3.1.56–66)

Prospero's dream in this production represents his own death as a loss of his desire. He is revenged on himself by his own delusion. The Yamanote Jijosha's *yojohan* method yields effective performances of the breath-taking murder and resurrection of Prospero in particular.

In a critical close reading *The Tempest*, Yasuda came to doubt its prevailing vague and romantic interpretation and to feel that, instead, it presents Shakespeare's prophesy of the coming apocalypse of humankind (personal communication 18 Dec. 2014). Although Prospero in this production is driven to lord over his slaves, his subordinates subvert and betray him until he comes to say, "This thing of darkness I/Acknowledge mine" (5.1.275–76). Prospero acknowledges the darker side of humanity and Caliban's lust for Miranda as his own.

In contrast with the master–slave relationship of Prospero and Caliban characterized by mutual hatred and dependency, Ariel, an airy spirit, performs and signifies something special and elusive, although "it," like Caliban, is under Prospero's control. Today, Ariel is played by male and female actors, and the representation and gender issues of this character have been widely discussed.

But Ariel is a spirit, as he later reminds Prospero, without human feeling (5.1.20)—and the variety of disguises the spirit assumes throughout the play suggests a protean being without a fixed human shape. ... Shakespeare's treatment of Ariel seems designed to remove the spirit from the human world, to make the character a sexless shape-shifter, an "it" rather than a "she" or "he" (Dymkowski 34–35).

Discussing the question of Ariel's indeterminacy in terms of transversal poetics, Reynolds and Thompson contend that,

by embracing Ariel's textually determined feature, its otherworldliness, the character retains its transversally empowering ambiguity, even if played within the confines of the human form. (207)

They propose several non-human representations of Ariel, such as "a metal-based robot" and "a non-gendered nude" (Reynolds and Thompson 207).

These means of dehumanizing Shakespeare's sprite would free Ariel from the bounds of meaning socially prescribed onto it, as well as onto audiences, and would allow Ariel's insprited indeterminacy to be harnessed in order to inspire transversal tempests both off and on the stage (Reynolds and Thompson 208)

In the Yamanote Jijosha's *The Tempest*, Koki Ura, one of the company's most skilled actors in *yojohan*, plays Ariel as rather sexless and genderless, often with a mischievous smile, wearing small flowers and weeds in its hair, sporting a

partially painted face and patchy costume and always barefoot. While executing Prospero's orders, Ariel appears suddenly, without notice and enjoys watching the confusion it causes among other characters. The spirit also connects the stage with the auditorium, for example, sitting in the aisle and using a loudspeaker to agitate the other characters in the spirit of fun. Ura performs Ariel as an acrobatic magician who becomes a menace to his master Prospero, plagued by internal conflicts. The non-human Ariel is free from crimes, memory, dark desire and any other human element, from past illusion, present pain and any ideology or faith; consequently, he can inflict violence on humans and think it fun. In the end, Ariel is liberated from Prospero's power. This spirit which signifies transversal power might suggest the only hope for a better future for humans. Ariel has left before Prospero's epilogue ends the play, aligning this approach with Shakespeare's text. The spirit is an emancipated being, free of the order of the world—a state to which most humans aspire.

Though Prospero is destined to pardon the crimes committed by his deceivers (his brother, the Queen of Naples, Caliban), he does not feel himself pardoned from his crimes at the end of the tempest brought about by his rough magic (or a delusion in his mind). The word "despair" in his epilogue thus takes on special emphasis:

Now my charms are all o'erthrown,  
And what strength I have's mine own,  
Which is most faint ...  
Now I want  
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant;  
And my ending is *despair*,  
Unless I be relieved by prayer,  
Which pierce so that it assaults  
Mercy itself, and frees all faults.  
As you from crimes would pardoned be,  
Let your indulgence set me free. (Epilogue: 1–20; italics added)

The world falls apart, leaving behind signs in leaves and broken objects. Yasuda's direction, which incorporates elements such as a wonder cabinet, shows the influence of strong images from the postmodern film *Prospero's Books* (1991), written and directed by Peter Greenaway. Prospero, stricken with conflicts, pain, anxiety and horror, on the border of sanity and insanity, delusion and reality, a being materially and mentally falling in a destroyed world, is lit and lifted in the air by spirits for a moment, and then, the stage blacks out. His emphatic statement of "despair" rings in the audience's ears. As Prospero's play ends, the audience must depart for a future that, in all probability, will not be easy. Amid the diversity of sounds created by the spirits, some of which might sound heavenly, the apocalyptic and catastrophic sound effects or clashing

noises and visual effects used by the Yamanote Jijosha throughout its performance of *The Tempest* reminded the Japanese audience of the contemporary counterpart: the natural and technological disasters in the Tohoku district and the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant on 11 March 2011.

