RIVISTA DI STUDI
antropologia e teatro

ARTICOLO

Shakespeare on the Edge of Intercultural Theatre: Lear Dreaming by Ong Keng Sen, a New *Nō* Performance

By Monica Alcantar

Abstract – ITA

Questo articolo mira a fornire un quadro generale ed introduttivo dell'intervista condotta il 30 aprile 2021 con l'autore teatrale singaporiano, nonché uno dei principali sostenitori dell'interculturalità teatrale, Ong Keng Sen. L'intervista vuole portare alla luce uno degli ultimi lavori del maestro, *Lear Dreaming*, in anteprima a Singapore nel 2011 e presentato a Parigi nel 2015. Coprendo un'ampia gamma di prospettive riguardanti le collaborazioni professionali di Ong con attori ed addetti ai lavori, si delineano le diverse strategie con cui il suo lavoro si esplicita, non solo da un punto di vista produttivo ma anche come innovatore delle tradizioni teatrali asiatiche.

Abstract – ENG

This article provides a general framework to the interview with Singaporean theatre creator and foremost advocate of Asian interculturalism, Ong Keng Sen, conducted on 30th of April, 2021. Aiming to focus on one of his latest works: *Lear Dreaming*, which premiered in Singapore, 2011 and was presented during the Singapore Theatre Festival in Paris, 2015, the interview covers a wide range of perspectives regarding Ong's collaborative practice and the different strategies his work engages with, not only from a production point of view but also as part of a constant exploration regarding the continuities of contemporary practice of Asian theatre traditions. Harnessing the results from the unavoidable disruptions within the different traditions, his work enables an artistic practice that is acutely mindful of cultural mobility by exploring every possibility of innovation without losing sight of its relevant traditional background.

ANTROPOLOGIA E TEATRO – RIVISTA DI STUDI | N. 13 (2021)

ISSN: 2039-2281| CC BY 3.0 | DOI 10.6092/issn.2039-2281/13709
Iscrizione al tribunale di Bologna n. 8185 del 1/10/2010

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Shakespeare on the Edge of Intercultural Theatre: *Lear Dreaming* by Ong Keng Sen, a New *Nō* Performance

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Introduction

Characterized by an unbroken practice that spans over six hundred years, the present-day *nō* theatre incorporates different interpretations and ideological trends.

Considering the specific historical and cultural frameworks, the origins of *nō* performance can be traced back to the end of the twelfth century, a time of immense political transition from the Heian Imperial Court to Kamakura warrior aristocracy, which saw sociopolitical divergence. Some historians, however, go even further back into the eighth century, suggesting a hybridization with different forms of performance that eventually transformed and contributed to the development of certain religious rituals. Early modern views at some juncture focused on *okina*, part of the *shikisanban* ceremony, singling it out as a foundational root of *nō* dance, attributing to it a symbolic representation of the threefold body of Buddha (Pinnington 1998: 509). Towards the end of the Edo period and the beginning of the Meiji era, religious syncretism was de-emphasized, favouring interpretations under asserted beliefs that *okina*'s ritual form derived from Shintō native traditions (Rath 2000: 256).

The aim of this paper is not to relate *nō*'s theatrical conventions nor its poetics to its presumable origins, which have been discussed elsewhere at greater length in connection to specific historical readings and revisions related to certain institutional legitimation and extra-performance linkages with different loci of authority, either cultural, political or economic. Our intent is not exactly to root out the significance of *nō*'s early beginnings to explain its historical specifics and justify a normative discourse prescribing what *nō* generically is or should be. Rather, we are more engaged with what *nō* actually becomes when, in tension with contingent influences and put under stress through intersections across disciplinary boundaries that challenge customary creative approaches, that is, when its horizons between contemporary *nō* performance and its alterity are emancipated.

Considered the oldest form of Japanese drama, characterized by an extremely stylized aesthetic that involves the use of masks and a rigorously choreographed behaviour by the actor on stage, *nō* theatre was generated and developed throughout specific genealogical lines during the mid-Muromachi period (1336-1573). Although the roots of *nō* took hold earlier in medieval Japan, Kita school—the latest school to gain recognition from the Shogunate—was not established until 1616, coincidentally the year of Shakespeare's death.

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Iscrizione al tribunale di Bologna n. 8185 del 1/10/2010

An efficient transmission of the performance technique enabled the *nō* actor to thrive among fierce competition throughout specific legitimation strategies. Interacting with values, contents and references from philosophical and poetic traditions, the actor conveys an artistic endeavour that functions as cultural capital that is recognized and sustained to the present day by different communities and institutional frameworks. Most influential in the development of *nō* is its pedagogical system that relates to pre-modern structures where the primordial essence of creativity seems reserved only for experienced actors who have lived and maintained an enduring practice within the traditional circuits (Brandon 1967: 154-167). This preserves and reproduces a hierarchical order and reaffirm familial and professional boundaries embedding *nō* in a perception of re-production paradigm, contradicted sporadically by newly composed, contemporary productions.

Although *nō* theatre production has a fixed dramatic repertoire with strict rules governing every aspect of its performance, a strong conviction for the renewal of its traditional performing device has received conspicuous attention. Newly created *nō* plays are produced sporadically, and very few become admitted as part of the established repertoire.[1] Although during the Edo period (1600-1867) *shinsakunō* or new *nō* plays were not as rarely written or performed, this dramaturgic creative trend became rather modest after the dissolution of the feudal system that followed the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Among the very rare examples of *shinsakunō* that became part of the *nō* repertoire, we can identify *Takahime* (The Hawk Princess) by Mario Yokomichi based on William Butler Yeats's *At the Hawk's Well*, first performed by Kanze Hisao in 1967. Only two decades after, Umewaka Naohiko[2] of the Kanze school performed two new *nō* plays.[3]

[1] Most of the pieces were composed before the end of the sixteenth century, while some plays underwent subsequent revisions and modifications. According to Stanca Scholz-Cionca (2017, 297) "The repertoire was restricted to about 200 plays—the number varies according to the school—in comparison to the over 3,000 plays that were written during the early modern period—while body language and gestures were standardised: the Edo period witnessed the emergence of the basic posture (*kamae*), the typical walking style with sliding steps (*hakobi*, *suriashi*), the system of gesture units (*kata*), and the rigid staging patterns that allowed only a few variations (*kogaki*)".

[2] Earlier, in 1985, at the age of 27, Umewaka did the choreography and performed in *Drifting Fires*, an English language *nō* by Janine Beichman, and *Takayama Ukon* written by Otohiko Kaga in 1999. A fifteenth-generation heir of one of most distinguished *shite* families, Umewaka continues to collaborate, write, perform and produce *shinsakunō* and *kyōgen* plays to this day. Interestingly, English language *nō* plays have continued to be written and performed strictly within academic circles, in Japan and overseas, e.g. *Emily—an English language Noh* by Ashley Thorpe (in preparation), presented in 2018 on the Handa Noh Stage at the Centre for Asian Performance & Dance at Royal Holloway University of London, UK.

[3] Although they are not necessarily considered part of the current repertoire, what might be considered remarkable at the time of production apart from the fact that new *nō* plays were very rarely performed by professional actors, is the parallel with late sixteenth century Christian missionaries writing *Kirishitan nō* or plays as ideological vehicles for the purpose of evangelization. See C. R. Boxer (1978: 58-59) for descriptions of *auto sacramentales* composed and performed during the mid-sixteenth century.

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Iscrizione al tribunale di Bologna n. 8185 del 1/10/2010

> The first, entitled *The Baptism of Jesus* (*Iesu no senrei*) was written by two Catholic priests of Sophia University in Tokyo, Dakowaki Kakichi and Sugiura Tsuyoshi. First performed in 1987, its revivals have included a performance before Pope John Paul II at the Vatican on Christmas eve 1988. The second, also written by Kadowaki and entitled *The Madonna in Azuchi* (*Azuchi no mi-haha*), was first performed in 1990 (Emmert 1997: 22).

