

ENGEKI: JAPANESE THEATRE IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM VOLUME 5

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The latest volumes of *Engeki: Japanese Theatre in the New Millennium* showcase the plays of six Japanese playwrights written in the 2010s. These two anthologies of translated plays deal with various socio-political issues in Japan and beyond; from living in extreme isolation to migration, from the representation of women to the problems of an aging society. Almost all plays have been translated by regular contributors Mari Boyd and Aya Ogawa; volume 6 also features a translation by Shakespeare scholar Daniel Gallimore. However, the volumes still lack meaningful commentaries that would give the readers an idea of the context and performance history of the plays (although the foreword to volume 6 by the president of the Japan Playwrights somewhat rectifies this). Overall, the range of styles and themes of the plays should equally entice scholars and students in Asian Studies and other fields as well as theatre professionals. The continuation of the series in the pandemic times is commendable and will strengthen the dissemination of Japanese theatre and drama abroad.

Volume 5 of the series contains four plays, a departure from previous volumes which only had three. The volume starts with *100 Years Stray* by SaringROCK (2012), translated by Aya Ogawa, which was the finalist of the prestigious Kishida Kunio Prize for Drama. For the first time, a volume in the series includes two plays by the same author, the Peruvian-born Japanese playwright Kamisato Yudai. These are *Isla! Isla! Isla!* (2015) and *The Story of Descending the Long Slopes of Valparaíso* (2017) both translated by Aya Ogawa. The final play in the volume is Yokoyama Takuya's *Stitchers* (2017), translated by Mari Boyd.

Following the story of Luck over the span of hundred years, SaringROCK's *100 years Stray* is set in an apocalyptic world in which women no longer exist and meteors are constantly falling. Surrounded by few people and strange objects, Luck tries to find a way in a crumbling world. Peculiar and sometimes humorous scenes perfectly fit this dream-like writing. It is nevertheless important to note that the characters in SaringROCK's plays speak in Kansai (Osaka) dialect bringing a sense of realism to an otherwise dystopian world. However, readers should note that Aya Ogawa's conscious choice was to dispense with this in English since the play is already too abstract and any use of dialect would obfuscate the meaning.

The next two plays in the volume, *Isla! Isla! Isla!* and *The Story of Descending the Long Slopes of Valparaíso* (referred to *Valparaíso* hereinafter) by Kamisato Yudai, both also translated by Aya Ogawa, are entirely different in content and form. *Isla! Isla! Isla!* consists of blocks of text without any indication of the characters although, as the text progresses, it can be gleaned that it is about the king of a fictional group of islands who prepares the islanders for war. This highly intertextual play questions the notions of culture, identity, and immigration through the motif of an island.

The second play, *Valparaíso*, consisting of a series of monologues, won Kamisato the 2017 Kishida Kunio Prize for Drama. Unlike in *Isla! Isla! Isla!*, there is some indication of speakers even though they are generic such as Man 1, 2, and 3 and Women's Voice. It traces an intercultural history across the Pacific Ocean, from Chile to Peru and to Okinawa and the Ogasawara Islands, all set against the backdrop of personal stories that Kamisato heard during his travels in South America. Formally, the text is divided into three parts. There is no fixed narrative, but rather the play evokes the images of immigration and the transition from one culture to the other.

Essentially, Kamisato leaves much room for directors to come up with their own mise-en-scène by inviting them to choose the languages for parts of the play, as is the case in *Isla!*

Isla! Isla!, or playing with the colours of the scenes in *Valparaíso*. This is one of the reasons why the volume would have benefited from an introductory essay about the context and performance history of the plays. Ogawa's translations of the plays try to preserve the foreignness inherent in Kamisato's writing without losing the poetic images. In *Isla! Isla! Isla!*, Ogawa leaves the bolded and underlined sections that evoke powerful images and in *Valparaíso* she adds some Spanish greetings demonstrating that translators can sometimes become co-authors. In that sense, Kamisato's plays will be particularly appealing to theatre practitioners who want to put their own stamp on a text.

