

Reflections on the Tokyo Festival World Competition

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Serving on the critics' jury for this competition was a fascinating, enlightening experience, one that I hope sometime in the future to reprise. I have emerged from the process with some confidence in my own abilities and a huge respect for those who organized the competition, particularly under the inspired guidance of the competition's director, Yoshiji Yokoyama.

After the initial presentation by the "recommenders"—i.e., the curators from the six regions being represented at this competition—and an opening reception attended by the three committees (recommenders, artists' and critics' juries), the week began with a couple of talks by festival programmers. Yoshiji Yokoyama, the brain behind this festival, discussed his rationale and what he hoped might come out of this, to wit: a new, and non-Eurocentric framework for evaluating performing arts in the 21st century, and a place to showcase promising artists from around the world. It's proving to bear fruit. Yokoyama's presentation was followed by the brilliant Seonghee Kim, who has served as Project Director of Performing Arts at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, among other prestigious posts she's had as a producer of Asian performing arts in Korea. She is in large part responsible for some of the most provocative works I've had the pleasure of seeing at festivals like TPAM in Yokohama, works like Apichatpong Weerasethakul's astounding *Fever Room*. Dai Chenlian's "Big Nothing" from Beijing was her choice to represent Asia at this competition.

What follows are brief reviews of the six featured works in the competition.

Possibilities that Disappear before a Landscape

This work, by Barcelona's El Conde de Torrefiel, was a textually dense performance that referenced artists and writers like Spencer Tunick, Michel Houellebecq, and Paul B.

Preciado. While philosophical pronouncements are made on art, ageing, and the Anthropocene (among other subjects), four men went through a series of seemingly unrelated and goofy exercises, sometimes clothed, sometimes near nude. Thongs were worn for the prudish Japanese audience in the first scene. Was that really still necessary? Performances in other countries had been done in the nude and, since the first scene was a re-enactment of Spencer Tunick's naked photo shoot at the Berlin Holocaust Memorial, covering the nakedness of the actors seemed counterproductive. Some of us wondered: was this a reflection of an increasingly inhibited artistic climate in Japan?

The gap between text and what was actually happening on stage was reminiscent of Japanese playwright Okada Toshiki's "noisy" bodies. Afterwards my fellow juror Adam Broinowski summed it up better than I ever could, remarking that it was a show his son would have enjoyed. "And how old is your son?" I asked. "Eight." "A very philosophical son," I replied. "Oh, no. He'd have been entirely oblivious to the text and would have been totally into the men in tights, the bouncy castle, the balloons and plastic bags, the lewd act with a leek, a carrot, and a banana. This was a show for people who were either under ten or over forty-five, but no one in between."

Mea Culpa

"Possibilities" was a very European work, very talky, very *literary*, with uncoordinated, somewhat flabby bodies signalling dark, unconscious motivations flowing underneath the voluble chatter. "Mea Culpa," by Charles Nomwendé Tiendrebéogo from Burkina Faso was, well, very African. A man comes to pray for the souls of the dead buried in a cemetery, but gradually becomes possessed by them. Tiendrebéogo played each ghost with a mask, masks of animals—a pig, a cow, a monkey, a donkey, a lion—representing the spirit of each dead soul, all bearing sins to confess. What a beautiful, expressive body Tiendrebéogo has!

Afterward, another one of my fellow jurors, Samuel Nfor from Cameroon, noted how Grotowskian his performance was. All African theatre is Poor Theatre, he said, since nobody has the resources for much else, but a world can still be evoked with an expressive body and a few masks and props. The first two works on the first day were thus a study in contrasts, each performance rooted in its own traditions. As a critic, one began to appreciate how difficult it was going to be to pick a winner if all the works were so different in nature. El Conde de Torrefiel's "Possibilities" practically screamed Europe, with its literariness, its intellectuality, its cynicism, its clumsy gestures toward physicality. "Mea Culpa" was a work conceived and executed by a single artist, with masks, props, music, and his own infinitely expressive body. Its message about the corrosive effects of political and economic corruption was simple but heartfelt.