Fighting the risk of stagnation, *nō* theatre entered the modern era, acknowledging the need for renewal, but not without reluctance. Innovative approaches that pursue the revitalization of the *nō* traditional creative approach, have looked towards Shakespeare's dramas as a source for cultural exchange that identifies them as an asset of the vitality and strength of Western humanism. An echo reverberates within the body of intercultural theatre practice that distinguishes Shakespearean texts as a resonance space for experimental practice beyond the confines of any linguistic territory. In this context, we will regard *Lear Dreaming*, created by Ong Keng Sen, as an intercultural production that engages in the revitalization of *nō*'s drama and performing tradition.[4] The aim here consists of bringing into analysis the mediation strategies related to Shakespeare sources that hinge on their outcome in *nō*'s theatre conventions maintaining its enduring traditional core, while revealing its ability to interact with other Asian theatre traditions. *Lear Dreaming*'s performance, produced in 2012 and presented in Paris at Théâtre de la Ville in 2015, incorporated *nō*'s performing properties and dramatic structure, created by Ong in collaboration with Kishida Ryo (Tonooka, 2001; Ikeuchi, 2010) and embodied by Umewaka Naohiko as *shite* (principle role).

Adaptation strategies: translation, acculturation and hybridity

An engagement with premodern matter consistently nurtures—from intercultural connotations—and often contests presumptions of unintelligibility based on historical distances by acknowledging different sources at play that constitute an intricate network of mediation strategies. In such a process, we propose to problematize what constitutes the allusion and interaction with Shakespeare's texts while problematizing the margins of standard views of traditional theatre in East Asia. Different tensions related to a highly contested global view that connects with economic and cultural hegemonies in the world's markets have allowed intercultural practice to develop several adaptational strategies. Acculturation, translation and hybrids appear not only as the foundational layers for a plural approach to Shakespeare but also an open interface for intercultural and cross-cultural theatre practice. In this paper we attempt to explore the mixed heritage that *Lear Dreaming* is capable

[4] Regarding Ong's previous work on *King Lear* by Shakespeare: *Lear* (1997) see James R. Edwards, (2014).

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Iscrizione al tribunale di Bologna n. 8185 del 1/10/2010

of interacting with, in an ever-fluctuating network between text and within its context, with multiple loci of interpretation, performance dynamics and audiences.

Beyond an already exhausted opposition between "domestic" and "foreign", the Shakespeare of today has grown beyond the margins of any single language and territory. We wish to trace the "traveling concepts" (Bal 2009) across disciplines involved in the adaptation process, the heterogenous possibilities in cultural mediation within its sphere of theatre practice in contemporary performance and consider their different geographical spaces and traditions.

> Take hybridity, for example. How did this concept from biology, implying as its 'other' an authentic or pure specimen and presuming that hybridity leads to sterility, that was current in imperialist discourse, with its racist overtones, come to indicate an idealized state of postcolonial diversity? Because it travelled. Originating in 19th century biology, it was first used in a racist sense. Then it changed, moving through time, to Eastern Europe, where it encounters the literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. Traveling West again, it eventually came to play a brief but starry role in postcolonial studies, where it was taken to task for its disturbing implications, including the historical remnants of colonial epistemology (Bal 2009: 20).

The partial overlapping and flexibility that a concept such as hybridity exhibits will be useful in this discourse since it opens a critical interaction that defies the constraints of theatre traditions per se. As Antony Tatlow (2001: 5) writes, "every engagement with a Shakespearian text is necessarily intercultural. The past really is another culture, its remoteness disguised by language can occasionally appear as familiar as we seem to ourselves, whom we understand so imperfectly". *Lear Dreaming* invites us to admit this statement, acknowledging that translation happens not only between texts but also within performance, representing contrasting world views, while conducting a scrutiny of conceptual threads across different cultural theatre practices. This paper seeks to trace in *Lear Dreaming* the mediation network supporting the creative renewal and rediscovery of theatre traditions by finding in the continuities and discontinuities the means to formal theatrical innovation and how the hybrid strategy at play might be an embodied act that decenters the presumed primacy of text.

As the Japanese discovered Shakespeare towards the end of the nineteenth century, the first results from translation followed the diction of the *nō* drama, revealing an immediate link to classic intellectual sources as a notable legitimation and appropriation feature. More than purely an issue of translating into Japanese, the iambic verse has represented a dilemma between the uses of poetic forms based on syllable count and an emphasis of poetic essence. Using native poetic forms such as the five-seven syllable metric of *tanka* poetry and

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haiku provided an immediate instance to familiarize the audience to Shakespeare's verse in analogy with *nō*, *kabuki* or even *jōruri*. It was not until more recent interpretations appeared that Shakespeare began to be translated into modern prose. Although localizing Shakespeare within vernacular poetic traditions contributed to the effort to familiarize Japanese audiences with Shakespeare's work, it remained univocally English.

> In the late Meiji era there was an enhanced interest in *shingeki* (new drama) which deliberately cut off traditional dramatic forms in favour of an intellectual and realistic approach. The members of the movement thought Noh and Kabuki were out of date, and wanted to Westernize the theatre world. Tsubouchi's translation of Hamlet produced by the Bungei Kyokai in 1911 is considered as the first presentation of *shingeki*. […] Nowadays Japanese directors are much inclined to fuse Shakespeare with their traditional drama, such as Kabuki, Noh and Kyogen. In 2005 Ninagawa directed *NINAGAWA Twelfth Night* at the Kabuki-za at the request of Kikunosuke Onoe, a young *onnagata*. Expressing both female sexuality and male sexuality with gestures and dancing, he played the roles of Viola, Cesario and Sebastian. This unique version of Shakespeare charmed both Kabuki fans and lovers of Shakespeare (Kawachi 2016: 8-9).

The dichotomy between domestic and foreign Shakespeare has grown ever less convincing, being globally assimilated to the point where its foreign origin tends to vanish. The global diffusion of Shakespeare's works occurs probably, as with a lot of pre-modern matter, in a context of perennial social processes of mobility and mediation.

> He lived in the age when all the world's populated continents were first permanently linked by trade. Some economic historians have even argued that globalization began in the year 1571, when the Spanish established Manila as an entrepôt finally connecting Asia and the Americas, and William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon turned 7. During his lifetime, cultural exchanges multiplied not only among European nations, but between Europe and the Atlantic and, more slowly, the Pacific worlds. Many of these growing interdependencies left their mark on Shakespeare's writing and theatre, from advances in stage design to an explosion of literary sources in print (Bosman 2010 [2001]: 285).

Indeed, cultural exchanges proliferated since the Iberic "mundialization" (Gruzinski 2004) between European territories, the Atlantic and the Pacific worlds. This generated emergent interdependencies, several of which left their mark on Shakespeare's writing, evidencing how an intercontinental dissemination might participate, even in a deceptive dynamic of exchange and production that truly confronted the notion of foreign with new realities

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mostly adept "of a western purism: the globalization" (Gruzinski 2004: 338). When coming across domains of intercultural practice, it becomes unavoidable to consider the complexities that global economics pervade when subsumed into the cultural sphere and vice versa. The goal here is to create distance from the actual terms of a Western-centric analysis engaging beyond a simple binary opposition. Instead, it is important to recognize the impact of multiple dynamics and influences derived from economic agendas and cultural narratives conceiving and engaging with and across the concept of Asia (Takeuchi 1963) as an approach that facilitates the comprehension and analysis of knowledge production according to its own autonomous epistemic terms.

The mediation that involves Shakespeare usually tends, under the means of acculturation, to predominantly assimilate different cultures, to derive different linguistic, visual, textual and media adaptations. *Lear Dreaming* seems to renegotiate the acculturation wave acknowledging its multiple sources, subverting the request for authenticity that implies holding on to Shakespeare's language.

Few who read *King Lear* are aware that its plot can be traced to Emperor Theodosius's moral anecdote included in *Gesta Romanorum* (Swan 2019 [1845]: 61), a late-XIII-century collection compiled by French prelate Jacques de Vitry, that was intended as a prompt book for general edification and easily identifiably with the *gunki monogatari,*[5] *a* genre of military tales, which often serves as a basis for *nō* plays. This possibly is the first contingency concerning the adaptation of the *exempla* into dramatic form while preserving the identity of its original late Renaissance background. According to Frances A. Yates, *King Lear* was probably written by Shakespeare in 1604-5, and speculates on the character's origins.

