After angura? Recent works by Kawamura Takeshi

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> In 1989, the emperor died and it was the end of the Shôwa era. The Berlin Wall also came down. In other words, there seemed to be many important historical events unfolding during that time. As a result, my work began to reflect a need to face these big moments in history. Until that era, as a theatre artist, I was known as a member of the little theatre movement (*angura*), as someone working in that tradition. In other words, I was writing my stories and directing them with my own company. However, I was becoming tired of making theatre in this way, theatre based solely on one story. Given what was happening in the world around us and the magnitude of historical events that we saw, it seemed to me that this kind of theatre making based on story was no longer able to address the questions that were being asked. Another kind of theatre making was becoming necessary. (Kawamura Takeshi 2004)

Japan's radical theatre movement *angura* emerged from a cultural space in the 1960s enlivened by acts of protest and experimentation. As discussed in previous essays, *angura* is characterised by transhistorical dramaturgy, transforming theatrical forms and changed relationships between the stage and the audience. One of the other notable features of *angura* was the rise of the writer-director, an often charismatic, sometimes autocratic, 'genius-figure.' Such writer-directors formed ensembles where their works were developed through distinctive and singular creative processes. These 'auteurs,' to borrow an expression from French new wave cinema, came to shape the 1960s theatre in Japan. They included Terayama Shûji, Satô Makoto, Suzuki Tadashi, Ôta Shogo and Kara Jûrô. Working in the era of rebellion and street protest, these young directors were impatient to revolutionise theatrical form. New physical training regimes and hybrid approaches to dramaturgy, aesthetics and design, coupled with idiosyncratic political-cultural outlooks are the fruits of the *angura* system, the outcomes of a singular *auteur*-like vision

These talented and sometimes provocative artists worked in contrast to the *shingeki* system of modern theatre. *Angura* artists sometimes felt alienated from the old-school social realist values of *shingeki* and the complex organisational platforms underpinning *shingeki* production. Indeed the historical moment when writer-directors in *angura* critiqued the limitations of modernist art in Japan is singularly important to the development of contemporary Japanese art overall.

Alongside the notion of a charismatic leader, the particularities of *angura* company life and especially the quasi-religious alternative lifestyles experienced by group members are equally significant. The strong leaders of these companies proposed radically different aesthetic and dramaturgical styles of performance in an experimental partnership with company members. As with the philosophy of many alternative theatres of the 1960s and 1970s—from Peter Brook's journey to Africa in *Conference of the Birds* (Heilpern 1997) to Australia's socialist-nationalist Australian Performing Group (Robertson 2000)—the life of the company was often thought to be the basis for art and performance. This demonstrates a principle of avant-garde theory that aims to collapse the separation between art and life and between the everyday world and forms of representation. Life on the road with Kara's travelling 'Red Tent' theatre (called in latter days *Aka Tento*), for example, was shown to be radically different to the life of modern Japanese citizens and was self-consciously styled on Edo period travelling *kabuki* troupes (see Tsuno & Senda 1971). Kara's work aims to recuperate the sensibility of *kawa kojiki* (river beggars), a slang term for the old-time kabuki performers of Tokugawa era Japan.

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In a different way, the training of actors in Suzuki's SCOT company (Suzuki Company of Toga) led directly to the company's theatrical sensibility. Without 'the grammar of the feet' (Suzuki 1986), Suzuki's work would not have developed as a distinctive original form. My point here is not to further elaborate these systems of production, [1] but to note how the dynamic social manifestation of the theatre company in the 1960s was radically other and alternative to conventional models of an ensemble based company. Over many years, each of these theatres developed distinctive, slowly evolving new aesthetics, dramaturgy and actor presence. The *angura* system, involving *auteur* leaders and sometimes fanatical commitment from members extended beyond the normal modern working life of the artist Only in this way, and with this sense of a determined and radical process of differentiation from the mundane bourgeois world, could new performance styles and acting techniques such as *butô* or the Suzuki method grow.

