

Tokyo Festival World Competition in Retrospect

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I was privileged to be part of the Tokyo Festival World Competition that ran from October 29th through November 4th, 2019 at the Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre as a Japanese speaking critic. It was a week that brought actors, directors, dancers, singers, critics, and scholars across the globe to Japan to perform, share, evaluate, discuss and debate qualities and values envisaged for the performing arts of the 2030's. As part of a jury of critics that evaluated and appreciated the six performances from Japan, Burkina Faso, Chile, Spain, China and Australia, the organizers of the festival made it known to all participants that the purpose of the competition was not to slam performances as bad or good. The festival was not a platform to determine if a theatre practitioner was a victor or a vanquish. The word 'competition' carried a positive connotation and the festival was to be seen as a forum to enthusiastically criticize each performance because, after all, any good work of art is always subjected to criticism. Above all else, because artists are always looking for creative avenues to make their works different, better, and more successful. With this in mind, some performances and performers were recognized at the end of the festival with trophies, bearing in mind that other participating performances and performers will take their turns to receive awards and trophies in subsequent years.

For a quick and brief review of all six performances, Spain's El Conde de Torrefiel performed *Possibilities that Disappear before Landscape*, a performance which was largely mimed. Mime is an intriguing, yet powerful theatrical mode of expression that was well exploited by the actors to reveal their artistic prowess. The performance upheld and safeguarded nature and the environment captured with bright props and colourful stage designs. Movements on stage were well calculated and presented symmetrical and balanced positions of actors creating a stage topography and architecture that was aesthetically appealing to watch.

Then, Charles Nomwende, a Burkina Faso born actor and physical theatre specialist, took the stage and held the audience spell bound with his solo performance titled *Mea Culpa*. The performance displayed his coordinated stage agility and alacrity. He embraced Grotowski's "poor theatre" technique by prioritizing movements, body and facial expressions over gorgeous costumes, fancy

lighting and colourful stage set and décor. It was total theatre with a spectacular spectacle of dance, music, song, mime, masquerading and incantation. He fully engaged the audience through and through and successfully bridged the actor-audience relationship gap, which by so doing was not only acknowledging the importance of an audience but also encouraging the audience to sit at the edge of their seats. The theme of the play was in a typical Brechtian fashion addressing burning socio-political issues like corruption, dictatorship and power mongering not as a mirror to uphold his African society but as a hammer to shape it.

Theatre company Bonobo from Santiago, Chile performed *You Shall Love*. The performance which addressed serious issues related to racism and inclusion amongst others maintained a simple set but upbeat performance rhythm. In a melodious Spanish language, the actors displayed their ability of great memory and exceptional oratory in their rendition of the lines of the play.

Dracom, an Osaka-Japan based theatre company performed *Sonokaizu* in strictly humorous kansai dialect. The actors spoke from their hearts, felt each word, observed all punctuations on the script and exquisitely maintained rhythm, pace, and tempo in their delivery in a way that articulated the beauty of the performance. In a soft-spoken tone, the performers found cracks on the status-quo as they told a serious story of pain, loneliness and abandonment.

Big Nothing, a puppet theatrical art form from China by Dai Chenlian company mesmerized a cross section of the audience with a solo performance that was somewhat magical, sophisticated and unique in its representation of reality and fantasy. The introduction of a tamed bird as character at the end of the performance created a memorable dramatic effect.

Australia's Sydney Chamber Opera performed *Howling Girls*. The lead singer sang effortlessly and demonstrated great capability and capacity of voice control in an amazing way that sustained the interest of the audience. Unique instruments, rare costumes and deep sounds combined together made *Howling Girls* a popular performance at the festival.

All in all, Tokyo Festival World Competition 2019 was a crossroads and melting pot of cultures for a week with a grandiose closing ceremony punctuated with brilliant speeches from the governor

of Tokyo, some members of the diplomatic corps, general director of Tokyo Festival, director of Tokyo Festival World Competition, and some household theatre names from Japan and overseas.

The festival met with a resounding success and kudos go to the hardworking and lively administrative and technical staff and the professionalism of the director of the festival who oversaw everything. The cocktail party that the festival offered did not only provide a relaxed atmosphere after a week of intense work but provided room for networking. The availability of interpreters of many languages who simultaneously interpreted speakers with such ease and comfort made the whole festival truly international and one that responded to the call for cross cultural communication and internalization in this increasingly global and interdependent world.

In my capacity as one of the critics of the festival, it is my fervent wish that we as theatre makers refrain from practicing “art for art’s sake”, the 19th century slogan which expresses a philosophy that the only “true” art, is one that is politically, didactically and morally colourless. “Art for art’s sake” has been challenged by many writers amongst them is the celebrated African anticolonial writer Chinua Achebe who argues unequivocally that art should “minister to a basic human need and serve a down to earth necessity”. To this claim, theatre practitioners could step back from trivial themes and engage in artistic creation that addresses the plight and predicament of the common man in our respective communities. That as theatre practitioners we would serve as visionaries of our societies, as eye openers, as the voice of the voiceless and the voice of the downtrodden. That we would join the United Nations slogan of *No One Should Be Left Behind* to orientate our theatrical productions towards including as themes Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) like Gender Equality, Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, Climate Action, Sustainable Cities and Communities amongst others as our own effort in making the world a better place through theatre. That we would invest in securing elevated artistic skills to keep the performing arts alive as we ride towards 2030. That we would embark in more collaborative work with other artists of varying backgrounds, nationalities, interests, to create multicultural works of great imagination that are engaging, educative and above all entertaining.

Looking forward to another Tokyo Festival World Competition, 2020!

