

METAMORPHOSIS OF A LIVING ROOM (*RIBINGU RŪMU NO*

METAMORUFŌSHISU) by chelfitsch & Dai Fujikura with Klangforum Wien. Directed by Okada Toshiki. Holland Festival, Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ, Amsterdam. June 8, 2023.

Renowned director and playwright Okada Toshiki needs no introduction given his worldwide status as the main representative of contemporary Japanese theatre internationally. Perhaps a less known fact is that ‘eco-critical’ performances have proliferated in Japan in the post-Fukushima period, including Okada’s productions. Many artists, such as Kamisato Yudai, Hagiwara Yuta’s Kamome Machine theatre company or Matsui Shū, have been re-thinking environmental disasters in their own unique ways. In Okada’s recent work, the Anthropocene catastrophes are often problematized through playing with absence and presence; from stages filled with objects that seemingly communicate with/against the performers disregarding the audience (*Eraser Mountain, 2019*), to video screens placed into theatre and exhibitions spaces without performers (*New Illusion, 2022*).

The latest production by Okada’s chelfitsch theatre company *Metamorphosis of a Living Room (Ribingu Rūmu no Metamorufošhisu)*, a collaboration with London-based Japanese composer Dai Fujikura and Klangforum Wien ensemble, continued this kind of exploration of the Anthropocene condition. The climate change topic nevertheless came in a more human form, with six actors and seven musicians who seamlessly recited and dialogued with Okada’s poetic text about a looming disaster. There was also a sense of an underlying satire about the nature of theatre-making internationally. I watched the performance at Amsterdam’s Holland Festival during its initial premiere tour which included Austria’s Wiener Festwochen that commissioned the work.

The performance started in medias res, in the living room of an extended family

during a torrential downpour. Scenography by Okada's regular collaborators, dot architects, was quite simple, consisting of bare wooden structures with a couple of colorful props thrown in. As the family members are bickering about who forgot to bring in the blankets drying outside, they receive information that they are being evicted from their rented apartment. The eldest daughter (Aoyagi Izumi) informs the rest of the family that this is illegal and proceeds to write and enunciate a very funny letter to the landlord, using ultra polite Japanese. Okada is often associated with use of hypercolloquial Japanese, but this scene was certainly a departure from that.

Due to Japan's border closures during pandemic, this production was initially rehearsed remotely with Fujikura sending music files from his living room in London. Okada and Fujikura set out to create an entirely new performance style where music and theatre could exist independently on stage. The music compositions, played by musicians seated in a semi-circle in the proscenium, were the crucial driver of the narrative as they were playing with and commenting on the performers' actions and the lines - just like a Greek chorus. For example, they created a beautiful and mysterious sound of the rain as soon as the performers mentioned rain. At other times, the music worked more independently by going against the grain of the performers' actions on stage, especially when there was less dialogue and more movement. Despite their intentions, the two collaborators never quite succeeded in the separation of the two art forms.

As the performance progressed, a man (Ohmura Wataru), showed up in the garden covered in black slime, perhaps reminiscent of the monster in Edward Bond's *Red Black and Ignorant* or contemporary figure of a climate migrant. From this moment, the stage slowly transformed into a strange world inhabited by bizarre colors. The family was both mesmerized and scared by this slime-covered man's strange presence. They seemingly killed the father, though I was not sure who did it as the narrative constantly retreats. As Ohmura

moves, slime left residue all over the stage. As expected from Okada's noisy body performance style, his movements were disconnected from speech. Other performers also employed this recognizable style.

In the second part, the metamorphosis culminated in the piling of poetic lines evoking the beauty of nature and ecological disasters in equal measure. The line such as 'where sky was, may no longer be the sky' is a prime example of the poetic potency of Okada's text. This was heightened by the lighting design (Takada Masayoshi) which is very much in sync with the music. In the third part, the cyclorama's violet and reddish hues reminded me of sunsets both near and far. Towards the end, two funny figures with huge black objects mounted on their heads appeared, representing the landlord and property manager. The skippy balloon inflated in the middle of the stage. The two figures with distorted voices were angry about the whole mess which brought a much-needed comedic tone to an otherwise very somber production.

As noted above, the claim that this was a new genre might be a stretch. However, I would argue that this was perhaps a deliberate attempt at satirizing the way theatre productions are always presented as something new and untried, especially on the international festival circuit. In addition to this rather subtle parody, Okada seemed to be interested in the way humanity deals with environmental issues. First, we must learn how to live together before we can deal with climate crisis. This was also evident through this attempted separation of the performers' voices and gestures and music, arguably a re-working of classical Japanese theatre aesthetics that veer towards separation of performative elements. At the same time, using absurd imagery, the performance questioned how we can deal with climate change if we cannot fully grasp its presence. At the end of the performance the stage floor became entirely covered in black slime while we could only watch either from within (performers and musicians) or the sidelines (audience).

It seems that Okada's dramaturgy, while retaining some old features, is now shifting more towards the use of comedy to problematize the Anthropocene and as a direct critique of theatre as an art form and an institution. This is a rather unexpected turn, but one with the potential to become a new trend.

BERI JURAIC

Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts, Lancaster University