More recently, changing work practices and shifting modes of creative production in Japan's contemporary theatre are evident. Newer work by so-called third generation *angura* star Kawamura Takeshi exemplifies this trend. His practice has broadened and become both more discursive and mainstream. Moreover, as Kawamura has argued, after the *Aum Shinkyo's* (Aum Supreme Truth sect) gassing of the Tokyo subway in 1995, collective group formations involving minority and seemingly strange cultural activities were criticised and a reassessment of the politics of group organizations was required (see Eckersall 2000). The tendency in 1960s *angura* to immerse in counter-cultural activities was questioned not only by the increasingly anxious urban populations of Japan, but also by artists. Group structures of *angura,* especially any suggestions of cult-like behaviour, such as the singular vision of the *auteur,* have been questioned and are now diminishing in importance.

Kawamura founded the group Daisan Erotica in 1980 as a theatre to produce his own plays; works noted for their distinctive cyber-culture themes and aggressive, cartoon-like physical performance style. Lately, with the establishment of T Factory (Takeshi Factory/Theatre Factory) in 2002, the contexts and processes of Kawamura's work have multiplied. Paradoxically though, these achievements are in the context of a visible decline in the *angura* system and evident anxiety about its rationale or possibilities in contemporary Japan. Are we seeing the end of the *angura* system and the subsequent homogenisation of creative works under the rubric of globalisation? And if so, what is the future for contemporary performing arts in Japan? Will it be the case that no radically new, or complex alternative vision and system of production will be able to emerge? Or perhaps some other distinctive and localised forms of cultural production might evolve from the new situation.

The cultural drift from angura

In a move relevant to considering emergent forms of the globalisation of cultural production, characteristic styles of *angura* became well known outside of Japan in the 1980s when performances by Suzuki, Ôta and Ninagawa Yukio, alongside *butô* companies such as Sankaijuku, became fashionable at arts festivals in Europe, Oceania and North and South America. For example, in a study of Japanese theatre touring to Australia, I noted that Japanese cultural production was conspicuously popular between 1987 and 1994. From seventeen visits by major Japanese companies to Australia from 1982-2000, ten occurred in this seven-year period (Eckersall, 2004: 31) and the wider influence of *butô* and Suzuki performance styles on Australian theatre was shown to be particularly strong (Eckersall, 2004: 36-8). Studies of intercultural theatre in the global sphere also point to the central influence of *angura* on such internationally successful artists as Robert Wilson, Robert Lepage and Arianne Mnouchkine. [2]

As Japan's experimental theatre aesthetics were seen moving onto an international stage and entering the vocabulary of global avant-gardes, *angura* enjoyed widespread popularity at home in equal measure to its declining sense of resistance to State and capitalism. This moment corresponds to the emergent globalisation of the economy in the bubble space of 1980s Japan.

Thus, the so-called '*shôgekijô* (small theatre) boom' of the 1980s has been described as a 'bubble theatre' of euphoria in response the bubble economy (*babaru keizai*) of hyper-speculation underpinning Japan's decade of rapid but unsustainable growth (see Eckersall 2000, Uchino 2000, Rolf 1992, Tonooka 1990). Alternative theatre since the 1980s has been read critically as a site of production that was aligned with postmodern capitalism—or what the scholar Asada Akira calls 'infantile capitalism' (Asada 1989).

Kawamura Takeshi's recent work

In discussing theories of *angura,* we can note the prevalence of physical training regimes, visceral aesthetics and highly distinctive dramaturgical forms—often relating to socio-political circumstances and shaped by the *auteur*-company system. Kawamura Takeshi criticised *angura* politics as lacking relevance to his generation (in Eckersall 2000) but continued to evolve an *angura* sensibility in his work. His company Daisan Erotica became known for a violent atmosphere of gothic melodrama and cyberpunk (*kaibutsu engeki*). Kawamura's influences include 1970s cinema, cartoons, science fiction genres and the *noir* seamy stories of the criminal underworld. His retro-science-fiction works of the 1980s were, according to eyewitness accounts, ambiguous and dangerous, arousing in people who saw the work a sense of profound unease (Nishidô 2002: 190). The company enjoyed success in two phases: the first cyberpunk phase of the 1980s and again after the mid-1990s when Daisan Erotica developed a bleak, intertextual, fragmented stage to explore the conditions of political crisis in the period following the collapse of the bubble economy. Prior studies have discussed these developments in some detail (see (Eckersall, 2000, Moriyama, 2004). Here I will focus on changes in Kawamura's work as an example of the decline of *angura*.

