

## Theater der Welt 2023—Dreaming Plural Worlds along the River Main

Beri Juraic

Theater der Welt 2023 (Frankfurt and Offenbach, Germany), 29 June-16 July 2023.

The announcement that the first non-European female curators will programme Theater der Welt 2023 felt like a wind of change on the European festival circuit. Japanese theatre scholar and critic Kyōko Iwaki later withdrew as the festival dramaturg but remained as the programme collaborator. This left Chiaki Soma, a well-known Tokyo-based festival director, to lead on the artistic programming. Her previous curatorial discoveries at Festival/Tokyo and more recent projects such as Theatre Commons in Tokyo put a unique stamp on what it means to engage with the world through art and culture. She was also instrumental in giving an international platform to some of the most important non-European theatre and performance artists in the last decade.

While I was browsing the catalogues of the past editions of Theater der Welt as part of digital and physical archive on display, I was surprised by how many Asian artists were programmed in the festival's forty plus year history. Much to my expectations, the 2023 programme featured many Asian performances. Despite quite evident organisational problems and at times lack of audience care in the three organising venues, Chiaki Soma's thoughtful curation brought some hope in the possibility of shifting perspectives towards plurality of voices within European festivals. In the following passages, I deal with the main curatorial lines and highlight some of the works.

Soma's main idea of 'pluralising the worlds' or 'theater der welten' (theatre of the worlds) brought a fascinating mix of works from all over the world and engaged local communities and young people through the programming strand entitled *Young Worlds*. This worked well with the second theme of *incubationism* as a way of practicing critical reflection on each individual work together with the artist. As Soma notes in her programme notes, in the post-pandemic period this offered 'spaces for contemplation, healing and recovery'. In-depth talks and encounters between artists, theatre researchers and audiences provided this opportunity. The festival was also held in the two cities on the opposite sides of the Main River which created interesting tensions between the urban and suburban.

### [PHOTO 1]

Dream-like installation *Palu Ángel Taizōkai* by artist collective Keiken at the Museum of Fine Arts. Photo: Jörg Baumann

Perhaps in anticipation of these tensions, Soma curated a major arts exhibition entitled *Incubation Pod. Dreaming Worlds* that was held at the Museum Angewandte

Kunst (Museum of Applied Art). The first in festival's history, it showed several VR performances, dream-like experiences, workshops and installations. The museum situated along the river, almost half-way between the two cities, served as a much-needed break from my busy festival schedule which, besides eight performances, included attending several talks and a symposium.

The honour to open and close Theater der Welt 2023 fell to the Tokyo-based director and playwright Satoko Ichihara. The closing performance *Yoroboshi-The Weakling* at the studio space of Kammerspiele Frankfurt was in my opinion stronger than the opening performance of *The Bacchae. Holstein Milk Cows*. Now that I have seen many of Ichihara's productions both at Theater der Welt and elsewhere, I think her directorial and writing potency shines arguably more through larger-than-life plays in smaller spaces.

*Yoroboshi* is a Japanese classic re-done to the bone. Ichihara draws principally on the noh play, but her staging also includes bunraku and kabuki-style elements. The original noh follows a father who hears a slanderous story about his son Shuntokumar and kicks him out of the family home. He later regrets it and goes to a temple for seven days to perform a ritual for his son's safety. On the last day of the ritual, a blind priest appears, and it turns out to be his son now called Yoroboshi (Weak Priest). The father chooses to stay quiet until the end of the ritual, but Yoroboshi becomes mad as he is ashamed of being blind and runs away. His father catches up with him and brings him back to their hometown. In kabuki and bunraku, the plot changes significantly by introducing female characters and a countryside setting as well as a stepmother Tsuji who falls in love with her stepson Shuntokumar and out of jealousy blinds him. Ichihara's version deconstructs these versions through a Medea-like lens. Her production could also be viewed as a rejection of male-dominated theatre tradition such as Shūji Terayama and Yukio Mishima's versions of the same play, Frank Castorf's productions or Edward Bond's last play *Dea*. She creates an entirely new doll world set in the countryside where the father, a lego-inspired construction site guard, lives with his wife, a sex doll. Their constant lovemaking imbued with a lot of powdering and hygiene of intimate parts, produces a love doll, or rather a masturbator that grows into a cute boy doll (Shuntokumar). Mothering is hard and the father has a new love interest. The boy becomes sad, but his daddy buys him Elly, a toy doll from a popular Japanese discount shop called Daiso. There is also a Mannequin, father's mistress. The boy and the mistress do not meet eye to eye, literally she blinds him. Following several insults, child abuse and sex acts, the two women are killed while the blinded boy disappears into the mad world. After a plastic surgery, the boy becomes a sex worker in a massage parlour. His queerphobic father visits the parlour one day and strange things happen.

