

Tradition and Creative Power in Theater

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Japanese culture has gone through significant changes in the postwar period, and I would like to discuss some of those changes and their ramifications. When human beings find themselves in contact with nature or with the world around them, they respond based on their perceptions of the external stimuli. These perceptions come from the notion of the five senses, and the rules that condition and modify those responses to stimuli are what I would call culture. Culture comes from the rules that accumulate over time in a group as ways of organizing animal impulses to stimuli. A key factor in this process is the fact that within any group or collective, there must be a shared trust in those rules. In other words, the rules do not function unless there is a mutual trust in them by members of the collective. From this point of view, culture exists in the way that animal energy is utilized within the group and the shared trust in how that energy is controlled. We therefore tend to look at culture in terms of the manifestations of those conditioned responses, for example the arts, sports, sexual activity, or cooking. The ways in which those manifestations differ from group to group, especially between ethnic groups, are what we tend to identify as cultural realities or as culture itself.

Contemporary society is characterized by a strong emphasis within the five senses on the visual sense and on information or perceptions gained through that sense. Accompanying that emphasis is an exaggerated related emphasis on the cultural rules that we end up basing on visual recognition. The difficulty with connecting culture to the visual sense is that the way in which we use visual recognition in contemporary society is not based on animal energy exclusively. In many cases, we are now using other non-animal sources of energy such as electricity, petroleum, and nuclear energy to create the visual domain. Because visual perceptions are now shifting to these other forms of energy, the patterns of conduct and patterns of culture that are based on those perceptions are also changing. If we look at computers, it becomes very evident. We now are communicating more and more through computers and computer networks, and this utilizes non-animal energy. In this type of realm, things like friendship, which used to be based on sensual animal contact between people, can be displaced into a completely non-animal, purely visual realm through something like email. Japanese society is no exception to this change that is taking place globally. The way in which animal energy is being utilized within Japanese culture and the rules that are emerging from that process are changing. As a theater artist, I am engaged in work that is based on or rooted in animal energy. As such, I am interested in examining these changes to Japanese daily life and particularly to the Japanese culture of the body that emerges from that life, as daily life used to have strong connections to all of the senses. It is out of that body culture that the Japanese performing arts emerged, and, as a result, the performing arts now are going through a transformation.

The performing arts, in particular theater, comprise two forms of expression: physical and linguistic. In looking at theater, many people think of the written text or the script as being the source and see the process of creating theater as a process of translating the play as a text into

time and space through the acting. However, when one looks at history, it becomes evident that actors-this group of specialized people who express with their bodies-came first and that the text and the tradition of dramatic literature emerged as a way of giving people access to those performers. Written plays were contexts for performance, not the other way around. As we entered the modern age, there was an explosion of interesting playwrights. There were more and more great playwrights building up a body of work that was to a certain extent trans-cultural and trans-linguistic (i.e., that could be translated), so it was very easy for people to see those works as the source of theater. Playwrights increasingly became recognized socially in their own right, independent of performance, and became more literary figures. What has happened as a result is that playwrights have come to be viewed more as members of the literary world than of the theater world.

Japanese people have been relatively isolated from the "literary first" perception of theater and the performing arts. The simple reason for this is that, in Japan, there have been collectives of actors who have been using their bodies and voices in very specialized ways to perform in distinct ways for hundreds of years through forms such as Noh and kabuki. Throughout history, watching these people perform and vocalize has been a valid form of entertainment. This led to a relationship between the language and our perception of the relationship between the words being spoken and the movement of the body that made it difficult to separate them into just "literary" and "performance." This process has been maintained to some degree since the time of its conception and has had an influence on the culture as a whole as well as on the rules of how performance is perceived and how the body and its relationship to text have been perceived. In contemporary times, a good number of people in and outside of Japan have placed a great amount of importance on the performing arts in Japan as the epitomes of Japanese culture or as high examples of what Japanese culture is. These traditions, however, began to change quite drastically in the 1960s.

