

**IMIGURE KAIDAN (IMMIGRANT GHOST STORIES).** Directed by Kamisato Yudai.

Produced by Okazaki Art Theatre. Co-produced by Naha Cultural Arts Theater NAHArt.

Naha, Japan. 28-30 October 2022.

The award-winning playwright and director Kamisato Yudai premiered his latest work *Imigure Kaidan* (Immigrant Ghost Stories) at the end of October 2022 in a small theatre space at the recently opened Naha Cultural Arts Theater NAHArt. I had the privilege to see the premiere and observe the rehearsal process. Like many of Kamisato's previous works, the piece features prominently themes of crossing borders and migration, multilingualism, history and geography, and life versus death. These themes are inspired both by his personal experiences travelling in South America, Asia, and Japan and by the stories and anecdotes he had heard from others. While *Immigrant Ghost Stories* might be infused by the same motifs, it is also evident that this piece re-thinks theatre and the theatre-making process from the perspective of a foreigner or immigrant by using the metaphor of ghosts and monsters (*yūrei and yōkai*) crossing borders.

When Kamisato won the Kishida Kunio Prize for Drama in 2018 for *The Story of Descending the Long Slopes of Valparaíso*, it initiated a debate about whether the piece could be considered a theatre play. This prompted him to write a blog post entitled “Gikyoku ni tsuite kangaeru koto” (Thinking about Plays), in which he wrote: “I always write words with people speaking them in mind. What I care about is how the words are uttered, the kind of rhythm, the lingering memories the text produces, and how the speaker's body changes” (Kamisato 2018).<sup>1</sup> Kamisato's new work exposes this approach effectively to the audience. The unusual rehearsal process for this piece contributes to its success. To illustrate, the rehearsals took place in Tokyo and Naha (Okinawa), with only Kamisato travelling back and forth to rehearse with each performer individually. The performers therefore did not meet to rehearse collectively until the final week before the premiere. The production team was also not allowed in the rehearsals,

but they could watch over Zoom, in real-time or via recordings. The rehearsals consisted principally of discussions, listening, and only a minimal amount of staging until the performers came together towards the end of the process. As a result, during the performance the audience has to listen attentively to fully comprehend the visual aspects. Kamisato nevertheless facilitates this task through his text which consistently throws at us both simplistic explanations and poetic complexities.

On entrance, the stage is brightly lit, revealing the scenography. In the middle, a sloped dance floor raises up to the ceiling. On stage right is a makeshift cubed structure hosting a monitor. Before the show begins, the top part of this structure reads “Immigrant Ghost Stories” in English, Japanese and Spanish. During the performance, it displays the subtitles, announces the titles of the four parts (“Ghosts of Thailand,” “Bolivia,” “Okinawa,” and “Part Four”), and exhibits various graphics and imagery. Scattered around the stage are a series of wooden constructions resembling high-bar tables and stools. On stage left is a microphone positioned between two of these wooden pieces. The starry backdrop is eye-catching. A half-empty glass lies on top of one of the tables as if someone had already been in the space before us. A ghost perhaps.

### [PHOTO 1]

Matsui Shu dancing to a pop tune from Thailand. *Immigrant Ghost Stories*, directed by Kamisato Yudai. Photo: Oshiro Wataru

It is difficult to settle into the performance, as the action on/off stage plays with the notion of time and space nonsensically. But that is a good thing. The four actors on stage and screen take us on a whirlwind journey across time and space, history, and geography in four distinct parts: from Thailand and Laos to Bolivia and Okinawa, with a final stop in a ghostly non-place (perhaps a graduation reunion, present day Japan, or a future Japan). We learn about the history and origins of the alcoholic drinks trade, such as *lao-lao* and *awamori* in Southeast

Asia and the Ryukyu Islands; the struggles of Japanese immigrants in South America and Japan; and about Laos during the Vietnam War.<sup>2</sup> Stories appear and disappear over the course of the performance. In a strange way, the narrative itself becomes ghost-like. This is further emphasized by the way the actors speak. The performers play with our perception of presence and absence and of the visible and invisible through a copious number of silences, pauses and confused exchanges. In fact, the performers play both themselves, their imaginary selves (or even their past selves), and ghosts.

