

## **Ghosts of War: The Sounds of the Uncanny in Kamisato Yudai's Immigrant Ghost Stories**

[SLIDE 1]

### **Introduction**

Let me start with an anecdote. Towards the end of October last year, I arrive at Naha, Okinawa to observe the in-situ rehearsals for Kamisato Yudai's latest work *Immigrant Ghost Stories* (*Imigure Kaidan*). After a very productive morning of the first day, performer Ohmura Wataru, Kamisato and I decide to go to the nearby *konbini* to buy lunch. It's Ohmura's and my first time in Okinawa. As we walk from the theatre, suddenly a loud bang is heard. I recognise this sonic boom as I have heard this sound of war planes many times before. Kamisato was not surprised either, but still it was unpleasant one. Ohmura was nevertheless visibly shaken by hearing this invisible sound and asked us what it was. The plane in question, was of course a military one. These jets with their ghost-like invisibility invade the sonic environment of Okinawan residents daily reminding them of the wars past and present. This is not lost on the occasional visitors like us. We continued discussing this experience while eating lunch, but it aptly marked the start of in-situ rehearsals for this new production based on ghost stories.

### **Theatre as a place of seeing through listening**

In this paper, I will introduce this latest work by the award-winning Peru-born Japanese playwright and director Kamisato Yudai. Kamisato's highly poetic texts are inspired by his travels and stories collected by visiting various places in South America and Asia. I would characterise his theatre as dramaturgy of crossing borders, not only geographically, but also stylistically. Having that in mind, I will explore today one aspect of his approach that I would call *seeing through listening*. When he won the Kishida Kunio Prize for Drama in 2018 for *The Story of Descending the Long Slopes of Valparaíso* (*Baruparaiso nagai saka o kударu hanashi*), it initiated a debate among Japanese critics and jury members about whether the piece could be considered a theatre play due to its novelistic style. This prompted him to write a response on his blog entitled *Thinking about plays* (*Gikyoku ni tsuite kangaeru koto*), 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).

[SLIDE 2]

In September and October last year, I participated in rehearsals for *Imigure Kaidan* as a researcher-observer and watched the premiere performances at Naha Cultural Arts Theatre- Nahaato at the end of October 2022. In the first part, I will explain Azuma's tourist principle, a theoretical framework that seems pertinent for Kamisato's work. Secondly, combining my own notes from the rehearsal room and my translations of Kamisato's own writings, I will explore some moments from the rehearsals in which 'the practice of listening or aurality' becomes the key method. Finally, I will offer a brief performance analysis and highlight how some of these methods translate into a performer-spectator relationship.

### [SLIDE 3]

#### **Invisible Ghostly Bodies in Theatre and The Tourist Principle**

Genron's fifth issue, a critical magazine founded by critic and philosopher Azuma Hiroki centred around conversations about ghostly bodies. Much of the discussions in the issue concentrated on the visual perceptions of ghostly bodies. However, dancer and choreographer Jo Kanamori observes the following: 'speaking of the concept of presence, Japanese ghosts (*yūrei*) have a certain humidity different from the Western ghosts. It may be a spiritual aspect, but we have a sense of humidity, a feeling that something is present there, as part of our skin perception.' (Kanamori in Azuma, 2017). This feeds into Robert Hanson's conceptualisation of 'ghosts as something heard more than seen' in his book *The Age of Em* (2017). Perception can also be through the ear: ear lobe as part of the skin, aural receptor. Furthermore, in the editorial, Azuma comments and asks: 'Theatre is inherently political. So, does theatre today lean towards the ghostly presence of democracy or rather move in the direction of "exorcism" of ghosts?' (Azuma, p.22, 2017.) Azuma here also refers to his 2017 *Philosophy of the Tourist* (*Kankōkyaku no testugaku*) and two notions: the tourist principle and postal multitude (*yubinteki maruchichūdo*).

