

Kitamari/KIKIKIKIKIKI, NOCTURNE FOR THE OLD FLOWER: The Night of a Lunar Eclipse Filled with the Hopes and Delusions of an Old Prostitute

Takao Norikoshi (writer, outlaw dance critic)



Photo: Akihito Abe

This is an astonishingly dense and weighty work. Rich but pared down, it pulls you into its calculated sensibility, thick squalor, and compelling yet painful sentiments.

It is adapted from an early play by Shogo Ota, the head of the Tenkei Gekijo (Transformation Theater) company and whose “theatre of silence” works like *The Water Station* sent shock waves through the performing arts. Ota also served as head of the moving image and stage arts department at Kyoto University of Art and Design (today, Kyoto University of the Arts), where Kitamari was once a student.

In an interview, Kitamari has described how she left Ota’s practicum after around half a year. While training to walk slowly, Ota apparently told her that her style of walking was not theatre, but dance, which awakened her to how her body was moving toward dance.

And now that same Kitamari has taken on her favorite play of Ota’s, *NOCTURNE FOR THE OLD FLOWER*.¹

The Hotel Moonlight is a brothel that employs the old prostitute Hana (literally, flower). The other eleven characters include: a regular, Yuzo; a blind man who has come to see Hana; his younger sister; the young prostitutes Toto and Riri; the brothel owner and proprietress; a mariner on a smuggling ship; an official; and a customer.

They are all played by just two performers: Kitamari and Mariya Takechiyo.

Takechiyo is a Kansai-based dancer active in butoh and his own style of work. Keeping a low center of gravity, he is muscular yet simultaneously gentle and with the charm and pleasant appeal of an older man. In this work, Kitamari too revealed a wide range of characters at a visual level, from a petite young woman to a gnarled old prostitute.

Kitamari apparently started by reading out the script with Takechiyo while moving their bodies, which gradually evolved into dance. This is a daunting task. But as a result, what developed were many unique, perfectly weighted movements that are not dance-like movements or explanatory mime, but (at key points) both and also neither.

This is not because they are simply movements packed with meaning. Though there have been dance works before that have scrupulously converted a script into movement, they weren't like this. I want to search here for the secret that lies behind that.

The work portrays one night during a lunar eclipse.

Light and shadow shift. The entire stage is pervaded by a sense that something different from normal is going to take place. Like light and shadow, the stage is replete with various binaries—male and female, young and old, dream and reality, hope and despair—whose relationships gradually change. (Kitamari's hair is also dyed half in gold.)

The old prostitute Hana is unable to get almost any customers, so much so that she attempts to take ones from the young prostitutes. The couple who run the Hotel Moonlight are at a loss, but their affection for her prevents them from treating her with disdain.

The old friend Yuzo tries to buy Hana's freedom, but Hana cannot forget the mariner who promised long ago to take her away overseas. And then on this night of the eclipse, the sound of a whistle signal is heard outside.



Photo: Akihito Abe

I have seen Kitamari's work in both Tokyo and Kansai. Conspicuously petite though she is, the energy that emanates from her body brims with a keenness and power that we might call frantic, and is reminiscent of a honey badger. This small animal, also known as a ratel, is visually similar to a badger, and its penchant for calmly facing off against even big animals has earned it a reputation as the most ferocious land animal on the planet.

Those unrelenting fangs are also directed at Kitamari's own work.

As her favorite stage direction in the original play, Kitamari cites: "A prostitute is sleeping. Looking closer, we realize that she is standing." (This stage direction was cut from the revised version of the play.)

Standing in such a way that she appears to be asleep? We can't immediately picture it. Ota seems to be intentionally choosing words that we can't visualize. But without overdoing the stage direction, Kitamari is rather carrying a futon at the start. Initially, it's like someone sleeping as seen from above, though she is brilliantly in a standing pose. Sharp-witted as this is, it's nonetheless like glimpsing Kitamari's earnestness to masticate each and every part of this play

There follow scenes where it is impossible to take your eyes off the stage.