### [PHOTO 2]

Uejo Miki dancing to an Amazonian-themed tune. *Immigrant Ghost Stories*, directed by Kamisato Yudai. Photo: Oshiro Wataru

The actors play all these various roles with remarkable skill, each bringing their own performance styles that carve their way through Kamisato's poetic text. Each of the first three parts is directed around an individual performer who is introduced through song and dance. This performance element is borrowed from *taishū engeki* as noted by Kamisato during rehearsals.<sup>3</sup> In the first part ("Ghosts of Thailand"), Matsui Shu's performance is a masterclass in speaking on stage—from using a calm voice to deliver historic-geographical lessons, through singing the lines of the famous Red Hot Chilli Peppers' song *Under the Bridge* in English, to adopting a sometimes-hesitant voice that elevates Kamisato's poetry. In the second part ("Ghosts of Bolivia"), Uejo Miki also gives a strong performance as she throws questions back and forth between the stage and the auditorium with a fighting spirit. Her performance is even more remarkable given that for the most part she is tasked with engaging with Beatriz Sano on the other side of a screen that at times freezes, as well as with Ohmura on stage. It is through this connection with her on-screen partner that Uejo perfectly embodies the interaction between the real and the imaginary as well as the near and the far. Beatriz Sano's screen performance in Brazilian Portuguese brings yet another dimension of ghostliness, strangeness, and foreignness

to the fore. This is amplified by the delays and freezing of her image. When Sano finally speaks, it is also a message from the past, one that is pre-recorded. In the third part (“Ghosts of Okinawa”), Ohmura Wataru’s schizophrenic performance draws his grotesque and noisy body silently across the stage, which brings a horror-comedy tone to the whole show.

[PHOTO 3]

Ohmura Wataru and Uejo Miki looking at the frozen image of Beatríz Sano. *Immigrant Ghost Stories*, directed by Kamisato Yudai. Photo: Oshiro Wataru

All four performers also play with the notion of the domestic and the foreign inherent in Kamisato’s writing and staging: Matsui with English, Uejo with Spanish, Sano with Portuguese; only Ohmura speaks in Japanese throughout the play. However, Matsui and Uejo only occasionally use their foreign language which they add onto the Japanese. In “Ghosts of Bolivia,” the confusion about what languages are to be spoken is amusingly verbalized by the performers. It is as if the ghostly performances have also latched on the humorous use of language(s). If we are to nit-pick, such confusion could sometimes be a distraction. Of course, this is down to Kamisato’s writing, which culminates in the final scene with a novelistic-style dialogue (for example, uttering “he said” or “she said”) that invades the theatrical space and adds to the confusion. However, as Kamisato insists, he writes texts for theatre rather than novels (Kamisato, 2018). In this production, this stylistic device cleverly demonstrates that the whole dialogue, perhaps even the stories we hear, might have already happened, or are about to happen.

All this aside, I would argue that the sounds generated both on and off stage, and the importance of listening, are the key to understanding Kamisato’s staging. The actors often seem not to listen to each other properly. This is perhaps most visible in the director’s approach in “Ghosts of Thailand.” The occasional sound of cicadas in the background is heard throughout

this section. At one point this sound stops as Ohmura and Matsui, facing away from each other, start a conversation. Matsui remarks that it is very noisy, so Ohmura stands sideways to the microphone and shouts the names of alcoholic drinks: *shōchū*, *awamori*, etc. Matsui acts as if he cannot hear him. Then there are the pauses and silences I have previously mentioned. It is in these moments we become completely aware of the internal and external sounds, of our presence in theatre space: the cracking of the lighting fixtures, the breathing of other audience members, the doors opening somewhere backstage and so on. And then there is a smartly dressed zebra that crosses the star-lit backdrop on stilts, with the sound of the stilts stomping against the hard stage floor. It is Kamisato himself, but we are not supposed to know this as he is not listed as part of the cast. In the final part, noise as a motif reoccurs both narratively and performatively. Matsui points out once again that it is very noisy although there is no real noise per se, just the sound of the emptiness of the theatre space. In this way, Kamisato exposes the beginning of the theatre process and makes us part of it in an understated way. The noise and the sound are the real ghosts here that hover over the space and migrate over the map of the Asia-Pacific region shown on the makeshift screen.

#### [PHOTO 4]

Performers Matsui Shu, Ohmura Wataru and Uejo Miki reminiscing about the wars past and present while drinking on the slope. *Immigrant Ghost Stories*, directed by Kamisato Yudai. Photo: Oshiro Wataru

As an audience member, throughout the performance I was haunted by the questions about the nature of theatre and of my own past and present existence. Why am I in this theatre, and who are these people on stage and around me? But then a sonic boom hits the space or is it the sound of cicadas? I am left without any immediate answers. On reflection, maybe we are all immigrants when we gather in the theatre space. *Immigrant Ghost Stories* therefore

destabilizes the theatre process and experience by making us consider the idea of immigrants in theatre through the uncanny sounds in the theatre space.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> English translation by the author.

<sup>2</sup> *Lao-lao* is a Laotian rice-based distilled alcoholic drink, a predecessor to *awamori*, an Okinawan drink made of long grain indica rice that is distilled rather than brewed. Since 2019, *lao-lao* has been available on the market in Okinawa and Japan under the name *Chura-lao*.

<sup>3</sup> *Taishū engeki* is a genre of popular Japanese theatre, usually by family troupes of itinerant performers. For an example, see (Powell 1991).

## REFERENCES

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