What does Azuma mean by the tourist principle? Azuma re-thinks the cultural meaning of 'Tourist as Other'. By tackling the Hardt and Negri's Empire, Azuma criticizes two opposing values in the world today, namely 'the value of something as outside the Empire (nationalism) and the value of something arising from negative-theological' principle of solidarity in the Empire (multitude)'. (Azuma, 2023, p.110). For Azuma, Hardt and Negri's multitude is based on blind faith that the new solidarity will happen by itself. Azuma therefore builds on this flaw by joining together Negri's and Hardt's idea of multitude with Derrida's notion of postal to coin a new term postal multitude. For Azuma, this is a form of political resistance: 'The new resistance of the twenty-first century will be born in the crevice between Empire and nation state... Its members (tourists) aim to meet people they were never meant to meet, go to places they were never meant to go, think what they are not supposed to and seek to infuse contingency back into the system of Empire, to rewire concentrated edges once again, and to revert from preferential selection back to misdelivery.'" (Azuma, p.139-140 2023 [2017], my addition). It is through this accumulation of misdelivery that subversion can occur. How does these two notions (ghostly) aurality and the tourist principle work in Kamisato's rehearsals?

#### **Rehearsing Kamisato Yudai's *Immigrant Ghost Stories***

*Imigure Kaidan* is inspired by a collection of true stories Takeshi Kohara's 2011 collection *The Ghost Stories of Ryūkyū Islands* (*Ryūkyū Kaidan*).<sup>1</sup> It consists of four parts and is based on (ghost) stories he collected in Thailand (Laos), Bolivia, Brazil and Okinawa.

Emerging from the pandemic, the production was initially rehearsed one-to-one with each performer individually. Performers were based in Tokyo, Okinawa and Brazil.

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<sup>1</sup> In September 2021, Kamisato worked with young people at Wagamachi shōgekijō (Theater in My Town) in Naha, Okinawa on re-telling some of these stories from the collection.

Three Japan-based performers Matsui Shu, Ohmura Wataru and Uejo Miki participated physically in the performances while Beatriz Sano's performance was pre-recorded and incorporated into the staging. Kamisato was the only one travelling between two rehearsal venues in Tokyo and Naha, Okinawa. The structure of Kamisato's text, centred around individual performers, certainly lends itself to such a rehearsal process. The creative team was also not allowed in the physical rehearsal rooms but could watch over Zoom in real-time or a recording. It was not until a week before the first show that the performers and staff arrived at Okinawa to rehearse together. [SLIDE 4]

In a blog post Kamisato discusses how he left the performers and staff work on their own. He explains: "The director probably spends most of the time with performers, so he ends up saying a lot of things and worrying about the details. However, I think that the more I focus on the details, the less I know why I stick to them. After all, I think that one can worry about these details, but the audiences don't care about them." (Kamisato, 2022a). I would argue that Kamisato essentially becomes a Tourist (Other) in his own production process. He moved between the venues, thinking what he was not supposed to think (as a playwright rather than a director) and misdelivered in a way that cancelled some of the priorities/preferences of the production process (details are not important).

The way the production was rehearsed changed with each rehearsal but rested on the listening and sharing of stories. Sometimes they would spend the entire rehearsal discussing various personal experiences in what would seem a misdelivery of the ideal model of rehearsals. Kamisato's movement from one rehearsal to another is similar in the way tourists go from one place to another and each time hear and experience something new. It is as if the actors were hosting Kamisato in their own world, but because the text is written by Kamisato, there was occasionally a feeling that he is the one prioritising what he wants to experience aurally more than visually. [SLIDE 5]

This is evident in a virtual rehearsal with Brazilian actress Beatriz Sano. Their session, spanning an hour and a half, concentrated on meticulous text work. Since Sano, a Brazilian Nikkei, doesn't speak Japanese, she translated her parts into Portuguese, reimagining Kamisato's text through English and Spanish translations. In this artist-led translation of a translation, Kamisato remained hands-off, except asking her to avoid stereotypes. For example, they discussed which Japanese words to retain and they also played with sounds of the various lines. But Kamisato only listened and reported back which aligns with what Azuma noted: 'The tourist is a private being...tourists do not deliberate with locals at their destination. They do not participate in the history of their destination either, or in its politics... They don't make friends or enemies.' (Azuma, 2023, p.78-79).

[SLIDE 6]

When rehearsals moved to a physical space in Naha, Kamisato's role slowly changed from being an outsider (a tourist) in his own production to a guide as he was the only one now having the whole picture. I would argue the rehearsal process was therefore both ghost-like and tourist-like. Ghost-like because of the elusiveness of Kamisato's text in the rehearsals and tourist-like because they crossed borders both literally and dramaturgically. How does this play out in the performance?