Conversely, Yokoyama Takuya is more prescriptive in *Stitchers* (2017), translated by Mari Boyd. The play verges on the theatre of absurd and follows six characters: two brothers who wish that their mother dies in dignity, a couple who are confused about an unexpected pregnancy, and two stitchers who are having trouble stitching. There is no contact between these characters. Instead, the weave-like structure of the play delays the dramatic conflict until the end which culminates in a funny and sometimes bizarre overlapping dialogue. In general, the play also touches upon some prevalent social issues in Japan such as the care for the elderly and the declining birth rate. Boyd adds a useful reference system to explain some of the Japanese terms.

Volume 6 introduces three plays - Furukawa Takeshi's *Will of Haven* (translated by Daniel Gallimore), *Anne's Days* by Shimori Roba (translated by Mari Boyd) and *OK, So Long* by Maeda Shiro (translated by Aya Ogawa). The president of the Japan Playwrights Association, Watanabe Eri, notes in the foreword that the plays in the volume are by mid-career playwrights who are currently enjoying a strong reputation in Japan. Furukawa's *Will of Haven* (2013) takes place in the Taishō era (1912-1926) between the turbulent Meiji and Shōwa eras. It depicts the real life of Emperor Yoshihito (Taisho) and the relationships with his father emperor Mutsuhito (Meiji) and eldest son Hirohito (Shōwa). The play is interspersed with

historical commentaries by Yoshihito's wife, Empress Sadako. It is rare for a Japanese playwright to tackle the Imperial subject. As briefly noted in the biography at the end of the volume, Furukawa and his company are famous for dealing with sensitive political topics. Gallimore's translation manages to transport us vividly to the world of the Japanese court with its elegant and neat use of Queen's English, entirely appropriate for this type of historic drama. The work could certainly be of great interest to historians as well as theatre artists and scholars and a useful tool for teaching pre-war Japanese history.

Shimori Roba's *Anne's Days* is a contemplation about the harmful effects of mass-produced sanitary pads. Stage directions note that the title refers to *Anne Frank's Diary*, 'Anne' being a synonym for 'a period' in Japan and the positive aspect of womanhood. The action takes place in a company that produces menstrual pads. In a verbatim style of writing, Shimori portrays the professional and working lives of eight women involved in the development of a new sanitary product. As noted in the biography, Shimori travels widely throughout Japan to gather the material for her plays, giving a unique perspective on often-taboo subjects. It is refreshing to see such bold, honest writing from a Japanese playwright, and it is hoped that subsequent series will include more of Shimori's recent plays. Mari Boyd's translation remains faithful to the original and she explains some of her choices in the notes.

Ok, So Long by the award-winning playwright, screenwriter, theatre, and film director Maeda Shiro is the final play in Volume 6. Out of all the writers in this volume, he is probably the most popular in Japan given his extensive work on TV and film. The play portrays the reality of an aging society through the comedic exchanges of four grandmothers. As stated in the volume's introduction, they were originally performed by young female actors. The writing is rich in familiar and less familiar Japanese references that are explained by Aya Ogawa at the end of the translation. Although such references can sometimes take readers away from the

play, as it is indeed the case in some other plays in the series, these will be invaluable to theatre directors.

In general, these two volumes of contemporary Japanese plays accomplish their mission to promote intercultural dialogue. The inclusion of photos from performances is laudable. However, the series editors should consider introducing the works through essays, commentaries, and performance histories. Both critical essays and performance histories could make these plays more accessible to theatre makers and researchers alike. Furthermore, it would be interesting to know how the plays in Volume 5 were selected. It seems they have been chosen due to the unusual forms. As shown above, the translations oscillate between domestication and foreignization (Venuti, 1995) in line with translator's affinities exposing the richness and the beauty of intercultural exchange.

The above-mentioned issues notwithstanding, the volumes are a valuable contribution to the growing pool of Japanese contemporary plays in translation. These books will not only interest theatre practitioners but also provide useful material for teaching and scholarly research. In addition, the plays can be recommended to those who are interested in theorising translation.

Beri Juraic

Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts, Lancaster University

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