There are two critical factors to consider when looking at this transformation. The first is a very conspicuous change in residential architecture in Japan in the 1960s. In 1955, the Japanese government created the Public Housing Corporation to provide low-cost housing to the Japanese people. The other factor to consider is the so-called IT revolution-the information technology revolution of the 1990s. These two factors have had a profound effect on not only the conduct of everyday life in Japan but also the physical sensibility of the Japanese body. The consequence of that change on this sensibility has been a change in verbal expression, because the two cannot be separated. This in turn has led to a transformation of not only human contact but human relationships within society.

In 1955, ten years after the end of WWII, the urban population in Japan surpassed the rural population in terms of numbers. It was a time of incredible economic growth, as well, and the very structure of Japanese society began to change. The so-called energy revolution, which was a switch from the use of firewood and coal to oil and electricity, was occurring at the same time as part of this process. As a result of these changes, the primary industries, which were based on direct animal energy, (i.e., agriculture, fisheries, and forestry) declined. The population moved to the cities, resulting in 70% of the population living in urban areas. The Japanese government had to build housing complexes and apartments containing very small residences of approximately 40 square meters (approximately 400 square feet). This was made possible in large part, of

course, because American bombing had destroyed the houses of 80% of the population. Each one of these new apartments was concrete, and they were divided up into very small individual rooms, which could be individually locked or closed. This change in architecture had a drastic effect on the shape and structure of the Japanese family. It promoted and accelerated a change into a nuclear family structure from what previously had been very large family units living in three-generation households, which had been the foundation of Japanese family structure up until that point.

This situation brought about a change in the basic Japanese physical sensibility. In traditional Japanese homes, there is an alcove in some part of the house called the *tokonoma*. Another feature of these homes is wooden floored hallways and platform areas called *roka*, which can be loosely translated as "hallways." Most rooms in Japanese-style houses before WWII had *tatami* floors, and in the most important room (i.e., the room where the patriarch lived or the room where the guests were received) is where one would find this alcove or *tokonoma* area. This feature first emerged in the Muromachi period, and it was called the *oshi-ita*. It was made just with pressed boards and was found only in the residences of Buddhist priests. It was a somewhat sacred space, where a painting of religious significance would be hung and incense would be burned. In the Edo period, the boards were replaced with *tatami* mats, and the *tokonoma* became a place where the *daimyo* or the *shogun*, the figure of authority, would sit. In the Meiji and Taisho periods, it became popular even among commoners to have a *tokonoma* in their house, which previously had been forbidden. Typically, the leader of a group or the patriarch in the family (whoever had some sort of authority) would sit in a position in front of the *tokonoma*. What this development implied was that even common houses in Japan had vestiges of authoritarian power as well as religious power built into their homes. In effect, this was a feature of the architecture and the rooms in a Japanese house had a hierarchical organization within the space itself. Of course, the argument could be made that this feature was just a relic of feudal Japanese life from pre-modern Japan.

The effect of the *tokonoma* on the Japanese physical sensibility was the creation of a space that had a center—a space with a starting point or a hierarchy, in other words a class order within the structure of the space itself. A person who is sitting with the *tokonoma* behind him/her has to be constantly conscious of his/her position and how he/she is being observed by the others in the room as the authority figure. The offshoot of this fact is that even when somebody is in a room alone without the authority figure, there has to be a physical intelligence and awareness in that person's body. This awareness is rooted in the power relationship with the authority figure, which results in a disciplined and sensitive physical sense. The room itself demands a physical consciousness similar to acting and what one engages in during performance.