> There were earlier plays about *King Lear* which he knew, and of course he knew the main historical source, Holinshed. The British Chronicle, and the legend of the descent from Brut of British kings was being adapted by contemporary propagandist, as Shakespeare certainly knew. He was following this process himself in choosing a 'Brutan' theme, a theme of sacred British descent, for his play. […] In Shakespeare's telling of the story, the theme of ingratitude is heightened to cosmic proportions (Yates 1979: 155).

In the complex network of integration and assimilation of cultural influences that implies the acculturation exercise, *Lear Dreaming* admits the impulse of distinction between language and cultural backgrounds alluding to a "multilingual community" (Canagarajah 2007) exhausting the resonances of the language of Shakespeare

[5] A narrative genre written in mixed Japanese–Chinese prose, tales of bravery and military skill in the context of the wars of the Kamakura and Muromachi period; e.g. *The Tale of Heike* and *Gikeiki*.

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plays as much as its symbols, icons and images, reassembling them for contemporary audiences and acknowledging multiple geopolitical and historical trade-offs. It is interesting to notice in *Lear Dreaming* that while Japanese and Mandarin Chinese are predominant on stage, Bahasa Indonesian and Korean are also used. In such manner, the visualization of the acculturation operation converges and reflects over possible biases derived from the Asian social fabric where it originates. As a vehicle of cultural mobilization, the different processes of social and cognitive assimilation, integration and acculturation are explored in theatrical terms, reinstating the voices of linguistic minorities with their respective voices and narratives. As noted by Ong (2007: 145) "Mobility demands that we engage with difference, mobility agitates any system - this agitation could be good, it could be harnessed to create better systems". Yet it "is a double-edge sword … a flexible concept that turns out to be less than flexible due to local laws and local constraints".

Adaptation is not necessarily a transparent concept; its meaning diverges according to different associations at play. In the case of *Lear Dreaming*, multiple foci of interpretation are opened up. From the start, it inevitably engages in a basic mediation strategy that transforms texts and textuality into theatre, already a different media, and addresses a series of challenges involving an intercultural rewriting exercise.

> An earlier adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy called *Lear* (1997) was the outcome of the collaboration between Ong and the avant-garde dramatist Ryo Kishida (1946-2003), acclaimed for her plays that focus on gender issues in modern Japan. Kishida radically rewrote Shakespeare's play, making Old Daughter – a composite character of Goneril and Regan – not only kill her father but also expel her mother. Although Kishida was interested mainly in the gender struggle and Ong's concern was the generational conflict in the play. […] Ong directed the cross-cultural, multilingual and multinational *Lear*, which premiered in Tokyo in 1997. This ground-breaking work marked by a diversity of Asian performers and languages subsequently toured in Asia and Europe. In 2012 Ong reshaped and directed *King Lear* as *Lear Dreaming*. He reduced the number of actors from more than thirty to four, comprising two men and two women, with a team of gamelan musicians. The production was revived in June 2015 in Paris as part of the Singaporean Art Festival (Hamana 2016: 90).

Regenerated in a new author's perspective, Ong and Kishida's collaborative reading of Shakespeare's text escapes the narrow limits of the predictable while remaining fairly faithful to the narrative line. Poised liminally between the *nō* performance device and the musical performing traditions of gamelan orchestra, Chinese *pipa* instrumental music and Korean *kagok*, the play starts in *media res*, like most dreams.

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Transformed into a new context, the identity of *nō* tradition evolves under the gaze of the audience. The distinction of its traditional core becomes highly subjective, while its artistic attributes and techniques perpetuate and enrich from the interaction with other theatre cultures also involved in a recontextualization of their socio-cultural properties. This is achieved in a way that potentially contests a clean-cut differentiation between contemporary and traditional cultural practice.

> Concepts and definitions can be presented and even idealized, its implementation must deal with different criteria such as public interest and sponsorisation. Whatever a present-day cultural phenomenon is will continue to change and evolve, as a result the perception must continuously be re-interpreted as much the recognition of the agency of the communities that produce and preserve the traditions (Arisawa 2012: 184).

The dream realm of mugen[6] *nō and the Anthropocene*[7]

Trapped in a karmic cycle, where a dream-like patina pervades the characters' background, a distinctive resonance to *mugen nō* builds over a posthuman, yet gracefully oneiric atmosphere. Within such framework, Shakespeare's referential text is synthetized to the minimally indispensable to be acknowledged by the audience while simultaneously alluding to an archetypic language and metric that derives from *nō*'s early modern rhetorical strategies.

> Who am I?
> I was sleeping the sleep of the dead.
> Sleeping, in the terror of a nightmare I cannot recall,
> Now the sound of music echoes in my ears.
> Musicians, cut the roots of nightmare, open my eyes.
> Who was I long ago?
> (*Lear Dreaming* 2012: 0:05':15"- 0:06':24" & 0:48':28"-0:49':09")[8]

[6] "Sometimes translated as phantasmagoric or dream *nō*, plays in which the *shite* appears in the second act (*nochiba*) as a ghost or spirit. These works epitomize the essential nature of *nō* as an otherworldly drama. Typically, the *shite* appears to a traveling monk (a living person) in the first act (*maeba*), discusses some local legend, and then vanishes, only to previously discussed. In a sense, all *nō* plays can be divided into two groups, *mugen nō* and *genzai mono,* in which all the characters are living persons" (Leiter 2014: 363).

[7] As described by Nobel laureate Paul J. Crutzen, the Anthropocene describes the current geological era where humans experience the fate of their ingenuity living in an environment entirely constructed of their own making. From burning grasses to make arable land, the use of fossil fuels and the consumption of raw materials needed for constructing large settlements eventually impacts our own species' survival.

[8] English quotations of the play are based on the web platform Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive www.a-s-i-a-web.org （last accessed 17 June, 2021）. Both script and video are kindly donated to A|S|I|A by Theatre:>Works and edited by Yong Li Lan.

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The theatrical space is inhabited by the Old-man, his Older-daughter embodied by the *pipa* player and his Younger-daughter represented *in absence*. Although it is possible to concretely perceive her in symbiosis with the figure of the Mother in the following scene, an overt alter-ego of the ghostly figure of the Old-man's wife. Within a psychoanalytic framework, the presence of the *absent mother* makes explicit the tragic conflict derived from the despotic paternal figure, in coherence with an isolated form of *reverse attachment* by the daughters. The response upon the Old-man's request for affection underlines with utter silence, the Young-daughter's lack of answer being evidence of "nothingness".

> CORDELIA What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent.
> (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 1.1.61)

> OLD-MAN My Older daughter gave me words of promise.
> What are your words?
> Words? Words?
> Your silence denotes endless darkness.
> I banish you!
> (*Lear Dreaming* 2012: 0:11:04-0:11:12)

The symbolic nature of *nō* allows the Young-daughter's defensive denial to the Old-man's pathological request of affection to overlap with an indirect gesture of dissent that draws from a connotation of civil disobedience that eventually the Older daughter will exhibit extrovertedly, challenging the ageing authoritarian rule of the father.

Suddenly the austere dark space opens to a scene where a laser-light landscape fills the intangible "dark backward and abysm of time" (*The Tempest*, 1.2.50) suggesting a journey in the stream of the unconscious, following a thread in the underworld or perhaps a post-human landscape where the Old-man navigates toward the manifestation of his instinctual impulses and emotional turmoil projecting the scene of his own death, where we will eventually witness the decay of patriarchy among the remains of social cataclysm.

> By the river of forgetfulness
> I will sing
> About my days of glory

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The moon shines
On empty wilderness.
I walk,
My feet hurt. I suddenly age.
I
I sink
Into
The night.
The storm is over. You lost.
A good for nothing loser, a dog, a senile old man.
The storm is over. You lost.
A good for nothing loser, a dog, a senile old man.
Father!
(*Lear Dreaming* 2021, 0:50:29-0:51:49)

The king's dream reconfigures "the tempest in [his] mind" (*King Lear* 3.4.15) appearing as in the ruins of collective memory—an archeological site where an old story of political power rewrites its possible subversion. Is the ability to dream the Old-man's only legacy? According to Ong, it is also his redemption.