Kitamari rips up and throws away the futon, and then begins to bend backward. Mariya Takechiyo stands back to back behind her, and a supine Kitamari leans onto his back. Fully riding on his back and lifted up high, Kitamari's legs open in the air,

at which point multicolored lights in her crotch begin to illuminate the darkness. This is the signboard for the Hotel Moonlight, recreating what the original play's stage directions describe as "decorative fairy lights blinking on and off, a world revealing various colors." The place where the lights are installed is just a place, while the flashing lights, at first resplendent yet actually small and cheap, seem to be the very life of the old prostitute.

Kitamari and Takechiyo then begin to dance, staying back to back the whole time.

Looking closer, we see that their bodies are tied by what seems to be a sash, joining them together as one. Back to back, their arms protruding, they resemble a Buddhist statue with two heads and four arms. This is a dance style formed out of a sequence of varied poses, but it firmly fixes the movement at each point, meaning this sense that they are a Buddhist statute grows and grows.

Needless to say, nothing is harder than moving back to back. But it creates movements and relationships by its very limitations: through a hand gently reaching out to a woman's thigh from behind, for instance, or by slowly switching places like a kabuki stage trick.

For more than a third of the performance, they continue to dance in this two-as-one style. It brings to mind various images in the audience: of something hard to let go, or of the fetters of a long life, of the life with which we are saddled.



Photo: Akihito Abe

Beginning with words from the play script, the rest of performance also uses words.

Words in dance are both attractive and dangerous. They are armed with the strongest weapon in that they are easy to understand, but are forms of expression overly reliant on that can fall into the trap of being explanatory. In which case, the format of a stage play makes more sense, and the specific meaning of creating a dance work is lost.

Here, attention is meticulously paid to the way in which words are used in the performance, and especially the way in which they are said.

The pamphlet credited Yoko Shimomura with the “songs” and Taro Yamamichi with the “voice,” and, on checking this with Kitamari herself, she said that the “the text of the play was used for the actual lyrics, while the music is original.” At the start, Yamamichi’s “voice” narrates Hana’s monologue, which likewise begins the first version of the play. The lyrics of “The Balloon-seller’s Song” seem like they were thought up by Shogo Ota; “The Moon’s Song” is an arrangement of a traditional Ryukyuan folk song; the narration uses quotations from François Villon and the noh play *Yamanba*. (All of these elements are found in the original play, though some were removed for the subsequent revisions.)

It is surely difficult for first-time viewers to hear the lyrics accurately.

The use of traditional Japanese music is also unusual in contemporary dance, but felt a perfect match for this work. In her career, Kitamari’s previous credits include Kinoshita-Kabuki’s adaptation of *Musume Dojoji* and the Saga kyogen–inspired *Atago*, though Ota’s source text does not specify the use of traditional music. As will be returned to later, this seems to reveal Kitamari’s interpretation of Ota’s ardor for noh.

Futozao shamisen player Yae Yamamichi is a young artist whose energetic activities have attracted much attention. A frequent collaborator with contemporary dance artists like Roma Hashimoto, she indicates the emergence of a generation deeply rooted in both classical and contemporary forms of expression. In this dance work, with such touches as a shamisen rendition of “Maiden’s Prayer” playing on a music box, the loose sense of distance is outstanding.



Photo: Akihito Abe

The story progresses and, the mariner's whistle blowing in the darkness, Hana's feet alone are illuminated as she slowly takes steps forward.

This whistle is blown by the mariner as a signal for the young prostitute Toto, but believing the sailor who long ago promised to take her away has come back, Hana jilts her regular customer Yuzo to dash outside. Yuzo gives up. Outside, the eclipse is over and a festival underway.

The mariner waits for Toto. Hana approaches, urging him to take her away. A resolved Yuzo slashes at the mariner with his dagger but ends up the one getting stabbed, and dies. These extraordinary scenes unfold entirely within the frenzied dancing of the two performers.

Moreover, Hana steps on the dying Yuzo's face and delivers the finishing blow (or at least seems to do so). Straddling his face and stamping on the ground in a semi-crouch, Kitamari peeps at the face as if hunching over. Having clung so long to it in the name of hope, her delusion outstrips and severs her relationship with reality.

In the original, Yuzo continues somehow to talk to Hana even after death. Such conversing with the dead is a staple of noh. The soul communicates with people beyond dreams and consciousness.