In traditional Japanese theater, the space where the performance occurred also had a centrality or a hierarchical structure. In Noh theaters, there were seats where the deity and the *shogun* would sit together. In kabuki theaters, there is a turret called the *yagura* over the entry area, which is the access-way for the deity to descend into the theater. All of the actors' actions and all of their words are directed in some sense toward this important center. The audience is watching the actors relate to a center, so ultimately this is what the audience perceives as acting or as performance. In certain Noh and kabuki plays, there are points where a performer will come to the center and bow toward that space. It is very easy to mistake this for bowing to the audience,

but this is not the case. The actors are actually acknowledging the center of the space; they are acknowledging the deity. Among the members of the younger generation in Japan today, it is very common to mistake this for bowing to the audience, because they are the ones buying the tickets and paying the bills. They are sustaining the actors in the same way that the gods used to, so this is perhaps an understandable error. Ancient Greek theater can be interpreted in the same way given the fact that some of the theaters had a specific seat reserved for the priest of Dionysus and the performances were no doubt in some sense centered toward that point in the theater.

Let us look briefly at the history of the development of the theatrical body or the theatrical focus. If we start with ancient theater, which, as just discussed, constitutes a space with a strong sense of a center, the actors' primary relationship is with that center. Their movement becomes vertical in a sense: upstage and downstage. They are moving toward and away from the center of the space. This becomes the primary access of movement and the primary relationship in that space. In the modern era, we have Chekov and Ibsen, and we no longer are concerned with the viewpoint of the gods or the king who might be sitting in the room. We now are dealing primarily with the other actor or rather another character in the play. As a result, the primary access has turned sideways, and the movement now is left to right in relation to another person. Then, if we move all the way up to Samuel Beckett, suddenly the other person has disappeared as well and he now has gone completely inside. You are listening to a voice on a tape or you just have the neck exposed as in "Happy Days," where you don't even need the body anymore and the self has become the focus to which one is directing the action. In simple terms, you have taken this focus that used to exist between the actor and a deity, which is something on a cosmic scale, and you have brought it, through Beckett, all the way into the self. You have collapsed it all the way inside. If we look at American musicals, we have "A Chorus Line," which could very well be seen as a parody of ancient theater, because you have the actor and the relationship with an authority figure or a deity who is making all the decisions. The performers are facing forward like classical actors. Then you hear the voice of god.

We now have the Japanese nuclear family living in these small concrete rooms, and that sense of an access or that sense of a centrality to the room is lost. When there is a *tokonoma* in these spaces, one will find that the television now occupies it. The position of prestige within the room (the place where the authority figure or the patriarch is going to sit) has become the place with the best view of the TV, which is of course where the lowest status person used to sit. Since the TV now occupies the space of the highest status person, the situation has become completely reversed. This, from some people's point of view, represents the success of Japanese democratization. The other feature of the traditional Japanese home that these Public Housing Corporation homes eliminated was the *roka*, or the hallways. Traditional-style houses would have long passageways usually with paneled wood as a floor. These passageways would be situated between rooms, much like a western hallway. There were also specific kinds of these hallways that would run between the rooms and the garden on the outside edge of the house, somewhat like a western porch or patio, thereby forming a space between nature and the interior. In either case, these *roka* usually would lead deep into the back of the house, where they would connect to special rooms (i.e., rooms that would be reserved for special occasions, rooms where guests would stay, or rooms where the important people would stay). Walking on the wood of the *roka* would require of the person, or of the body, a concentration similar to what an actor

needs to exercise while walking on the *hashigakari* in Noh or the *hanamichi* in kabuki.