## 2. Caliban's Binding and Torture on Stage

In the first scene showing the tempest caused by Prospero's magic on the dark stage, sailors and other characters do not speak, while spirits portray the violent tempest through gestures and physical movements, tearing the sailors' clothes. Using letters, pictures and signs drawn on boards and pieces of paper, the spirits depict the sea and shipwreck. Spectators might see this stage structure as a mirror or parallel world. The performance event on the stage could be Prospero's illusion; the exiled duke of Milan has sought revenge, and in a delusion, Prospero imagines that the Queen of Naples, his wicked brother Antonio and their party are coming to his island in a ship at last.



Photo. Caliban and his double in the mirror world of *The Tempest*.  
Photographer: Toshiyuki Hiramatsu. Courtesy of the Yamanote Jijosha.

One of the greatest inventions in the Yamanote Jijosh's *The Tempest* is the presentation of another secondary or imaginary Caliban, bound and



sometimes tortured in the bottom of a slave ship throughout almost the entire performance event as it unfolds on centre stage. As if in the mirror world, a naked figure is bound on stage right and at times is afflicted with convulsions, groans or cries in pain. Yasuda is keenly aware of colonial violence as he deploys triple Calibans on stage: Caliban proper who is an icon of Western colonialism, along with his two illusions. The bound, tortured Caliban in a slave ship writhes in pain; when he groans, the ship slants, and the chandeliers shake. Colonial violence on the slave's body is powerfully represented in the blinking lights and the squeaking sound of the bed. In this production, looking at this tortured self, the genuine Caliban says, "He is myself. That's my identity" (Motohashi n.p.) The bound Caliban is the genuine Caliban's self in his memory as a slave, which he can now recognize. Another Caliban appears as a slave driver who tortures the slave as a colonizer's instrument. The layered representation of Caliban as native, slave and slave driver is profoundly insightful (Motohashi n.p.).

More disturbingly, the presence of this illusory Caliban bound and tortured on the stage makes the spectators witness not only past colonial violence but the dark, cruel realities of the world then and now. His pain and groans do not allow audience members to remain passive spectators but make them perceive their ethical responsibilities and their participation in history.

### 3. An Additional Japanese Ending

In the director's note about *The Tempest*, Yasuda states that he always attempts to include contemporary Japan on the stage. He thinks that Prospero's farewell to Ariel and throwing away of his magic, that is, his delusion, represent the problematic condition of contemporary Japan, where most detest the dubiousness of delusion but ironically have difficulty finding hope or vision (Yasuda, *Programme* n.p.). Prospero, who is an ordinary street magician throughout most of the play, comes to represent contemporary Japanese at the end.

The company's ending to *The Tempest* appears moderate compared to other radical endings. For instance, in the ending of the Yamanote Jijosha's *Titus Andronicus*, performed in the shadow of 11 September 2001, the revenge cycle ends with the death of Titus, but another cycle is born with the rise of Aaron as a terrorist, who alone rises and walks menacingly along an imagined, narrow path into our daily world (Yasuda, "Talk" 4). In a 2009 postcolonialist production of *The Tempest* directed by Janice Honeyman, as "Prospero leaves the stage, Caliban, throwing off the two crutches he has been leaning on all through the performance, is the last visual image before the lights black out" (Heijes 139). Similarly, the Yamanote Jijosha's *The Tempest*, radically and critically questions

the contemporary Japanese way of life represented by Prospero. Life itself appears as a kind of magic containing all elements, from the grotesque, dubious, erotic and violent to the beautiful. In the pursuit of the cool, comfortable, easy and rational, the contemporary Japanese do not face the reality or truth of life. In Yasuda's view, those who cannot look at reality, regardless of how grotesque or hopeless it might be, cannot find true hope or vision, as those who have experienced the bottom of life dare to. The Yamanote Jijosha's ending of *The Tempest* presents a powerful, critical view of the blindness and dumbness of contemporary Japanese society.