## [PHOTO 2]

Hybrid human-dolls. Ryōta Hatanaka and Mikiko Kawamura in *Yoroboshi-The Weakling*, directed and written by Satoko Ichihara's. Photo: Jörg Baumann

However, it is the performances and the staging that make this a worthwhile evening of theatre. The cartoonish scenography brought out the absurd atmosphere. Sachiko Hara's kyōgen-style comedic intermezzo offered a critical distance to the themes of violence, child abuse, sexism, queerphobia, ableism, ageism and suicide that were mentioned at the entrance to the theatre. Hara, a Japanese actress working in Germany, also brilliantly captured the noh-like chants in German language cosplaying a doll. The musicality of her voice accompanied by the biwa player (Kakushin Nishihara) was a welcome respite from the heavy themes and imagery that were not always to my liking. Following bunraku techniques, the dolls were attached to the performers' bodies creating a hybrid human-doll. The final image is a potent one. Against the noise music in the background, the performers are unable to detach themselves from these artificial dolls despite violent and frenzied movements as if stuck in a perpetual world of violence against the weak. From the festival's dramaturgical point of view, *Yoroboshi* communicated well with Susanne Kennedy & Markus Selg's *ANGELA (a strange loop)* in which we follow a young woman caught in endless loops of meta perspectives, virtual and real, life and death, demonstrating the human weakness in the era of ever-increasing technological advances.

### [PHOTO 3]

Anime-style monsters and a sleeping soldier in Ho Tzu Nyen's *Night March of Hundred Monsters*. Photo: Jörg Baumann

The rest of the programme comprised of many immersive video installations and virtual reality (VR) performances. Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen created an indoor promenade video installation piece *Night March of Hundred Monsters* inspired by the Japanese monsters (yōkai). The vast space of Bockenheimer Depot was divided into four spaces. In the first spaces, there are two large video screens. The first screen displays a procession of hundred monsters that transform as they 'walk' from the left to right side of the screen. The second shows a soldier sleeping. We are encouraged to move around while being enveloped by the mystical soundscape. The promenade leads us into the second space with mirrored wall. There on the display we learn more about some of these monsters. When the animation ends, we are only left with our own reflection. In the third space, we watch a video installation juxtaposing clips from the Japanese war propaganda films with the animated versions of the same clips. In the final space, Tzu Nyen uses animated ukiyo-e (woodblock prints) recounting a story of a spy turned into tiger skin collector. Overall, it was a compelling use of various intermedial techniques as storytelling devices. Even more impressive is the fact that the artist worked on the animations clandestinely with North Korean animators.

### [PHOTO 4]

Playing with the virtual and real. Meiro Koizumi's *Prometheus Unbound*. Photo: Jörg Baumann

The VR performances by Yokohama-based artist Meiro Koizumi who worked on the myth of Prometheus were another highlight. I participated in two of the three performances—*Prometheus Bound* in Offenbach and *Prometheus Unbound* in Frankfurt. Exposing the way that the dreams are buried and uncovered through

effective black, white and grey video techniques, these performances questioned who has the right to dream in this hi-tech world. *Prometheus Bound* enveloped me in a nightmarish black void only for me to be a witness to other audience members in the same position as I watched a neurodivergent person narrating about a borderless world merging dreams and hopes, fears and joys and past and future into one. A shorter piece, *Prometheus Unbound* showed images of the bodies of Vietnamese immigrants in Japan hovering over a real bed. Their mundane stories of fears and hopes were amplified by the sound of the broken Japanese against the grain of English translation. In these uncertain times, Koizumi's work perhaps best embodied plural worlds that the festival curator dreamed up along the river Main.

**Beri Juraic** is a PhD Candidate in Theatre Studies at the Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts, Lancaster University, United Kingdom. He was a Visiting Scholar at the Kansai University in Osaka, Japan in the autumn of 2022 supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK and The Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation. He holds an MA in Japanese Studies (Distinction) from SOAS, University of London. His research interests include post-war and contemporary Japanese theatre. Previously, he also worked as a theatre producer and a festival programmer in the UK and abroad.