The Howling Girls

After 9.11, five teenaged girls arrived separately at the same hospital, presenting identical symptoms. They claimed that the falling debris (including human flesh) had lodged in their throats, robbing them of speech. The diagnosis for all of them was that it was psychosomatic, since the doctors could find no physical damage had been done to their vocal cords. This is the premise of a collaboration between composer Damien Ricketson and director Adena Jacobs and mounted by the Sydney Chamber Opera of Australia, with musical director and theremin musician Jack Symonds, soprano Jane Sheldon, and six teenaged girls as chorus. A special stage and bleachers for the audience was built on the mainstage of the playhouse at the Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre, making for an intimate experience that soon became both explosive and oppressive. The work began in the pitch dark, with the sound of what sounded like a respirator: slow, rasping, gasping sounds that gradually became notes, vibrations, eventually rising to a crescendo. But first, there was only sound, and mostly inarticulate at

that. Under the inhalations and exhalations, the sighs, ran a deep electronic buzz, and an ominous sound it was. Then in the dark one could vaguely see that the black curtain had parted slightly, revealing a white form--a bag? a head? The curtain parted more and the form elongated, becoming what seemed to be a shroud. Slowly the shroud moved. Underneath was a body, and it was breathing. The shroud seemed to rise, or writhe, as the voice became louder, more articulate. The curtain parted more and the form rose up, discarding the shroud and mounting onto the main stage down right. Dim figures then presented themselves upstage right, whispering, gasping, rasping. The electronic drone sounded like those brass trumpets in Tibetan music, something unearthly, the voices rather like Inuit throat singing, but earnest and humourless. The aural effect was visceral, like a kick to the gut. Then, suddenly, the lights went up, blazingly, and the visual effect was like a slap to the face. Soprano Jane Sheldon was down front at stage right and to her left were six furry figures holding little screaming skulls and wailing. Upstage the theremin played, always an eerie instrument but this time uncannily emulating the human voice. It became impossible to distinguish what was live and what was recorded, and everyone's voice was amplified anyway. Eventually the chorus stripped off their monkey suits and presented themselves in body stockings, female forms that were at the same time stripped of any sexuality, but still bearing furry pelts down the back that I initially took to be pony tails. The voices eventually coalesced into something like a language, but unintelligible, sounds the girls themselves had invented for their part, something sounding vaguely Scandinavian. The overall effect should have been offensive, alienating, and yet it was enthralling. Kudos to the soloist and to the music especially. The young women, after their weird manifestation, appeared for the curtain call, just girls, over the moon to be in a production in Japan. Today I ran into the soprano Jane Sheldon on the street and praised her. It was surely not an easy work for any human voice to sing. Reflecting on the work later with my colleagues on the critics' jury, I had to agree, however, that the

reference to 9.11 seemed both out of date and gratuitous, and that, if this work was an expression of how people can be silenced by trauma, was there not a contradiction here? The entire performance was an articulate, albeit nonverbal exercise in expressiveness.

Tu Amaras:

“Tu Amaras” was the Americas selection from the Chilean theatre company Bonobo. Ostensibly set sometime in the future with a group of doctors preparing a presentation about how to provide non-judgemental medical attention to a race of extraterrestrials called Amenites, the play begins with a funny schtick involving two Spanish priests in black cassocks and an indigenous man apologizing for having made love to the priests' cow. This routine, however, underscored a more serious theme running throughout the play involving issues of violence and racial discrimination. Broad humour sweetened the bitter pill of the play's message. My colleague on the jury, Tove Bjoerk, remarked that folks like us could readily identify with a group of people anguishing over the right language to use and images to show in a PowerPoint presentation at an academic conference. I should mention something very important that was not part of the performance happened afterward. For the second curtain call, the actors brought out a large cloth on which they had written “Human Rights Are Being Violated in Chile.” The state of emergency there has been generally underreported and I learned of it first only from a colleague I ran into in the airport in Victoria who had just managed to return from Santiago. Carmen Romero, the producer from Chile who had selected this play to represent the Americas, had to Skype in because she was still stuck in Santiago. She managed to make it here by Day 3. If “Big Nothing” seemed enigmatic, too private, too dreamy, “Tu Amaras” was readily legible as a political allegory, one that was not restricted to a specific place and time, however, but one whose message was universal. Talky

and busy like “Possibilities,” it was sometimes hard to follow both the surtitles to understand the dialogue while keeping an eye on the action.