This type of hallway is made out of wood. It is usually very smooth and therefore slippery. Particularly when one is wearing socks, it is very easy to slip and fall, so one cannot move very fast. The partitions between the hall and the rooms are usually just paper walls or paper doors, on the other side of which somebody might be sleeping, entertaining a guest, or thinking. There are other people in the space with you, and, as a result, the physical sensibility that is engendered in someone living in a space like this is one that allows the person to move along these hallways very quietly and unobtrusively. Specifically, one develops a very thorough understanding of the use of the lower body that allows one to walk while keeping the center of gravity from moving up and down at a steady and constant rate and to kneel down without the knee suddenly clunking down onto the floor. One is able to exist and work in that sort of environment while being aware of others in the space with you and aware of their awareness of you. Consequently, everybody is actually in the space together. The presence of other people is a constant reality within the living space. This has resulted in a situation where, for example, if the lighting was to suddenly go out in a Noh play, most of the actors would not necessarily fall off the stage. Noh actors have a highly developed sense of their contact with the floor and knowledge of the space, which is encoded in their bodies. Most other performers, on the other hand, would probably stop the performance for fear of falling off if the lights suddenly went out.

The foundation of the physical sensibilities that supported the Japanese performing arts existed in the lifestyle engendered by the architecture of the homes. With the *tokonoma* and the *roka*, people were in a sense receiving fundamental actor training just by growing up in their houses. Noh and kabuki have taken that base that one was obtaining at home and heightened it; they have taken it to a relationship with the space in theater created specifically for acting and for specialists in physical expression. In the 21st century, however, Japanese traditional homes have become extraordinarily expensive to live in, so it now is very rare for young actors to have the opportunity to grow up in such a home. Therefore, in order for these same basic physical sensibilities to be part of the foundation of the actor, we are forced to come up with contexts in which actors can be consciously trained in these sensibilities. Speaking Japanese, especially speaking Japanese forcefully in a public forum, requires a breathing technique called abdominal breathing. This is not specific to Japanese but is a definite feature of the language. It requires breathing deep in the abdomen-lowering the diaphragm to get air deep into the abdomen without involving the shoulders or the chest. Linguistically, the syntax of Japanese is such that words indicating intent come at the very end of a sentence. This means that the way in which one controls one's breath when speaking Japanese needs to be very carefully modulated to allow enough breath to express strong intent at the end of a long sentence. Accordingly, knowing where one is in one's breath while speaking Japanese becomes very important. Even the Japanese language and Japanese thought are full of references to breath as an essential part of spiritual or psychological life. When talking about somebody having died, one doesn't say that their heart has stopped; rather, one says that they've breathed their last breath. Finding accord with somebody, forming a friendship with somebody, or syncing in with somebody would be referred to as your "breath matching"-that you "breathe together." This technique was being taught to Japanese unwittingly through another architectural feature of the traditional Japanese home: the traditional Japanese toilet.

For a period after the end of the war, Noh and kabuki actors, as well as other traditional performers, experienced very difficult times. They didn't enjoy very much support, and there were few opportunities to perform. There was a producer/director at the time named Takeshi Tetsuji, who helped these performers greatly by providing them with opportunities to perform and by offering financial aid. He once said to me that what would ruin traditional Japanese culture was not the American Occupation or American culture (right after the beginning of the Occupation, kabuki was criticized as feudalistic and performances were forbidden for a while). He said that it was the dissemination of the Western-style toilets Americans brought with them. His theory was based on the fact that there is no actual contact between the body and the porcelain with the Japanese-style toilet, as it requires one to squat-it's a stylized trough of sorts. One squats and lowers the hip, and, in this way, Japanese people have learned how to put strength in their lower body in a specific way that is necessary to make a bowel movement. If one is there for a long time, one's legs go to sleep. It is not an especially comfortable position to be in for a long time, so one learns to take care of one's business very quickly. This requires very specific control of the breath and of the lower body muscles that regulate breath. Now that Western toilets are predominant in Japan, the physical ability to concentrate the energy in the lower part of the body is being lost, because one can just sit there for as long as one likes. Traditional toilets have become harder and harder to find, and one could argue that the Japanese control of breath is being lost as a result of this change. Even if there are holes in this theory, there is some merit to it. We can see that the disappearance of the *tokonoma*, the *roka*, and the Japanese-style toilets have had a transformative effect on the basic physical sensibilities of people entering the Japanese performing arts.