In *Lear Dreaming* the main character seems aware of the posthuman ecosystem the Old-man inhabits, and appears to awaken through his own death to the false ideals that led him to the entropic landscape he shares with the rest of the characters. The *mugen nō* dimension is translated as a posthuman condition, revealed as a nihilistic interrogation through the crucible of a radical reaction to patriarchy. The characters' responses are somatic answers, a result of the continuous trauma carved by their experience of indifference inflicted on each other and their environment.

We see the archetypical behaviour of the *shite* actor as in a *shura nō* or warrior play[9] wearing a *sōsaku nōmen* (original mask, created *ad hoc*) and equivalent modern costumes for *shirogashira* (wig), and a modern militia version of the warrior attire of *happi* and *atsuita* kimono dancing a *rambyoshi* or choreographic sequence synchronized with music. This is usually accompanied by *kotsuzumi and otsuzumi* percussions, but in this case are exchanged with a *gamelan* interlude. While the absent mother character joins the Younger-daughter scene,

[9] "The *shura nō* usually deals with the hell in which warriors who have died continue to exist after death and thus is called 'warrior nō'; it regularly features a warrior who appears as an ordinary character in the first half, the maeba, and is revealed as the ghost of the warrior dressed in armor in the second half, the nochiba. Zeami says about plays that appear in the second position of a programme that they should be based on a straightforward source, be powerful and have grace" (Smethurst 1989: 31).

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another intertextual suggestion seems to reference dementia. The female character dances a *nō* sequence—called *kurui*—that usually features a character attempting to release itself from obsessive psycho-social imprinting as a result of karmic attachments. This *kazuramono*-style character has a dual representation as the Wife of the Old-man and a subjected female spirit, unsettled and dispossessed. This character helps us visualize a dialectic between the victim's voice of the *kagok* singer and the typical gendered insubordination embodied by the *pipa* player as the Older-daughter. Here can be acknowledged *Lear Dreaming*'s dramatic emphasis exposing the multiple forms of female subjection later to be subverted in a critique of the "phallogocentrisme" (Butler 1990: 120) as well as the opposition between nature and human culture rationale. All this articulates an interaction that reflects female alterity as a vehicle of unrestored patriarchal authority and a redemptional ethereal figure who offers the king an alternative through suicide. The personification of dissent embodied by female bodies alternates the view of the victim (Young-daughter/Old-man's Wife) as a critical instrument disrupting the patriarchal authority as the mainstream form of social institution.

The song of the young daughter in Shakespeare's reference, embodied in *Lear Dreaming* by the *kagok* singer, sets up an intertextual reference with Shakespeare's depiction of female dementia where Ophelia describes a floral catalog (*Hamlet* IV.5.174-185). In analogy, the Young-daughter plays on a well-stablished code attributing emblematic meaning (Goody 1993: 206) to certain flowers.

The flowers' corresponding meanings link to specific poetic and dramatic components while playing to a series of Sino-Japanese specific connotations.

> The peony is the [king][10] of flowers;
> The sunflower is a loyal subject;
> The lotus-flower is a true gentleman;
> The apricot blossom a mean person;
> The chrysanthemum a hermit-scholar;[11]
> The plum blossom a poor honest one;

[10] According to Jack Goody (1993: 395) the peony has been cultivated in northern China since the days of the Tang Dynasty, and holds an equivalence to success and abundance. The peony is sometimes called the "flower of flowers" or "the queen of flowers".

[11] "The lotus is the first flower to appear in poetry, followed by the orchid. The chrysanthemum plays its part from the third century AD when it's associated with its homophones, or near homophones, longevity, wine and with the lucky number nine, its festival taking place on the ninth day of the ninth month. The colour of the favoured yellow variety was associated with the emperor and represented the centre of the earth" (Goody 1994: 368-9). During the thirteenth century, in Japan, the symbolism of the chrysanthemum began to resonate strongly among privileged literati for whom the maintenance of symbolic value meant the preservation of political and economic influence. During the Meiji Restauration, the six-petal chrysanthemum notably became the symbol of the Imperial Family.

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The gourd flower an old man;

The pink flower a boy;

The hollyhock a shaman;

The wild rose a harlot;

(*Lear Dreaming* 2012: 1:02:30-1:04:12)

After the king's wrath is represented according to the emblematic performance of madness or *kurui*, an intense choreography, along with the unequivocal *kata* that stresses inhibited pain, the *shiori* gesture with his left hand. Towards the scene of Lear's death, another paradigmatic *kata* is performed—the *hotoke daore* (*hotoke*: Buddha; *daore*: fall). Such a gesture indicates a warrior's definite defeat by the sword, as also shown in several other plays.

Conclusion

While the main intention of this paper is to provide a framework around an interview with Ong Keng Sen, a foremost advocate of intercultural theatre, we hope to demonstrate in the approach to *Lear Dreaming*, *nō*'s extensive possibilities as a result of the adaptational practices that its contemporary performance can engage with. Demonstrating that an orthodox or all-encompassing view to judge contemporary *nō* production may be simply futile. Much debate surrounds the evolution of cultural practice within the traditional performance entourage. *Lear Dreaming* as a *shinsakunō* play is evidence and part of *nō*'s evolution into the intercultural context, sustained by the identity of its performers who are involved deeply in the tradition. The performance practice may also develop parallel to the traditional sphere, and then the distinction between traditional and innovative or even experimental becomes highly subjective. From this perspective, the artistic values of the *nō* tradition are susceptible to reevaluation, while the context and definitions of its performance are produced primarily by communities and audiences who constantly negotiate certain elements as part of an evaluation criteria, preserving the traditional approach; potential discontinuities are part of a shifting process that constantly examines, recontextualizes and redefines *nō*'s aesthetic values and thereby continuities within the tradition.

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RIVISTA DISTUDI
antropologia e teatro
N. 13 (2021)

Shakespeare on the Intercultural Edge. An interview with Ong Keng Sen[12], creator of *Lear Dreaming* (2012 Singapore; 2015 Paris) – Interview transcript

Location: Zoom (online platform)

Date: 30.04.2021

Monica Alcantar (hereafter MA): I really appreciate this opportunity, Keng Sen, thank you so much. I consider that your work contributes to experience and repurposes earlier cultural matter, such as Shakespeare. When dealing with pre-modern cultural matter, we deal with significant historical and cultural distances. These never seem too wide to bridge over in your work, which engages with a multitude of connotations; it's part of your strengths to admit the cultural distances and the aesthetic differences, not merely as an obstacle but as a locus, a place where you let the audience appreciate the current geopolitical complexity. Your work is engaging, insightful and courageous. In the case of *Lear Dreaming* you engaged in a multi-layered mediation context that included an allusion of a Shakespearean source, delivering a text adaptation in collaboration with Kishida Ryo that became even more succinct in the latest version. While including several musical traditions derived from asian theatre traditions, *nō* theatre was perhaps the most prominent. Starting from there, *Lear Dreaming*, its title, is there a connotation to *mugen nō*, characterized by a dreamlike, oneiric quality?

Ong Keng Sen (hereafter OKS): Yeah, I mean the most powerful thing about *nō* theatre is that it evokes many different layers of existence, at least three layers onstage: the actor, the character (the mask), as well as the actor physically wearing the mask (one still sees the flesh of his face surrounding the mask). The actor becomes a non-human, post-human, or an artificial human existence, with the mask strapped onto his face. The audience also has at least three levels of existence: reality, fiction, dream-meditation. One of the most interesting things, when I first started working on *Lear* in 1996, I had a producer who spoke about the time she went to watch a *nō* play. She fell asleep during the play in the open air while watching the *nō* play, and when she woke up, her father had passed away. She felt that just as she watched the play, in her sleep she was somehow in contact with her

[12] The interview was conducted virtually on Zoom by the author of this paper, in April 2021. Ong Keng Sen holds a PhD in Performance Studies from Tisch School of Arts, New York University, and is initiator, with his company, T:>Works (formerly Theatre-Works), of the Flying Circus Project, Arts Network Asia, Continuum Asia Project, the Dance Archive Box Project, and other intercultural and inter-Asian collaborations. Recipient of several awards including the Fukuoka Asian Arts and Culture Prize in 2010 for his creations in Asian contemporary performance, and in 2019, the Freie Universität of Berlin International Research Center Fellowship and Interweaving Performance Culture. His productions have been presented at multiple festivals around the globe. Ong is the founding director of the Singapore International Festival of Arts (SIFA) and director of four editions from 2014 to 2017.