In this context, Kawamura's decision to form a new production company called T Factory in 2002 marks a significant departure from the *angura* paradigm. Prior to 2000, Kawamura focused exclusively on writing, directing, producing and touring plays with his ensemble group. Since T Factory however, the contexts and processes of Kawamura's work have multiplied and include divergent projects and diverse aesthetic qualities. In the last five years, for example, Kawamura has worked on:

- Commissions of new plays for *shingeki* companies;
- Reviving and restaging the iconic Daisan Erotica work *Nippon Wars* as a 'directors cut' version;
- The *Hotel Asia* intercultural collaboration involving numerous theatre artists from North and South-east Asia, under the auspices of Setagaya Public Theatre and The Japan Foundation;
- English, French and German translations and a German tour and Australian workshop of his 2000 play *Hamletclone*;
- The T Factory production of his modern *nô* plays *Aoi* and *Komachi* in partnership with Setagaya Public Theatre. Kawamura has returned annually to Setagaya to present the premier of new work written and directed by him. (He also holds a professorial post at the Kyoto University of Art and Design).

These activities show a diversification and generalisation of the contexts for Kawamura's work, especially when compared to the previous 20 years of his artistic life, and suggest a larger paradigm shift in Japanese theatre. The work is also conspicuously cosmopolitan. Intercultural projects (funded with geo-political as well as artistic aims in mind) are a popular genre now and the Japan Foundation's Asia Centre has funded several notable works including *Hotel Asia,* above. In a similar vein, Kawamura's *Hamletclone* is a play on a vast scale; it rewrites

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine* while also focusing on Japanese history and contemporary political events. Kawamura said about his motivations for writing *Hamletclone*: 'I began to realise the extreme burden of capitalism. As a Japanese person, I felt the same thing that Heiner Müller felt at the fall of the Berlin Wall when he proclaimed: 'it is no longer the Stasi, but the age of control of McDonalds' (cited in Nishidô 2002: 192). *Hamletclone* is a play that negotiates intercultural influences and debates notions of revolution while easily slipping between local and global political perspectives. [3] The restaging of *Nippon Wars* and the modern *nô* plays also exemplify the changing nature of Kawamura's theatre.

Nippon Wars: 'The directors cut'

In his widely known and award-winning play *Nippon Wars* (1984), Kawamura draws on images from the Ridley Scott film *Bladerunner* (1982). Nippon Wars was one of the first and one of one the most influential of an emergent cyberpunk genre of art, media and performance (see Kerman 1991). Cyberpunk evolved as an interdisciplinary sub-cultural formation drawing on computer networks, science fiction by writers such as William Gibson (who coined the term cyberpunk), and electronic music for inspiration. In the 1980s and 1990s, Tokyo's futuristic architecture and technological advances were the basis of the formation of an east-Asian cyberpunk imagination, a perspective extensively circulated through popular culture and the media. The cyberpunk *anime* films *Akira* (directed by Ôtomo Katsuhiro, 1988) and *Ghost in the Shell* (*Kôkaku Kidôtai*, directed by Oshii Mamoru, 1995) are two key works playing with notions of cyberpunk in Japan. The Japanese phenomenon of *otaku*—or people living in relative isolation but connected to an internet-based subculture and who haunt the electronic dives of Akihabara—is a cyberpunk practice. Key in the cyberpunk-*otaku* imagination is the idea of extending or enhancing the body through technological melding. Thus, in the film *Tetsuo* (directed by Tsukamoto Shinya, 1988), a metal fetishist inserts a bolt of metal into his flesh and gradually underdoes a transformation into machine metal-human hybrid. Many of these ideas are brilliantly prefigured in *Nippon Wars.*