If one looks at Noh and kabuki actors and other traditional Japanese performing artists, one can see that there are certain physical sensibilities that are very important to these performers. The strength or weakness, depth or shallowness, and timing of the breath are very important. The sensibility of the feet in relation to the floor or the tactile sense of the feet against the floor, along with the ability to have a steadiness in one's center of gravity when moving through space horizontally, are all sensitivities that are central to the performer. In the Japanese language, the lack of control or physical sense in these areas also is reflected in parts of the language that refer to psychological issues. For example, if you are getting flustered, irritated, or out of control, the expression is that you are "going up," that the tension is "going up," that you are becoming "high" in a sense, or that your voice is "rising" to a high tone. These expressions are rooted in the physical sensibility of the breath rising into the upper half of the body when you are in a psychological state like that and have lost control of your breathing. People who are not mature, who cannot be trusted, or who are not settled "don't have their feet on the ground" (we have a similar expression in English), but the Japanese expression stresses the touching of the foot to the ground. That "your hip is not set" is another expression to convey somebody who is not yet set in life, so the criteria of the stability of the center of gravity and the sensibility of the feet to the floor clearly were very common within the Japanese physical sense. These expressions emerged in the language because there were shared criteria or shared values concerning physical experiences. There was proper and improper physicality for the Japanese body, which came directly out of the shared experience of living in a Japanese home.

The collaborative expressive capability of the Japanese traditional performing arts, which has been praised throughout the world, is in large part rooted in these commonly shared values in the

rules of physicality. However, the current conditions in Japan are eroding these sensibilities, and Japan's performing arts are losing those outstanding characteristics that have brought it to the fore. There are other ethnic arts that actually are producing more interesting work. That sense of physical expression is being sapped out from the culture itself, and within Japan, it's very drastic. Looking at traditional performing arts now and young actors in particular, it is very rare to see a performance, even in kabuki, where the breathing is done well and the control of pitch and tone is carried out with the art with which it once was done. It is rare to see the control of the language or the horizontal movement being executed with the kind of skill (without any wavering in the upper half of the body) that used to be a matter of course. What we are seeing is that kabuki actors are becoming better suited for acting in musicals, which is happening in many cases and actually is quite interesting in some cases. Young theater-goers in Japan perhaps have the feeling that they are becoming more familiar with English and American culture. It might actually be more interesting for young Japanese audiences if American actors came and performed kabuki plays.

With respect to how the Internet and cell phones and similar technologies have changed the Japanese sense of space and physical sense, I had an experience that essentially summed it up for me. A few years ago, I went into a public restroom in Tokyo and heard a voice coming from a stall of a person speaking very loudly and angrily, obviously into a cell phone. I could not see this person, but he was somebody from a securities firm or bank and was speaking to an underling, haranguing him about the treatment of a client. Being a curious type with lots of imagination, I stood there and listened for a while. Eventually, I began to wonder if this person had come in here to use the toilet or to sit on the toilet to make a phone call. If the phone had rung while he was taking care of nature's call, it would have meant that the person was naked from the waist down while having this conversation. He is aggravated, he is conducting international business, and his voice can be heard throughout the whole public toilet, but he seemed to be completely oblivious to this situation. From the point of view of Japanese culture of a few years ago, this behavior is complete and utter insanity. He is in complete disregard of others who might be in the space with him at any time, and he is spending a lot of time on a toilet. I began to wonder if the ultimate thrill for this person might not be to have a computer built into the wall of the stall and have a little stand beside him with a coke and some potato chips so that he could sit on the toilet and communicate with the world via the Internet with his pants down around his ankles.