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father's spirit when it was leaving the Earth. I felt very strongly that in *nō* there is always a kind of existential level, not only for the performer, but there's an existential level for the audience, as we experience the *hana*[13] of *nō* theatre. So, in that sense, *Lear Dreaming* refers to that. We're all dreaming about *Lear*, not just *King Lear* but of course the *Lear* that we did in 1997 because there was that reference that actually created the 2012 production. At the same time, we were dreaming about *Lear* because there is a large issue in Asia, this idea of the patriarch and the people who are trying to escape from this patriarchy. In *Lear* as well as in *Lear Dreaming* it's a very prominent issue. The character of the elder daughter, the antagonist, who kills her father is trying to escape the patriarchy in a violent mode. It provokes a lot of violence within certain scenes of the play. It's the character of Lear, dreaming about his own death, so there is also this constant level for us, as artists, dreaming about this earlier layer, dreaming about the issue of patriarchy and trying to escape from it. Then, there's also the fact that the characters are also dreaming and dreaming about life and death, and I think the return in 2012 of *Lear Dreaming* is essentially focused on the Old man, being much more empathetic towards him. Already in '97 there was a strong emotion for all the characters involved, but somehow this narrative, it's really focused on Lear, who cannot escape the destiny of his flaws. He's truly a tragic character with a strong psychology because he's able to dream. In my view of the world you are not really having a human existence if you don't dream. There is a lot of work that's being done nowadays on post-humanity. We are discussing about nature, but perhaps the nonhuman or posthuman may not be able to dream, as humans are able to. Let's say, Stanley Kubrick's film *A Space Odyssey*, it became so transcendental because suddenly we realized the machine is uncapable of dreaming. We don't know. We know when the machine becomes alive, but when it does, can it dream? The machine can kill or be programmed to, but not necessarily is able to dream, so this whole question of what makes a human being human, it's maybe an old-fashioned topic today, but I think it's a topic which also retrieves the Anthropocene. Because the Anthropocene has been seen to be primarily destructive. But also its redemption depends on whether he or she is able to dream, that's perhaps also the redemption of the character, of the human being.

MA: The connotations you mention are overwhelmingly interesting.

OKS: Yeah, with the word "dreaming", it becomes a whole different level, not just the character.

[13] According to Zeami's *Fūshikaden* the notion of *hana* (flower) can be broadly defined as the quality of a performance which gives the audience a sense of uniqueness and grace. See Rimer & Yamazaki 1984, 27.

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MA: Certainly, I wonder if this ambivalence between life, dream, and the after human could also be related to the fact that the same actor, the *shite*, inhabits an ambivalent space, playing both the Old-man and his Wife, as a ghost. Could we consider that the pre-modern structure of *nō* allowed to portray this ambivalence, through the embodiment of the ghost of Lear's wife?

OKS: Yeah, inside the narrative of *nō* play, there is always the sense that you might have, let's say, an old woman, and then her spirit. So, there is always a dual existence in the *shite*'s character, that could appear as a mortal being, but later on there is a kind of spiritual rupture and the spirit emerges, and the costume changes, as well as the mask is even transformed. So, it's not just conceptual. You have duality, but it's actually a duality that's physicalized by changing mask, a change of costume. In this sense, this duality was already harnessed in the first *Lear*. I mean, one of the things about the first *Lear* was that Kishida Ryo and myself sat down and made the whole storyboard, and this is quite unusual in terms of dramatic work, because with theatre it normally begins from the writer, and then the director interprets the writer's layer. I mean the writer writes and then the director directs. But in this case, because we collaborated from the basis of writing the actual storyboard together, due to the fact that we were going to work with many different cultures, there was a sense that Kishida would not be able to really enter the other characters who came from other worlds, in terms of other Asian traditions. So, because of that concern we began to write together. The first version was really about the Southeast Asian traditions coming in. This is Singapore, and I'm from Southeast Asia, but at the same time I'm Chinese, so I had both the Chinese opera knowledge as well as the Southeast Asian knowledge. So we wrote together the storyboard, but of course then she developed the text of each character. She has certain motifs in her work; one of those motifs is the Mother character. The introduction of the absent mother was her proposal of course. We developed the storyboard over several sessions. That means that, for example, we would meet in April for the first draft of the storyboard, and then the second draft would be ready in July. So, when the absent mother came in it was perfect because it fitted our *nō* concept, the embodiment of two bodies in one being, duality in one piece. At the beginning, the premise of the storyboard was always settled after death and the unrequited souls of Lear and his daughters appear in the first scene, the prologue, then there's a kind of a flashback, after this scene. So, there is this first scene, of these ghosts coming together. They are forever trapped in a guilt cycle where they can't release themselves. The daughters are also inside this cycle of hatred. Also Cordelia, three spirits, trapped inside this world, as at the beginning of any *shite* role. That was the premise, so we knew that

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we were writing a *nō* play, a contemporary *nō* play. And then somehow this idea of the absent mother came, and then we added more interpretation to it, I mean we built more *nō* concept, yeah.

MA: I see, thank you for that explicit clarification. You're an expert also in Japanese literary sources, such as the *Genji* and the *Heike monogatari* as well as Shakespearean themes. By the way, I'm looking forward to your Keynote Speech programmed at the 2021 World Shakespeare Conference: "The Queering of Shakespeare's *Richard III*". These pre-modern literary sources have been mediated through several adaptations. I wonder if there is a feature, derived from this adaptation synergy, an influence from pre-modern aesthetic values such as *mono no aware* or *mujōkan*[14]?

OKS: I think a strong aspect with ancient literary sources, not only Japanese or Asian—because even Shakespeare wrote from many different layers—and Italian creators such as Fellini, he made works derived from narratives of medieval tales, for example. So there is a strong sense that literary sources—I won't say adaptations but drafts—becoming embedded right into another, or a future draft. I mean, to quote Giorgio Agamben (1993: 3), he talks about how each work is a dead mask of another work that's yet to come, and I think that's really powerful. That means something like a medieval narrative becomes a dead mask for a work that Fellini creates, or Shakespeare, and then that is re-casted by Kishida Ryo and myself. We're all working, with every new creation, I won't even call them adaptations. With every new creation we're actually drafting from another draft, which is a dead mask for a future work, done by somebody else, maybe for next decade, it could be the next century or whatever. Inside the production of *Lear* itself there's a transfiguration, like what happens in *Hagoromo*. Originally in *Lear*, in the last scene, the elder daughter is left alone with herself after she's killed everybody, and during that last scene, she asks who is behind, who will come after me? At that moment she's left alone in the universe and suddenly the bird of the absent mother appears. That of course, you can see it comes from a *nō* play. In all these scenes, the way Naohiko worked was to draw from existing *nō* plays. For example, with Cordelia's dead body, it was transfigured as lady Aoi's *kimono*. Of course, Naohiko adapts the technique from *nō* theatre. He brings other dance elements from Shintō. You see all these layers upon layers, those *nō* plays become embedded inside *Lear*. These performative gestures are extracted from earlier *nō* plays

[14] *Mono no aware* or intense feeling inherent from the experience of the world. In early modern times, *aware* was considered the source of the response to an intense, rather joyful sensation, but *aware* later came to designate a melancholic or even tragic feeling. *Mujōkan*, on the other hand, derives from a Buddhist term that designates the non-permanent essence of all things, their emptiness or ephemeral nature. It is also the contemplation of a Buddhist truth, the sense of uncertainty or even awareness of the ever-changing nature of the world through the human experience.

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and then embedded into our score. You get a performative dead mask, quoting Agamben, he looked at it as written language but it's now being used for dance and performance, anything that has a (written) score. He was writing about written drafts, dead written drafts. Of course, from each role, either a warrior play, or a young girl play, out of the five *nō* plays, we took for *Lear* scenes from the whole *nō* repertoire. We took some performative gestures. We transfigured them, re-drafted them, embedded in the performance, of our storyboard. Of course, when we were writing the storyboard, we were already conscious that something like that was going to happen. When we did the storyboard, Ryo had not written the poetry of the speech for instance, but we already had these images drawing from *nō* repertoire. At the same time the bridge was really the *shite*, in order to physicalize that specific play which we can only conceptually put as an image.