In the original 1984 production of *Nippon Wars,* cyborg-soldiers were shown to be rebelling against their leader and against their programming. They developed subconscious urges, subjectivity and self-awareness. By the play's conclusion, however, we realise that the leader all along anticipated the cyborg uprising and the rebellion was nothing more than pre-programmed, fully containable dissent. In the 2001-2 revival of *Nippon Wars* Kawamura staged two versions of the work. The first was a restaging of the 1984 production that replicated, as closely as possible, the staging of the original. In the second version—which the audience could view immediately following the first—Kawamura reworked the text as a kind of meta-critique of the original and a contemplation of the changing situation for the play's message and reception. *Nippon Wars #2* began with an interrogation scene between an android-soldier survivor and his interrogator who seemed to be a control figure for the play's re-enactment. As the soldier recalls the story of *Nippon Wars,* his thoughts blend details from the past era with the present. Sections of the play are performed as if in video replay mode; the actors are fast forwarded and reversed. They speed-up or play their scenes backwards and replicate the jerky motions of bodies on a television screen at double speed. In this way, the performance progresses in a fragmented way, some scenes are taken out of context and commented on, while others are simply fast-forwarded. Over the final moments of the performance, as the cyborgs play out their empty rebellion, Kawamura projected images of the world trade centre strikes, inter-cut with the words: *Eiga?* (Film), *Senso?* (War), *Engeki?* (Theatre). The performance ended with the words 'The film is finished.'

Kawamura said that he would make no new Daisan Erotica projects but was thinking about remaking signature works from the company's repertoire as, what he termed, 'directors cuts' (Kawamura 2004). As already noted, his work has always been influenced by cinema, but something beyond mere referencing or parody is suggested here. The *Nippon Wars* remake, which is concerned with examining processes of memory recall and social history, investigates mediatisation as a form of reality. It also signals a crisis of representation in Japanese theatre. It

presents a fascinating possibility: that an artist of Kawamura's stature might at a certain point stop writing altogether and only reconstruct and disassemble his past works; in this case, his best known play and for which he was awarded the Kishida Prize. This both undermines and extends the notion of *auteurism*, since it pulls focus on his own choices as director while at the same time, Kawamura adopts a blatantly commercial stance in appropriating the market-derived idea of 'the director's cut.' The theatrical process becomes dramaturgically self-referential and the status of the work is confused. It is reified and simultaneously re-energised.

The cyberpunk ideals of simulacra and copying as a form of mutation are explored here. The work is a mutating copy of a suspect original. The recollection of the original is blurred; shades of Jean Baudrillard but with a faith in the power of the defective copy and of the spectral figure of the clone to bring something new to light. This also offers an oblique political commentary which recalls Slavoj Zizek's reference to the staged reality of war as a 'desert of the real.' This notion has profound meaning in relation to the images of war in Kawamura's play and of the empty politics of repetition and reproduction in the 'late capitalist consumer paradise' for which we can read Japan. Zizek writes:

> The ultimate American paranoiac fantasy is that an individual living in a small idyllic Californian city, a consumerist paradise, who suddenly starts to suspect that the world he lives in is a fake, a spectacle staged to convince him that he lives in a real world, while all the people around him are effectively extras in a gigantic show. (Zizek 2002: 385)

Zizek's context for these remarks is the American response to the 2001 attack on the world trade centre. As with Zizek's reading of 'America's "holiday from history"' (2002: 389), Kawamura in the remounted *Nippon Wars* sees Japan as trapped in a similar neo-liberal capitalist desert of the real. No effect of the *angura* counterculture remains here expect perhaps as a replayed and empty form of nostalgia. After all, as the play notes, how can we resist something that works so hard to remain insubstantial and chimerical? Like some Armageddon-like cyberpunk scenario, or latter day politics of fear and anxiety, the themes of *Nippon Wars #2* surround us, but are nowhere to be seen.