Even in the face of the soul of Yuzo, who had tried to bring her happiness, Hana continues to describe her endless yearning for a journey to a foreign land. The two dancers stand back to back, becoming one once again, and then fade into the darkness.

In an interview, Kitamari has spoken of her “keen sense of the influence of noh in Ota’s work.” The pillars standing in the four corners of the stage for this performance also reference the noh stage, which further reveals why the use of traditional music does not feel out of place.

But Kitamari also spoken of “her sense in Ota’s early work of the smell of the dead, of how all the characters are dead people without human form.”

Indeed, this adaptation also has moments in which the flow of time and life or death of people seems vague. Toto, for instance, is introduced in the list of characters in the revised version of the script as a “prostitute who falls off a smuggling ship,” but this is not shown at any point. Toto suddenly goes missing and is never found. But in the first version of the play, she abruptly returns in the second half wearing a drenched wedding dress. Though the scene was later cut, that element remained in the character list, continuing to exist in a corner of the audience’s mind.

Shogo Ota’s major work *The Water Station* depicts people moving slowly over a span of time that is highly stretched out, with only the water from a single dripping pipe continuing to mark the flow of the ongoing present. In this performance too, only the eclipse proceeds matter-of-factly over the passage of time and various chaotic incidents.

And it performed and showed those “without human form” through dance, a means reliant on the body. The certain kinds of “leaps,” which ordinarily occur during the process of words being sublimated into dance, are scrupulously dissected and excluded. As a result, it proceeds to a unique rhythm that is not a “dance-like” one of jumping and bouncing around in time to a song. With movements underlaid by delicate actions, yet nonetheless still heavy, the tension of not knowing what would happen next continues unbroken right until the end.

Age inevitably accumulates on the human body, but our thoughts are not necessarily restrained by our physical form. Out of a play woven with words, Kitamari depicts and shows a world only possible to convey through dance.

The boundary between theatre and dance has played host to various experimentation before, yet this work surely drove a wedge very firmly between them.

1. There are various versions of the play. Kitamari based her work on the first published version, which appeared in the magazine *Shingeki* in 1974. She then

reconfigured it into yet another script for her own purposes. It goes without saying that it differs in numerous ways from the subsequent versions of Ota's play.

Takao Norikoshi

Born in 1963 in Tokyo, Norikoshi Takao is a writer and self-professed "outlaw" dance critic. He is also the president of Japan Dance Plug. In 2006, he undertook a research trip to the United States upon the invitation of the Japan Society in New York. In 2007, he served as the Japanese director for *Japone Danza* in Italy. Norikoshi serves as a judge and advisor for foundations and dance festivals at home and abroad, and is a member of the jury for the El Sur Foundation Newcomer Award. His many publications include *Contemporary Dance Total Guide HYPER* (Sakuhinsha), *So You Won't Watch Dance?! Contemporary Dance Extreme Record* (NTT Publishing), *Dance Bible* (Kawade Shobo Shinsha), and *Alice, the Story of Fumiko Kawabata* (Kodansha). He writes columns for Bravo, act guide, Ballet Channel, and more.

Kitamari/KIKIKIKIKIKI

"NOCTURNE FOR THE OLD FLOWER"

Original Text by Shogo Ota

Choreographed and Directed by Kitamari

Schedule : Friday, Oct. 22- Sunday, Oct. 24 (Archive streaming) Thursday, Nov. 18-Tuesday, Nov. 30

Place : Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre, Theatre West

Cast: Kitamari, Mariya Takechiyo, Yoko Shimomura (singing)

Performers: Yae Yamamichi, Rina Hasegawa, Mikako Mochizuki, Satamitsuro Mochizuki*, Rokon Tosya*, Sou Katada, Yuuka Tomizawa

Recitation, Taro Yamamichi

*One of performers, Youko Mochizuki will be changed to Rina Hasegawa.(Updated on oct.18)

*double cast (Rokon Tosya performs on Friday, Oct. 22 and Saturday, Oct. 23 and Satamitsuro Mochizuki on Sunday, Oct. 24.)

<https://tokyo-festival.jp/2021/en/program/kitamari>

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