MA: Regarding the *shite* and how he embodies an entire theatre device within a specific space, I was wondering about the process of translating *nō* into a different space, the intercultural and postmodern stage. The stage of *Lear Dreaming* is very different from the *shite*'s own habitat, squared with the four pillars and the *hashigakari*, yet the device he embodies remains so strong and so powerful.

OKS: Yeah, I mean, you know there is a constant, a very strong parameter, in the transcultural work that I do. It's not about the continuities of the tradition, but it's also the disruptions of the traditions. It's quite often that this parameter means to deny certain perspectives. For example, the scene where the bird flies up, onto a slope and comes down again, of course you'd never have that in a *nō* play; there's never a slope. Having an empty stage, really built as the inside of an old, wrecked ship—in that sense it was not built as smooth pine wooden floor, but it's really made out of wooden planks—and these planks have gaps, and the boards are bit warped so, in the first *Lear*, when you see the rise of the stage, it's actually like the top of the Globe. Walking, you find a rise that slopes onto the center. So this is not a strictly horizontal floor. For the *nō* actor, for the *shite* it was very difficult, not being able to walk (in *suriashi*), since you cannot slide because the wooden boards are planks, looking like the boards of a rotting ship. That was obviously a deliberate strategy to not have a smooth floor, and take away something that is completely fundamental and primary for the *nō* actor, which is to walk. It takes away that, and the work becomes a challenge. So that's part of the transcultural process. For me it was not just about continuity. I would say it's about the continuities of the imageries, but it is a disruption of some of the physical practices. For me, the imageries are the most important thing in a transcultural work. Coming from Beijing opera, some moments are difficult to portray. Let's think about a love scene, these are not part of the imagery of *nō*. A love scene as in Indian *kathakali*, since love is one of the eight different *rasas* or different

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emotions, you have the essence of love, the *shringara rasa* is the first emotion. Therefore, inside *kathakali* there is a very strong imagery of love, flirtation. You have eye movements, hand gestures (mudras) which describe love, while you don't have that in *nō* theatre, so for me, the most important root of transcultural work is to give continuity to the imaginaries. There are no love scenes in *nō*, is very hard to do that in the *nō* form. You can sing about love, you get poetical language of lust love, perhaps like in *Sotoba Komachi* or something like that, but you can't really have a love scene. At the same time, these disruptions of the tradition and their physical practices, I would pair the *nō* actor, the *shite*, with other instrumentation apart from *nō* musical instruments. For example, the Beijing opera was paired with *biwa* originally, and *nō* was paired with *gamelan*, and even in 2015 it was paired with *gamelan* music. It was a big challenge for the *shite* because the thing about *gamelan* is that its basis, its metallic, it's always called "silver rain" or "metallic rain" so there is a sense that inside the strength of metal, there is also a lightness, such as rain. So this lightness, again is something that cannot really function with *nō*, among the things that initially had a lot of problems with that. Naohiko wanted to have a flute sound to bring him out onto the stage, but the flute sound of Indonesian *gamelan* orchestra is a very soft flute, not volume-wise. Its sound is not hard, it's not a hard blow, or high pitch like with the *nō* flute that brings the underworld creatures into our realm, because conceptually that's what happens when you blow this very strong, hard sound from the *nō* flute. It blows the spirits into our stage. That's how it begins with the flute that summons the walk. So at first with Naohiko, he felt the flute was too weak in his view, was too soft, was too organic, was too natural, was too human. He needed a louder, more aggressive sound to bring him out as a dead soul. So, these are the situations which would be deliberately designed to form and bring some kind of discomfort into the collaboration. That is not always about just continuing the form but to disrupt it in a very serious manner.

MA: Could you also elaborate regarding the Korean theatre form, which I identified at first as *p'ansori* chanting but later found out it was actually *jeongga* tradition.

OKS: Correct, the form itself, it's *kagok*, it's basically poetic singing. In Korean singing the important thing is the different speeds, so you have either the short, long, or medium form of meditative singing. In this particular case, *kagok* is the long form. Essentially, each song it's four lines, four phrases, I mean it's short, not like *haiku*, but there might be some parallels. The full phrases can take five minutes or seven minutes, so it's a slow form of meditative singing. I'm moving freely between the 1997 production and a 2012 production. For example, in in the 1997 production there was a Beijing opera, a male actor who played elder daughter, and in 2012 I conceptually surrounded the *shite* with different musical instruments including the voice, so there was no longer

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another actor in the traditional sense but the presence of musical forms. Either you have Goneril or the elder daughter represented by the *pipa* sound. The virtuosic *pipa* player, Wu Man, she is very well known, has a very experimental technique, and she composed her material in consultation with me, but basically she self-composed and played. In 2012/15, I wanted another approach, toward a more austere form. You have the *shite* surrounded by different musical interventions, which is how a *nō* play works. Basically it's the interaction with the chorus chanting, or the flute or the shoulder-drum and hip-drum. The musical code that is surrounding the *shite*, it's a music atmosphere. Apart from the elder daughter, the younger daughter is always blended together with the mother. It's a single one atmosphere, so that's why we used the Korean *kagok*. And then the loyal attendant from Shakespeare, he's more like a blinded Gloucester. For him we used a form of Indonesian choral singing which is called *randi*, a kind of holistic form of dance, singing and music, choral singing and at same time martial arts. It's actually interesting because in the 1997 production that performer who played the loyal attendant, in 2015 we took him out to be on stage, but he was actually singing in the same form that he used to sing. I was interested in all these singers or musicians who would also represent characters, because a strong thing about *nō* acting is that it's not really naturalistic acting. Obviously it's overtly a representation of the character. When you have a character in *nō*, a young girl or maiden, what you really see is a robust old man playing a young girl, so it's very clearly a representation. I wanted to surround the *shite* with all these musical character representations, the elder daughter, the musician is dress[ed] as a princess, but at the same time she doesn't really speak. She speaks through the instrument and the same happens with Cordelia or the mother. You get a sense that the singer is in some kind of performance ritual, since it's the wife who gives him the sword to him, to kill himself. In the 2012/15 version, the *shite* was surrounded with musical presences; this also allowed us to be more like in a dream. The protagonist is dreaming of his life, of his death. In a dream perhaps you see also characters, as an idea, but you never really see them clearly. You only get a feeling from that person. In that way these instruments are these voices, the atmospheres surrounding the man who's dreaming. At the end we also played with a very strong idea going back to these three East Asian countries. I felt even more strongly than in the narrative of 1997. In the performance narrative in 1997, Korea was not involved nor any Korean kind of performance. And in 2012, I wanted very much to bring them up strongly, in terms of the East Asian triangle. These three cultures that were all related, engaged in harmonies and competitions, let's say.

MA: During the 2012, as well as 2015 in Paris, we were able to visualize different *kanji* projected on stage, animated or fragmented, isolating the radical, giving a sense of the different connotations of the characters, the network of the story, its development. We were able visualize: 父 (father), 殺 (murder), 眼 (eye), 眠 (sleep), 夢

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(dream), 回 (turn), 王 (king), 主 (master), 生 (life), 死 (death), then displayed in Scene 5, with 記 (history) and 黒 (black). The iconographic function was evident. The *kanji* [was] used as a universal language, a lingua franca perhaps, a cultural influence all over Asia, a writing system that functions perhaps as the Greco-Latin etymologies for neo-Latin languages, and territories influenced by the Romans.