Terrorism and utopia are dialectical forces in the directors cut. Early in *Nippon Wars #2* grainy black and white images of 1980s Tokyo are projected over the stage. The suburbs, cars, billboards and coffeehouses take on an eerie bleakness and nihilism. Ironically, they somehow feel nostalgic, yet how can we long for these images that seem almost innocent? These images seem to symbolise an era on the edge of something, a time when a certain kind of choice was still possible. The symbolic resistance in the revival version of *Nippon Wars*—the replay of 1984, already a compromised revolution—is shown in part by the androids singing the socialist anthem, the *Internationale*. In the director's cut, they do so at hyper-speed while dancing manically in front a huge psychedelic projection of the Japanese flag. In retrospect, a crucial time is referenced in these images of the 1980s cityscape, at the onset of globalisation and the beginning of the end of *angura*.

The staging of Kawamura's modern nô *plays*

Kawamura's modern *nô* plays, *Komachi* and *Aoi*, from 2003, are, on the surface, an entirely different project. They reflect the author's continuing interest in Japanese history and his clever articulation of this as a politics and poetics of memory. This is mitigated, however, by the conditions of production of these works in a mainstream production house and the articulation of a kind of return to, or newly rising sense of neo-modernism, as is evident in the plays' modernist *shingeki*-like dramaturgy.

Sotaba Komachi and *Aoi* are two popular enduing *nô* plays dealing with the themes of love, attachment and forgiveness. Mishima Yukio previously wrote his own modern versions of these plays (*Kindai nô gakushu*) and Kawamura—who had also earlier directed the Mishima plays—was influenced by Mishima more than by traditional *nô* sensibilities. Both plays feature women in

distress either though excessive emotion and unrequited love or grief. Kawamura wrote and directed his plays as a commission for Setagaya Public Theatre, one of the two contemporary theatre spaces in Tokyo that approach the status of main stage European-style production houses. Following the closure of the commercially run Ginza Saison Theatre, Setagaya and the New National Theatre (*Shin kokuritsu gekijô*) are now the main outlets for contemporary theatre production in Tokyo beyond the very small scale venues.

Kawamura states that he was motivated to produce the Mishima plays both as way of exploring the complex political problems surrounding Mishima and as a way of exploding the theatre scene. His own versions of the modern *nô* extend and develop these themes:

> At the time, it was considered scandalous and almost revolutionary that someone from the small theatre world, who until then has singularly written and performed their own plays, would turn to another writer for inspiration. The fact that Mishima's plays are regarded as *shingeki* pieces was also controversial; the idea that someone from the *angura* world could direct a *shingeki* play was somewhat scandalous. I really wanted to take apart that whole *shingeki* style though and question the *angura*/*shingeki* dichotomy.

And later:

> Mishima is a figure who embodies all kinds of problems that Japan has, even today. He was a very ambiguous person politically. He was left wing and he was right wing, he was a bit of everything. It is difficult to place him. He was very anti-American, while at the same time, he was very Western and European in the ways he worked and thought. He was active in 1960s politics—in 1968, many problems in Japanese society were exposed. But Mishima died before there was any sense that these problems had been resolved. In the *Modern Nô Plays*, I think you can see this kind of political and cultural ambivalence that Mishima showed. These problems are addressed in the *Modern Nô Plays*: the fact that he was looking at the *nô*, a type of performance that is recognised as being ancient and traditionally Japanese, and at the same time that he was trying to fit that into a very western idea of theatre. When you look at the work—both the strangeness of the old theatre and the incongruity of the western theatre seem to come together. What he was trying to incorporate seems to be very important even in Japanese society today. It is a question of distance (and perspective) between Japan and the west. (Kawamura 2004)

As we have seen above, questions of distance and even Brechtian *Verfremdung* techniques of are evident in Kawamura's recent work that seems to want to make space for social critique. As such, Kawamura's *nô* plays aim to debate Mishima's insistent cultural critique and hyperbolic neo-nationalist stance. Kawamura takes his analysis of the Mishima plays and explores it in his own versions.