Big Nothing:

Dai Chenlian’s “Big Nothing” was anything but. The Chinese title (东来紫气满函关), a line from a poem by Dufu, was more evocative. Dai’s performance, like Tiendrebéogo’s, was a one-man show, and as mysterious as Laozi’s Daoist text. The work was a combination of shadow puppetry and material theatre, with props like a machine to make shoes, a fan, a tea kettle, objects Dai was familiar with from his grandmother's house in Xiaoxing, which is also the birthplace of Lu Xun. The work is a nostalgic dream into the past of his grandmother, referencing Lu Xun and a weirdly Kafkaesque Tang dynasty collection of stories with the delightful title of “The Miscellaneous Morcels of Youyang.” It was a waking dream, riddling, slow, very quiet, which was finally broken by a white dove who flew onto the stage and landed at Dai’s feet, patiently remaining there for the curtain call. Afterward talking to Dai, I said something to the effect that the dove had woken me from my reverie, to which he said, “Did it, really?” A beautiful work. This was ultimately my favourite work of the competition and I was personally eager to see that it was made the winner, but many I talked to didn’t get what the artist was trying to express. My colleague from Kyoto, Naoto Moriyama, remarked later that as an artist in China Dai was no doubt limited in the extent to which he could make any social or political commentaries or critiques in his work, but I sensed that its nostalgia for the past, for a slower, rural way of life, a life given over to personal, lyric flights of the imagination, was itself a critique of contemporary Chinese life.

It was only after the performance, in talking with the artist, that I was to get a glimpse of an understanding of the meaning of the original title, and later I had to look for an English translation of Dufu’s poem to learn more. The “purple haze” mentioned in the title carries the

philosopher Laozi from the capital to the provinces and, when asked to show his passport to a barrier guard, he presents the *Daodejing* (The Way and its Power). Like Laozi, Dufu reflects in his poem on returning to the provinces after serving in the capital: “How often did I, by the gate’s blue rings, take my humble place in dawn court’s ranks?” Most Chinese art, however personal and lyrical, is politically charged, and it would not be an overinterpretation to see here a statement from Dai about the reasons behind his choice to leave public life for an intensively private world in the provinces.

“Bottomless” (Sokonaizu)

And last, but certainly not least, was the entry from Japan, which merits its own region as the host country: “Bottomless,” from Osaka theatre company Dracom, with a beautiful script written by Tsutsui Jun. Based on a real event, the story resembles Koreeda's 2004 film “Nobody Knows,” with some significant differences. The family here are not children, but adults, and the parents have abandoned them only because they have died. Two sisters have inherited the house where they were born and raised, but death duties being what they are in Japan and loans still to pay, they have had to surrender it to an unscrupulous realtor who promises he will clear their debts if the house is torn down and a condo built there. This is done, but there is no money left for the sisters to live on after the debts and taxes have been paid. They eke out a slim living in a simple one-room apartment but find it impossible to make enough to live on and have no friends or relatives to rely on either. Failure to pay the utility bills means their electricity and gas are cut off. Letters from the city pile up through the letter slot but the sisters never answer and are perhaps too ashamed, or too fed up with the system, to seek out welfare assistance. They have literally fallen through the cracks, and though they have a case worker at the city hall and a bureaucrat appointed to enforce the rules, none of the officials bother to reach out to them, nor does a neighbour enquire as to

their wellbeing after one of the sisters begs to borrow a little cash to pay for something to eat. Even when the stink of garbage exudes from the letterbox every time the “enforcer” shoves another letter through the door, he doesn't pursue the problem. We watch the two women slowly starve to death and by the time they could save themselves they are too weak. When everything has been taken away from them—their mother and father, their home, their savings—, all they have left is their lives, and ultimately the only choice they have is to end it. But it's a slow death, unnaturally natural, and not suicide, as if the two had finally decided to let circumstances take their inevitable course and not to meddle with that. The text was lyrical, elliptical, repetitious yet not annoyingly so; the pace was slow, deliberate. Many of us wondered when it would end, but nobody had any doubts as to how. Stylistically the work was reminiscent of Beckett, but a somehow sentimental, Osakan, “wet” Beckett. No sophisticated theatrical effects, the only offstage sounds the distant moans of the neighbour, being made love to by her husband on the last night of the year, and finally, Nina Simone singing “I Got Life,” the volume turned right down so one could just hear it. Afterward I felt wretched for my own amazingly good fortune, and rightly so, and then, hungrily, unconscionably, I devoured a late lunch.

Discussing it with my colleagues afterwards, we were all impressed by the artistic quality of the work, both the text and its performance, but felt suffocated by the sense of paralysis and defeatism prevalent in contemporary Japanese society. In a land that extols *kizuna*, the ties that bind community, where were they when these sisters died alone? Were we the audience meant to lie down like them and accept the indifference, the injustices portrayed here? Of course, the work was a critique of all this, but it didn't seem to move us toward some transformative action that sense of isolation and impotence so many Japanese feel today.