When I was young, I used to feel very awkward speaking to people on the telephone. I couldn't judge from the person's voice what the response to what I had said had been and didn't want to misunderstand their reaction just based on their voice and their pronunciation of the words. I wanted to see their face and speak directly to them, face to face. Therefore, whenever I had something important to talk about, I would always make sure that the discussion took place in person so that I could see the other person's face. Recently, I heard a young person state the following: "We couldn't solve the problem by email, so I had to face them by cell phone." Now even the English expression, "to face them," is an expression that involves the body; it assumes physical presence. What this person was going to be face to face with was in fact a cell phone, not the other person. Speaking directly to somebody requires the other body, technically speaking, so in this statement we can see how new technologies and the use of non-animal energy as a means of communication are changing even the Japanese language in terms of the

basis of how communication takes place.

I have taught my training methodology outside of the context of Japanese culture, directed quite a bit using foreign actors, and done productions exclusively with foreign actors a number of times. On those occasions, what was freshest or most stimulating to me was working with actors who have mastered their own traditions and have a sense of command over a specific tradition other than Japanese tradition. What happens in that process is that while respecting one another's differences, oftentimes a completely new element emerges in the work that is of neither tradition. Tradition is something that provides a step toward creation or toward something new. Tradition is not something to be protected; it is something to provide a springboard for creation. Tradition is there to change and to create by constantly grappling with traditions of other kinds. Even with respect to Japan, it's easy to think of Japanese traditions and culture as having evolved within a homogeneous ethnic group living in Japan, but that's not in fact true. Japanese traditions and culture evolved out of friction with other cultures.

As globalization progresses and economic and communication systems create standardization throughout the world, people are going to continue to confirm the similarities that we share as human beings. At the same time, they are going to be constantly reexamining the distinctions in cultural aspects, such as differences in religion, language, values, and systems of government. People will question each other as to the identity of the countries to which they belong and who they are. What will be brought forth in this, no doubt, is an awareness of culture and tradition. In the case of Japan though, the current trend is to forfeit thinking about this kind of national identity in relation to cultural traditions. Because of economic prosperity, Japan became a world power, and it lost the spiritual attitude to seriously face this kind of question. As a result, when identifying the uniqueness of one's own national culture, people without fail come up with aspects of the culture that existed before WWII. They can't seem to see that this essence is changing, as just discussed, and that many of the things that are still visible and tangible are simply a framework and are there for the purpose of re-creation. Contemporary Japanese culture tends to want to protect these things, but it needs to be re-created. There is a rich amount of material with which to carry out this re-creation, and it's certainly not too late to start. The actor training methodology called the Suzuki Method was created in order to try to find ways for these Japanese traditional aspects of performance to be utilized in a more global sense in contemporary theater. It was one attempt to try to transform and continue tradition.

Finally, I'd like to add that many of the activities that are recognized both in and outside of Japan as Japanese cultural traditions, whether in religion or the performing arts, were persecuted by political authorities and scorned by the populace at the time of their initial development. In particular, the founders of many of these great art forms and those who made contributions to these developments were murdered, died destitute, or were forced to abandon their causes against their will. However, these defeats in their lives in the mundane world were merely manifestations of the continued spiritual fight to achieve human freedom. The battle, depending on the objective, was not one merely fought against the authorities or the populace of the times but rather was a battle against the eternity of time. What these people were trying to establish were forms or ideas of movement and activity in connection to space that could transcend time and would continue to exist even after they passed away. Many of what are called Japanese traditions, no matter what time or environment they emerged from, have remained unchanged in

form in relationship to space because of the enduring value of these earlier works that set these very solid things in space. Therefore, when looking at tradition, we must be very careful to see the visible, tangible manifestations of traditions as being supported by invisible spiritual traditions. To consider only the external forms of traditions as valuable is contrary to the Japanese spiritual tradition, which has been a series of these battles through time.

Many theater artists throughout the world are striving to create contexts in which disparate traditions, values, and people can communicate and coexist in a rich environment. This *raison d'être* for theater is socially and culturally very significant and worth preserving. To this end, I'd like to ask all of you to continue in your support of theater and the performing arts, both materially and spiritually.