

## Review - Tokyo Festival World Competition 2019

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The quest of the Tokyo Festival World Competition was to search out works of performing arts answering the following two questions positively:

1. Does the work or artist have a relevant message, idea, approach, or form of expression, to stage art, which has the potential to develop into a novel theatrical expression by the year 2030?
2. Does the production show sufficient technical skill to express the above relevant message, idea, approach, or form of expression?

Question nr.1 concerns the contents of the production, nr.2 the performance skills, and both require a potential to develop further over the next decade. In order to objectively judge the participating works suitability for these criteria, I used the following measurements:

- 1) Does the work contain a message which stimulates thought?

Performing arts possesses the power to stimulate the spectators' thoughts and widen their worldview, and are therefore potentially powerful tools for creating and remodeling the way we live. That an artist has something he or she wants to say is also motivating force enabling a long-term development. Therefore, I judged the works in this competition according to whether the work contained a socially relevant message for today's society.

- 2) Was the stage direction and acting efficient in transmitting the above message?

Each work contains a different message, and each message can be transmitted in a way which makes it optimally accessible through techniques of stage direction and acting. These techniques and acting skills are also the capital which the artist can bank a future development, so therefore I judged the works choice of direction and acting according to how effectively it transmitted the message.

- 3) How well did the work balance its level of artistry and accessibility?

Works of high levels of artistry can be inaccessible to a wider audience. Again, works which aim only to be accessible, end up reduced to entertainment. Works of art are always produced between the Scylla and Charybdis of artistry and

accessibility. Works of high artistry can obtain support from the state or different foundations, but this support often come with a bias to favor the supporter. Therefore, in order for artists to contain their freedom of expression, a certain ability to attract paying spectators is necessary. Also, if the work fails to attract an audience, the message it contains doesn't transmit to anyone, which renders the it useless. Therefore, I judged the works on how well they balanced their artistic expression with remaining accessible.

I chose the above criteria because in my research on early modern Kabuki theatre, I analyze how, and to what extent, the early modern commercial theatres functioned as public spheres in Japan. A public sphere consists firstly of venues accessible to all, such roads or market place or other venues of public infrastructure, secondly of venues accessible to all disregarding their social status against a rule, such as theatres or museums, and lastly, of venues where a public discourse can be conducted unrestrained.

In Japan, performing artists have been using roads, marketplaces and other points of gathering as performance venues since antiquity. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, commercial theatres in which members of all social classes gathered and consumed the same spectacle arose, and in the modern era, performance spaces became venues to went opinions. In Europe, theatres fulfilled the role of being platforms for public educators and reformers since the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The message projected from these stages had resounding effects for the surrounding society. Their impact on a society where most people did not have the possibility to make their voices heard, cannot be overstated. However, what function does the performing arts have in today's world, where everyone can project their opinion, and be seen by everybody all over the world instantly? This is an existential question for the performing arts, and that is why I chose to judge the participating works according to their relationship to the public and social context they work within.

I watched the participating works in the following order and will evaluate them in the same:

“La posibilidad que desaparece frente al paisaje (Possibilities that disappear before a landscape)” El Conde de Torrefiel (Barcelona, Spain)

“Mea Culpa” Charles Nomwendé Tiendrebéogo (Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso)

“The Howling Girls” Sydney Chamber Opera (Sydney, Australia)

“Tú Amarás (You Shall Love)” Bonobo (Santiago, Chile)

“Big Nothing” Dai Chenlian (Beijing, China)

“Sokonaizu-Bottomless” dracom (Osaka, Japan)

**“La posibilidad que desaparece frente al paisaje (Possibilities that disappear before a landscape)”**

The work re-enacts artistic happenings in six European cities. The text is dislocated from the actors bodies by being read from off stage or projected on a screen. The actors undress and re-dress, walk and stand, alternating between natural and exaggerated movements while interacting with objects such as plastic bags or an inflatable castle.

1) The content of this work is a philosophical and introvert pondering, a discourse on the borderlines between art, nature and the human body, searching for the question What is Art? Reflecting on this question should be a natural part of the creation of any artistical work, but in order to be truly fulfilling, the work should have something to say except a discourse on its own *raison d'être*.

2) The dislocation of the words and actions and the use of inanimate objects was both clever and humorous, and did convey the message of the work effectively.

3) The work showed a high level of artistry at the same time as being easily accessible and entertaining. Of the six works in this competition, this work achieved the best balance on this scale.

Total evaluation: The message of this work did not feel urgently relevant, but it was artistically very well executed at the same time as it was entertaining.

**“Mea Culpa”**

A lone night watchman at a grave yard breaks the protective statue and is

consequently inhabited by the spirits of a dead dictator, his henchman, police, and other people affected by rise and fall of the dictator. The actor enacts all the different characters alone, using animal masks imitating and traditional to Burkina Faso performance style.

1) By displaying a political situation from various standpoints, the work presents a strong discourse on the relationship between political power and individual responsibility. The work stimulates to thinking about what an individual can do in a world with rising authoritarian regimes, which makes it highly relevant.

2) The physical expression of the artist was explosive and engaging. However, by placing the performance in a narrative, the potential universality of the message was blurred.

3) The message was easily accessible, and the performance enjoyable, however, it lacked in universality. In my personal opinion, I think this artist could develop by moving away from the paradigm of representative theatre, and further enhancing the techniques of performative theatre.