OKS: Yeah, yeah correct. I mean, I think that once we were in the world of dreaming anything was possible. That means that you have also abstractions. These abstractions give a sense of the root of the words, at the same time how the words morph and meaning layers are added or subtracted. It was just something that we played with, because you know in the 1997 version, *Lear* was still a very strong narrative, much more realistic even when strongly codified in different Asian performance traditions. It was still a danced drama, with constructed characters, and the dramatic balance was place there. So, I feel like in 2012/15 we went more into an abstract space which the title allowed us to organize. In 2012/15 we suggested Lear's suicide. Instead in '97, you see that he is killed, he's stabbed by the elder daughter, there's a clear dramatization of it. While in '12/15 it all begins after the scene of the dead body of Cordelia. Then the royal attendant brings him a sword. Later on this sword is brought back again, with a clear suggestion, into almost a ritual killing ground by the Korean singer who plays his wife. She holds the sword for him, and he runs into it. While she continues to sing, leaves the space, and then you see him in his last breath, he's dying and fading, and finally falls. So, there's a very strong suicide suggestion in that scene, and I find it incredibly moving actually. You see the old man committing suicide after all these years, and all that he's built has actually come to nought. He suicides with all the feelings of anger, and emotion towards his Korean wife, his daughter from China, while playing instruments around him, creating a whole death ritual atmosphere—a death ritual it's clear this time—while he runs into the blade. Unlike the case in '97, where you actually see the antagonist stabbing him. Here the daughter is only playing the *pipa*, creating a very strong atmosphere which is about to break. There is an extreme tension that grows or accumulates, like when a powerful storm is about to happen. And then it breaks, there is water, rain, and he falls down on the ground. For me it's a tremendous scene. It is all made together with these wonderful performers, able to create this image by just their voices or very simple suggestions of movements, which of course the *shite* doesn't have a very complex choreography, he dances very simple, very precise steps, then creates a whole energy in the space and at certain time he actually dances in his mind. Yes, there're some scenes where the *shite* is just kneeling, he's dancing in his mind.

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MA: Already drawn from *King Lear*, the play is about borders and liminal spaces set on a number of literal and metaphorical edges, tension, and links. *Lear Dreaming* then seems to assimilate the different literal and intangible borders that you described so vividly, within a new theatrical landscape. Apart from the text or script, which is in fact an object of artistic actualization, is it possible for a text to engage with the context by itself? What is the degree of conceptual intervention on your own previous work, that you take distance from, benefiting or hindering from perhaps when repurposing your own work? I am asking this, considering that your production was part of the context of the Singapore festival in Paris, it aimed to be context-aware. Because this work (*Lear Dreaming, 2012/15*) hinges on the production/reception of a previous work (*Lear,* 1997), so what are the pros and cons achieving such delicate balance?

OKS: Yeah, practically in terms of the technique, the 2012/15 production was very much about erasing the script, meaning that there were sections that were erased, but those erasures were there, remained still in the psychology of the characters. So, it was very important that I had the same *shite*, because Naohiko himself was dreaming about the first *Lear*, so there is a double layer, that he was playing the same role. So in that sense, you really have not just the same character dreaming about what he acted, dreaming about his performance in 1997. When we talk about the mother, he pictures himself playing in 1997. He brings all the scenes of the killing. There's always a ghost in his mind from the '97 production, and this of course is very useful for this production because we could then erase something from the performance text, but he still could remember it. He still has the memory of having done the erased scene. Overall, understanding that he feels this deep emotion as if a memory dwell inside him. So, I think that's an amazing, lifting experience, in this case, because he performed the part in *Lear*, and then what we did in 2012, we performed this part fifteen years later, so he could recreate it all from fifteen years apart. And he recreates it in 2012, with this whole knowledge of what he has experienced from 1997, so he cannot be replaced by a new actor. If a completely new actor came along, I would have to direct much more. While here, I didn't have to direct because he had lived and experienced it. So having this whole idea of this creation fifteen years ago, I could erase a scene's visibility, but it was still intact inside his intangible memory. So this is was how we worked through the text—we erased the text from the form, from the visible stage, but it was still inside his intangible memory.

MA: Evidently in the 2012/15 version you were giving unprecedented possibilities of adaptation and answers to Shakespeare's material, and for me that was again really astonishing, from the point of view that you were not preserving what the authors "said" or what he "really" wrote, neither what tradition dictates from the

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intercultural point of view. To develop a dynamic version, redrafting from and beyond the previous source, instead of reducing it to the state of preserving the original content. I was wondering if there's a sort of *translator's task*, as creator, as director? What are the limits or potential benefits of making these creative connections and links, perhaps uniting spectators, scholars, translators and theatre makers in a pro-creativity alliance, towards an unorthodox reading of Shakespeare?

OKS: Yes, there are two thoughts here. The first should not be underestimated. Shakespeare is rewritten constantly. We're not really just translating Shakespeare's words into Japanese or Mandarin or Korean or Indonesian, but we are rewriting the entire text. Actually the text of the 2012/15 production is still Kishida Ryo's text. We just erased some parts. We are no longer playing Shakespeare's rhythms. I think that's very important to say. It actually frees me from the text of Shakespeare; it's about what remains of the Shakespeare is actually the archetypal emotions, the structures that give me a large degree of freedom. So that's the first thing. I don't really have an issue translating Shakespeare, like with an Italian translation, because then you're trying to find a rhythm, you're trying to find meaning of Shakespeare's words, because in that sense, we're not performing Shakespeare's, we're performing Kishida's words. It opened, there is a big change. Of course the original Shakespeare is very important. Perhaps the strongest thing that I keep coming back to, that I'm always performing, are the imageries. So even in the Shakespeare version, I'm not performing Shakespeare but performing the imaginaries in it: The big scene where you have Lear on a cliff, lost in the storm, with his psychology at the moment, his grief when he comes into Cordelia's dead body. Actually, if you remember the original Shakespeare, when he meets Cordelia's body, he doesn't say much, he just says like "this heart just breaks and this sorrow is so immense, let me just die" and he dies. The speech is just about eight lines or something like that, very short, unlike the scene on the cliff under the storm. That is a big scene in itself, but I think that these are the imageries which remain for me, from the whole Shakespeare version, from the moment when he gives the land away to his elder daughters and Cordelia is silent. That's a realistic scene, but these other psychological scenes, about his trauma in the storm and when he's lost, he lost any sense and his dignity is melted down, and then meets the body of his true love, right? His younger daughter and his wife are the only persons who loved him for himself but not for his power. These are the imaginaries which exists in that play written by Shakespeare. You have this deep psychology, and whoever Shakespeare was, whether he was real or not, he was able to capture this great feeling of displacement, among the storm over by the cliff. With that action of giving away his kingdom to his evil daughters, he actually lost himself, and then we see he's melted down self in the wilderness. This for me is relevant, the imagery, not the imagery of the relationship with Goneril

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or these things, which are just lots of padding around. In Kishida's story we gave quite a deep psychology to Goneril. For example, she has a reason to kill. Because she wants to destroy the patriarchy, there is a whole sense which actually Shakespeare did not provide. Shakespeare didn't really care about what the daughters were thinking of. In that sense it was much more similar to the *shite*'s psychological structure, because actually Shakespeare mainly cared about the psychology of Lear. All these things happening around, there's no reason to understand why Goneril did what she did, it was just relevant her impact on him. I suppose, we assumed, and we embraced the fact of the self, being defined from being a king, the self in *Lear* is so much defined by the power, of being a patriarch, so once you take that away, you just, you just collapse, he just collapsed in the wilderness, so that's also a strong imagery from Shakespeare that we appropriated, to talk about patriarchy in Asia.

MA: Taking decisions about the imagery, representing the decadence of patriarchy but also the gender issue, in contrast with the pre-modern or Shakespeare matter, was that also part of the challenge of the 2012/15 production? I could see, in *Lear Dreaming*, a very emphatic decision regarding the female embodiment, considering these archetypical structures perhaps also as a way of opening a discussion regarding female agency, including motherhood, explicitly.

OKS: Yes, that was a strong development in 2012/15, because of a strong critique that came in 1997. More or less from academics, these critics like Bharucha (2001) refused to accept the codification of the *onnagata* role, whether or not it was according to the psychology of the role, but it was a deep codification, a kind of conduit into the psychology. Let's say, an 80-year-old *kabuki* master playing the role of Cordelia—a 20-year-old virginal character—and we claim that this is about feminist rights, it would never be accepted. I think it's quite interesting, I mean, I'm not going to say what is right or wrong, but it's quite interesting that this kind of critiques would never happen in Japan. We can just talk about Japan specifically, we don't have to go talk about other cultures because it was written as a *nō* play, a contemporary *nō* play. You would never have such an issue if a 60- or 70-year-old *nō* actor is playing a young maiden.

MA: Because it's part of the theatre paradigm.