## The Performance of Immigrant Ghost Stories

On entrance, the stage is brightly lit. In the middle, a sloped dance floor raises up to the ceiling. On stage right is a makeshift 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 and exhibits various graphics and imagery.

Using the metaphors of *yūrei* and *yōkai*, the four performers on stage and screen take us on a whirlwind nonsensical journey across time and space, history, and geography: from Thailand and Laos to Bolivia, Brazil and Okinawa, with a final stop in a ghostly non-place or a graduation reunion. We learn about the history and the origins of the alcoholic drinks trade, such as *lao-lao* and *awamori* in Southeast Asia and the Ryūkyū Islands; the struggles of Japanese immigrants in South America and Japan; and about Laos during the Vietnam War. Each performer is introduced through song and dance, keeping their own real names. Bringing their own performance styles, performers play both themselves, their imaginary selves (or even their past selves) and ghosts. [SLIDE 7]

Stories are fragmented over the course of the performance. In a strange way, the narrative itself becomes ghost-like. This is further amplified by the way the performers speak. They play with the perception of presence and absence of the visible and invisible sound/speech through a copious number of silences, pauses and confused exchanges. In the first part (*Ghosts of Thailand*), Matsui with a calm voice delivers history lessons while also singing the lines of the famous Red Hot Chilli Peppers' song *Under the Bridge* in English. His sometimes-hesitant voice elevates Kamisato's poetry. In the second part (*Ghosts of Bolivia*), Uejo throws questions back and forth. [SLIDE 8] For the most part she is tasked with engaging with Sano on the other side of a screen, at times a frozen screen, and with Ohmura on stage. It is through this connection with her on-screen partner that Uejo perfectly embodies the interaction with the ghostly, both near and far. Sano's delayed and frozen performance in Brazilian Portuguese brings yet another dimension of ghostliness, strangeness, and foreignness to the fore. When Sano finally speaks without interference, it is also a message from the past, one that is pre-recorded.

All four also play with the notion of the domestic and the foreign (or touristic) inherent in Kamisato's writing and staging: Matsui with English, Uejo with Spanish, Sano with Portuguese (only Ohmura speaks solely in Japanese). In *Ghosts of Bolivia*, the confusion about what languages are to be spoken is amusingly verbalised by the performers. It is as if the ghostly performances have also latched on the humorous use of language(s).

All this aside, I would argue that the act of listening or aurality is the key to understanding Kamisato's dramaturgy. The performers often seem not to listen to each other properly. This is perhaps most visible in the first part. The occasional sound of cicadas and music in the background is heard throughout this scene. 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 while Ohmura shouts the names of alcoholic drinks over the microphone: *shōchū*, *awamori*, etc. Then there are moments in-between when 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 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. Kamisato himself, but we are not

supposed to know this. 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 the audience part of it. The noise, voice and sound are the real ghosts here that hover over the space and migrate over the map of the Asia-Pacific region shown earlier on the screen.

At the end a sonic boom of military aircrafts hits the space or is the sound of cicadas?

[VIDEO, 1h33- 1h35]

## Conclusion

While this method of production mounting might, on the surface, seem quite anarchic, Kamisato creates a democratic space. His rehearsal rooms are places where the hierarchies between listening and seeing are blurred. Equally, the roles between director, performers and creative team can change over the course of such an open-minded process. I would now dare to call theatre makers Tourist - Other in this creative process, but same is also then true for the audience members. Kamisato's new rehearsal method embodies this through emphasising aurality or *seeing through listening*. This not only destabilises the theatre process, but also audience experience through the uncanny sounds in the theatre space. Furthermore, if one is to consider what is political in theatre today, one also needs to consider how subversive the theatre-making process is.

Let me finally end with Kamisato's words: "In today's world, where everyone can present their own experiences and perspectives, the act of listening and imagining someone else's words has perhaps been neglected. What I am anxious about and what I think is theatre's function is based on that idea. For that reason, I embrace the role of the messenger, connecting the Other to the Other." (Kamisato, p.192, 2008).

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