In *Komachi* and *Aoi*, Kawamura neither draws on traditional theatre aesthetics, nor *angura* for influences. His plays are set respectively in a film scenario and in a hairdressing salon. He cast television stars and a well-known ex-Takarazuka star and used only one of his actors from the Daisan Erotica company. The production, moreover, was rehearsed on a full-time basis over a three-week period, rather than in the evenings over several months (the typical *angura* production system) and Kawamura was supported by a full and efficient production team. Thus, *Komachi* and *Aoi*, despite their unique qualities and engaging and complex exploration of history, are normative in terms of theatrical style and mode of production. They explore politics with a fine sense of the comparative and metaphor, for example, the conversation with Mishima's politics, the film as a vehicle of memory, and the hair salon as site of beauty obsessions. Dramaturgically, this represents a move away from the submerged subjectivity and violent ruptures of meaning in *angura* and towards articulating the sense of semiotic distance that Kawamura notes is important to opening new critical spaces for theatre. But it also risks a tendency towards the homogenisation of cultural practices under the rubric of globalisation.

In developing a program of modern *nô* plays after Mishima, the authorial figure is emphasised in a dynamic conjunction of Kawamura after Mishima. Authorship is produced through the textual authority provided by the reference to a canonical figure of Japanese modernity. The authorial voice of Kawamura is a product of the unique interpretation of the text. As a result, the focus or

location of the aesthetic qualities of the work shift from the collective *angura* company structure towards a professional and commercialised system of production. This theatre is consequently objectified and removed from the immersed qualities of hybrid corporeal *angura* style. At the same time, it is a return to a sense of dialectical possibility and intellectual debate. In this sense Kawamura's emergence as a playwright, rather than *auteur,* signals both the end of *angura* as a style but new possibilities for theatre to address a continuum of ideas and work across the boundaries of genre categories. A new kind of hybridity is therefore evident at the same time as older models disappear.

Closing

The changing systems of theatrical production in Japan, as evident in Kawamura's recent work, signal the end of the *angura* system. A series of interrelated factors have influenced this trend, including the changing basis of arts funding and the aforementioned rise of public theatres. A culture industry has emerged in contemporary Japanese theatre that is global in the sense that theatre is made in ways markedly similar to the ways that it is made in other developed countries. A part of this trend sees artists working freelance on a variety of projects. They become multi-skilled and begin to work across genres and between cultures. This process has significant impact on the Japanese contemporary theatre scene that has historically grown from a group-*auteur* structure and group sensibility. While we are seeing a vast range of theatre activity in Japan, the Kawamura case shows what happens when the work that was unique to *angura* is re-made under this system. Something is lost and something is gained. We might expect Japanese theatre to change in a multitude of ways as a result. On the one hand, artists will have greater freedom and will become more widely experienced. Their work will reach wider audiences. On the other hand, those cultural locations that developed distinctive and localised performing styles and dramaturgical formations seem to be in decline.

Endnotes

[1] For further discussion of angura theatre aesthetics see, for example: Eckersall (2006), Allain (2003), Goodman (1988), Senda (1997).
[2] For example, the narrative of Lepage's seven-hour epic The Seven Streams of River Ota is developed in part around the presence of a western performer living in Japan to study butô. Butô is contexualised in the work by discussions of Japanese history and the atom bomb. Hybridity and the aesthetic sensibilities of Japaneseque in Wilson's theatre can be traced to the seminal 1970s postmodern work Einstein on the Beach, while Mnouchkine was seen creating a typical angura blend of traditional and modern theatre forms in her use of bunraku in her recent work The Flood Drummers. In these examples, we see that the raison d'etre of 1960s Japanese theatre as a far-reaching exploration and interrogation of the Japanese body, and culturally specific mechanisms of production, came to enter avant-garde performance vocabularies around the world.
[3] For my extended discussion of Hamletclone and the English translation of the play see Eckersall (2006). See also Moriyama Naoto's excellent essay on Hamletclone (Moriyama 2004).

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