When the epilogue is spoken, the stage blacks out, with a spotlight left on the grief-stricken Prospero lifted at centre, as discussed in section 1. His emphatically spoken word "despair" hangs in the air, while the audience listens in darkness to legendary popular singer Momoe Yamaguchi's song "Days That Used to Be (*Iihi Tabidach*)."<sup>2</sup> Following the company's practice of using a mix of music, Western, Asian, classical and popular, *The Tempest* presents a variety of music, including Western classics and traditional Japanese folk songs, such as *Tsugaru Jongara Bushi*, and instruments, such as pipes. The play concludes with Yamaguchi's song:

I hear a voice—It sings to me  
 The ancient calling of the sea  
 It's bringing back to me a memory  
 Of days that used to be  
 My dear old friends—I remember them  
 They'll never pass this way again  
 I'm left alone, and I think back then  
 Of days that used to be  
 Somewhere someone is waiting just for me  
 A special someone who shares the calling, calling of the sea ...  
 I'm gonna leave the past behind  
 And shake all sad thoughts out of my mind  
 I know a new life now I will find  
 But what must be, will be.<sup>3</sup>

Yasuda makes the audience listen to this sentimental, well-known J-pop song for several possible reasons. There is no overt connection between Shakespeare's

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<sup>2</sup> The title of the song "Iihi Tabidachi," written and composed by Shinji Tanimura in 1978, literally means "a nice day for departure." It was translated into English and made into a great hit entitled "Days That Used to Be," written by Clive Scott and Des Dyer and sung by the Nolan Sisters, an Irish-born British female group, in the 1980s.

<sup>3</sup> The English-language version of "Days That Used to Be," written by Clive Scott and Des Dyer, represents the sentimental atmosphere and overall mood of the original Japanese song.

play and the song, except for the reference to the sea; the original version of the latter suggests the northern sea. As Prospero seems ready to return to his homeland, the narrator of in this song prepares to depart on a journey, likely to the north. Life is not always easy and, indeed, seems to be becoming harder in contemporary Japan. The song, with which most Japanese, old and young, are familiar, serves as a device to return the Japanese audience members from the violent performance event on the stage to their daily life with a sense of familiarity, sentimentality and relief. At the same time, the song recalls for the audience the 11 March apocalyptic disaster in the Tohoku district. Reflecting contemporary Japan and taking a critical view of the nation, the song helps the Japanese audience feel relief while mourning the victims of the great disaster.

### Conclusion

Shakespeare has long been respected as a prestigious British great dramatist and has been translated, adapted and produced on stage and in film in Japan since the Meiji Era. He has also been appropriated, recycled and commoditized in contemporary popular culture. While losing his traditional authority and legitimacy, Shakespeare has managed to survive. The cynical critical discourse fashionable in certain circles does not tell the whole story about the performance of Shakespeare in contemporary Japan. Although limited in number, small theatre companies such as the Yamanote Jijosha perform his plays with a strong sense of socio-political criticism and theatrical originality, eschewing a commercial, capitalist spirit that anything goes if the playhouse is full. Instead, these companies present Shakespeare in a manner to which contemporary Japanese audiences can relate, retaining the underground theatrical spirit of resistance against the establishment.

In considering the Yamanote Jijosha's *The Tempest*, this paper has explored the significance of performing Shakespeare in contemporary Japan. The company's *The Tempest* reveals to contemporary Japanese audiences the ambiguity of Shakespeare's text by experimenting with the postdramatic and a new acting style. While critically pursuing the meaning and possibility of theatre and performing arts today, this version of *The Tempest* powerfully presents a critical view of the blindness and dumbness of contemporary Japan, as well as the world represented in the play.

Although Yasuda refers to Shakespeare's works as classics, we see on stage no old-fashioned play but a deconstructed, glocalised performance event, revamped for its contemporary local audience. Theatre and performing arts have long confronted a crisis. They do not generate economic profits and so will neither defeat nor even compete with fields such as information technology and medicine in terms of market economy supremacy. Nevertheless, we need theatre

and the performing arts to learn the value of freedom, criticism and ethics, and we need theatre companies such as the Yamanote Jijosha, filled with a bold spirit of experimentation. We can reconfirm the value of extraordinary imagination on verge of delusion and the creativity of theatre and performing arts through the company's inventive performance of Shakespeare's works in Japan and abroad.

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