Total evaluation: This young artist shows potential to develop well beyond the 2030s and into the 2040s.

### **“The Howling Girls”**

The work is described as an opera, and deals with women who lost their voices due to the trauma induced by the September 11<sup>th</sup> terror attack on the World Trade Center in New York, but enlarges its spectrum to encompass the trauma of women whose voices are not heard in this world. The first 30 minutes, throat singing and electronic noise music echoes on a very dimly lit stage, to very gradually let the shape of the performers appear, and reveal their transformation from animals to human form.

1) Dealing with terror attack on the World Trade Center felt a bit outdated. Though trauma itself is a universal and relevant topic, this work only displayed trauma, and didn't offer any potential method for overcoming it, leaving it unclear what they wanted to achieve by showing it. In a sense, the topic of trauma felt a bit like an excuse for using throat singing and noise music to make an opera.

2) If the purpose of the work was to inflict trauma on the spectator, the staging

and acting was extremely effective.

3) The artistic level of the work was very high, but not necessarily easily accessible.

Total evaluation: On a personal level, I hated this work and found it pretentious, but I do agree that the level of artistry was among the highest of the participating works in this competition. I do hope that this ensemble uses its technical skills and talented artists to create new and different works in the future.

### **“Tú Amarás (You Shall Love)”**

A work discussing the idea of “the other” and discrimination set in the not-so-distant future. A group of doctors preparing a scientific presentation about a care program for a shunned group of immigrants from space gather in a conference room. A seemingly innocent joke about one member not present in the room escalates, so that each and every member of the groups becomes the discriminating and the discriminated in a seemingly never-ending, comical, and high-speed fugue.

1) The play stimulates the spectator to scrutinize his or her own involuntary discriminating tendencies towards a perceived other, a highly relevant and useful message in a world of rising intolerance.

2) The high-speed delivery of the lines and the rapid entanglement of personal relations in a group of colleagues resembled a TV drama. By using a technique of delivery familiar also to non-theatre goers, they effectively conveyed that “the other” is everywhere and oneself can be “the other” everywhere.

3) The work was highly entertaining and the speed of delivery and artistic tension was impressive.

Total evaluation: This work not only discussed a problem, but presented a possible solution to overcoming one’s innate discrimination. As the infighting of the group reaches katharsis, one member of the team reveals that she had been ritually cut by the very people she was treating, as it is considered a rite to show sincerity among them. The doctor, while dealing with the physical pain, realizes that the fear she had been secretly feeling against the others, did not dwell anywhere in her organs, but was something she had learnt. And because it is an acquired sentiment, one can also get rid of it. Not necessarily a new insight, however, much

worth repeating. This group had the most universally relevant message and delivered its message most efficiently of the participating works in this competition, and I hope to see many more of their future productions.

### **“Big Nothing”**

This work is a one-man show, where the artist playfully moves around old machines, photographs and shadows, creating a world where dream, memories and reality merges. The artist both manipulates shadow puppets, but also himself disappears behind the screen to become a shadow, amongst other things, and the performance ends when a white dove flies in to sit at the artists feet as a pot of boiling water blows steam on an old stove.

1) The work incorporated classical Chinese poetry and ghost tales from the Tang dynasty with the artist’s own memories of his grandmother, expressing a strong nostalgia for the past, rather than having a particular message to the audience.

2) The work contained many strange elements, such as the inexplicable hoisting up a bucket of water to be just left dangling mid-air for the duration of the performance. I would not like to even try to interpret or explain all these details, however, as the white dove landed on stage, it did feel like the dream world merged with this world, so in that sense the chosen method was efficient.

3) The work offers a level of artistry probably not digestible to a wider audience. However, it produced an agreeable atmosphere, and can probably gather a certain amount of support.

Total evaluation: This is a work which my chosen scale can’t evaluate properly, but I enjoyed it very much. On a personal level, it felt refreshing to take a break from reality, and I would go and watch this artist again.

### **“Sokonaizu-Bottomless”**

The work is based on a real tragedy happening in Osaka. Two daughters of a wealthy family inherit land and build an apartment building on it to live of the rent incomes, but instead loses all their means of income because of inheritance taxes and repayments of loans. In the end, they lose their will to live, chose not to do anything at all, and end up starving to death.

1) The work deals with the very real issue that people in this day and age can die of starvation due to neglect and lack of social caring in Japan, and is therefore acutely relevant.

2) The text repeats time related phrases, such as the sound to the new years bell, drawing associations to opening line of the Tale of Heike “the sound of the bell of Gion-shoja.” The repetitions, in combination with the slowly decreasing movements of the sisters, efficiently paint the two women’s slow demise.

3) The level of artistry was high, and the message accessible, however, due to the very bleak content of message, this work may be hard to sell to wider audiences.

Total evaluation: The work acutely shows the unkind side of Japanese society with its correct, but unfeeling administration and complicated laws which ends up crushing individuals. I found the work very poignant. The only point I disagree with, is the writer’s decision to make the sisters consciously decide not to do anything, because this places the responsibility for the situation on the sisters themselves, which I don’t think is fair.

Lastly, a few words about the competition overall: This competition was judged by one jury consisting of artists and one composed of critics, each proving to be new platforms to discuss and evaluate performing arts. This time, the two juries had little chance to interact, but in the future, a cross-fertilization between the two different standpoints may give birth to new ideas, and help establish this competition as a permanent forum for artistic discourse.