Picking a Winner:

In many ways, the critics' choice came as a surprise to me. We had but one winner to choose out of six candidates, while the artists' jury could award three prizes: best technical artist, best performer, and best overall production. Like the critics, the audience also got to award their favourite production a prize. The whole exercise was really interesting, but the results made one reflect on both criteria and the process. There is undoubtedly room for improvement. The artists' jury, chaired by Juliette Binoche with vice-chair Natsuki Mari, met simultaneously so that one hand didn't know what the other was doing. The critics' jury was a polite affair, and had a respectable audience of Japanese artists, critics, and journalists listening, and later even joining in the discussion. We hadn't really expected anyone to come listen to us. "Tu Ameras" was the overall winner, getting prizes from all three categories: artists, critics, and audience. Prizes also went out from the artists' jury to "The Howling Girls" (technical artist) and "Big Nothing" for best overall production. Yokoyama had stressed that this was a competition without losers, but the stakes were different for some of the performers. I heard that Charles Nomwendé Tiendrebéogo from Burkina Faso was crushed not to win something, because it is exceedingly rare for an African to be able to attend such an international event and he tried so hard. This made me consider the possible ethical injustices of evaluating apparently incommensurate productions. Should artists have to compete with one another? Of course, the Greeks entered their tragedies into competitions, and competitions in film and the other arts are common. It was Yokoyama's hope that we could somehow come up with new standards for evaluating the performing arts, standards that were not hamstrung by the old Eurocentric categories of drama, dance, and opera. But are all performances, as varied as they were, to be measured by the same yardstick? Film has categories for documentary, drama, and so on. Perhaps we need to define new, non-European genres for the performing arts.

Afterward the awards were given out and the closing reception ended, a couple of groups ended up in separate parties that convened in a hotel bar called Orient Express. I joked that with that name there must be a murder. I found myself with the producers and directors of “The Howling Girls” and another Australian member of the critics' committee, Adam Broinowski, all products of English colonization: fellow travellers, in other words. Across from us sat the artists' jury, *avec la Juliette Binoche*, *sans la Natsuki Mari*. We joked that a trench had been dug in the floor between the artists and the critics, until the staff in the bar ushered us critics into a little room further inside the bar so we didn't have to awkwardly regard one another or the divide. Was there a murder on the Orient Express? Yes, the critics.

It would have been interesting to compare notes with the artists' jury on their deliberations, but they and my own team seemed to move in parallel worlds, and we really intersected only on the first and last days. I suppose it was planned it that way so we could not compare notes, but would come up with our own independent choices. In any case, I was fortunate to have the chance to talk to one of the members of the other jury afterward, on the long bus ride to Narita airport. I came away from this conversation both impressed with how the artists' jury argued long over first principles and, at the same time, a little disappointed that we critics had not really come to a consensus on how the two criteria we were given to measure the works were to be defined.

To summarize, those two criteria were:

- 1) Whether the piece presents a new set of values for the performing arts of the 2030s; and

- 2) Whether the piece presents those values through skills of exceptional quality.

Essentially, what “values” were we meant to measure? In conversation with the artists' jury member after all the awards were handed out, indigeneity and decolonization were highlighted as two potential themes of the competition. One of the jurors, Emily Johnson,

was from the Yukip nation in Alaska, and another, Lemi Ponifasio, was a Samoan based in New Zealand. The eclectic, multicultural choice in recommenders, artists and critics—to say nothing of the selected works for competition—was clearly an effort to move the practice of and discourse on the performing arts out of the kind of Eurocentric orbit it has been for at least the past century, but to my mind, the ultimate choice of “Tu Amaras” seemed somewhat tame. Ultimately as critics we had to decide—and this is how we interpreted the criteria given to us—which work addressed pressing issues that would remain with us as a species, and which company as artists showed the greatest promise to create challenging new work for at least another decade. In that sense, after weighing the strengths and weakness of all the productions, “Tu Amaras” seemed like a happy compromise, hitting more of the right notes than just about any of the other works. And we did not seem to be mistaken, since the artists and audiences had also singled it out as one of their favourites. But could we not have been more provocative in our choice?

I do hope that this competition will not be the last. The conception was daring and imaginative and the entire week was brilliantly organized. The team of interpreters (for English, French, Spanish, Chinese, Korean) was amazing and all the other assistants to handle the artists, recording meetings, and so on, were superb. Bravo to everyone!