OKS: It's part of the paradigm, yeah, but it is also conceptual, of a deeper psychological subjectivity. But in 1997 there was a list of critics fixated about the character of Lear's daughter, and it could not be played by a man. For

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me it was a kind of imposition of subjective psychology over an entire production that was really looking towards negotiating tradition and contemporary. In 1997 there was no subjective psychology regarding Lear or the elder daughter. They were role types, the archetype of patriarch and the daughter or new generation who tries to destroy patriarchy. I think that in 2012/15, we started to research, to become much more involved by this subjective psychology, that's why we called it Lear Dreaming, is Lear himself dreaming or, is that all of us, including the audience are dreaming about Lear and what the play can mean as a dream, it becomes subjective. This subjective psychology becomes a new modus operandi; that's why it was appropriate to have actresses or female musicians playing these roles, because it was already within the subjective psychology, while in '97 it was about the psychological archetypes, about the concept of patriarchy and the concept of destroying patriarchy, destroying the old world to create something anew, that destruction could be a brutal one.

MA: Then, from the '97 to the 2012/15 version you reformulated the theatrical canon that included the female embodiment by a male body as part of the classic theatre connotation, either in *nō* or in Elizabethan theatre, where male adolescent bodies would portray female characters, such as Cordelia. Through this re-contextualization, through your vision, you illuminated and modified preconceptions about Shakespearean and pre-modern matter, reworking the historical and cultural connotations you're dealing with these tension and distension, to talk about dissent. Very interesting indeed. Regarding the issue of dissent, in your new work recently premiered in Taipei—I'm referring to *Thousand Stages, Yet I Have Never Quite Lived*—I was wondering, is there a constant in your work, reformulating meanings, delivering new connotation regarding the development of certain theatre cultures?

OKS: Yeah, in my approach to this new work, there are three positions I am interested about: nation, art and self. In that particular case, the controversy revealed, or unveiled in the production, although everybody knows it, to state publicly on a stage that Beijing opera was part of the propaganda machinery, the art of the regime. I mean we also know there was Nazi art, but in terms of the Taiwanese history, this idea was the propaganda machinery of the military. That was the narrative that we put forward. This narrative is very well known, but then when we made it public on stage, it was too provocative, right into extreme, revealing the political taboos that have existed, either because of nationalism. I do deal with the power of the nation, and the power of art exploited by the militia. The whole point of the Beijing opera used by the military to install an identity. If we read James R. Brandon (2009) from University of Hawaii, he wrote a lot about the history of *kabuki*, and you can see how *kabuki* was used as a nationalistic art form by the Japanese government around World War II. It actually

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starts from the Sino-Russian War. *Kabuki* was already used as part of the propaganda, in the same way that, *nō* theatre was the art of the samurai, used by those power structures. All these traditional art forms have been made into accomplices for these instances of power. Art itself has a dialogue between its own purity, that it's usually instrumentalized, etc. In Taiwan we went further into the self. The actress realized art itself was not enough. After the military was defeated and martial law was lifted, Taiwan became a democracy, and then she became a pure artist, but then after twenty years she also begins to realize the artist within herself, within that art, and I think this actually is a conversation which I didn't make in *Lear*, where there were cultural grids and political grids. It's about cultural politics between Japan, China, and Korea, or Japan and Southeast Asia, because Southeast Asia was colonized by Japan. That's why the loyal attendant is Indonesian, for example. I linked the nation and power structures to the art forms, essentially still telling the story of characters, and it's almost a kind of morality tale, of a man who lives behind power only to realize that he has to finally kill himself, to be released from power. This of course extends the Shakespeare's *Lear*, because King Lear did not realize that he had to destroy himself to be released from the power structure. He was such a vassal of the power structure that the only way he could be free was killing himself. Of course, Shakespeare's *Lear* doesn't realize. That's what I often love about this kind of work for myself, where you reached a certain point where you go beyond the original, innovation commences. The work of re-performing, reinventing, adapting the "original". Where you reach beyond the inspiration, somehow the inspiration of Lear led us to this point where the only way this great king could be free was killing himself, to commit *seppuku*. A ritual act that is designed by the system but the individual still takes the choice to act, he may have no choice but he still decides. It was the only way to be free from the memories of Korea, China, Nanjing massacre, Southeast Asia's colonisation, World War II, the brutal colonisation of Korea. The only choice was a final release of himself, for me this is a moment where again we extend beyond the original literature, because of my own interest of this natural triangle of relationships between, power, art and self. For me, Lear's last scene portrays an individual symbolizing freedom, when mankind takes personal responsibility to decolonize themselves in the hope that the world can be transformed. And art itself is very ambiguous zone, because art is constantly instrumentalized, not just becoming a victim, but art desires to link to power while it also desires to be a medium of liberation and freedom finding the self. But somehow art itself is not always a saviour. *Lear* was actually a very naive work. In many ways *Lear Dreaming* was much more mature. But, because we were naive in 1997, we could also be quite clear, we were not afraid to be clear. At the time, I didn't think too much about the self because I was working inside the traditional forms.

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MA: Thank you so very much for this last consideration, explicating all the different layers of meaning, that I'd like to take as conclusion of the interview. Thank you for the entire dialogue, it was a pleasure. And I'm looking forward to your Keynote speech at the upcoming World Shakespeare Conference in July 2021 in Singapore and online.

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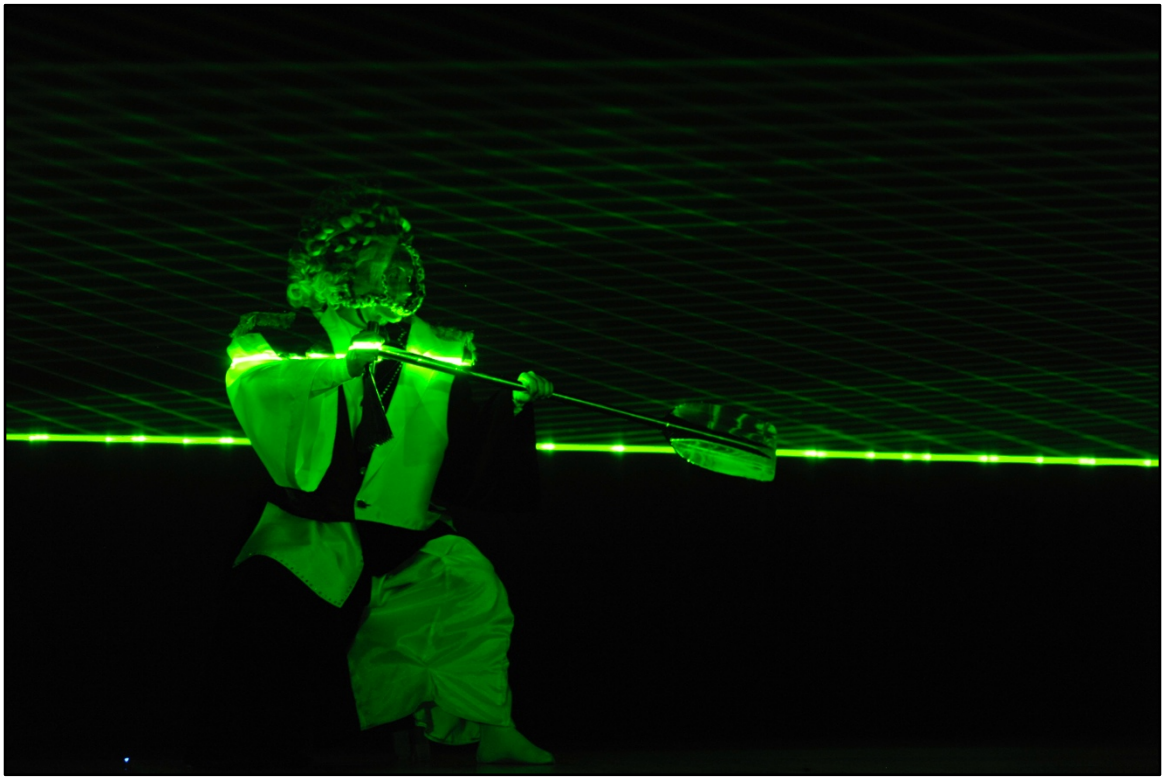

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