**BILLI ON NINAGAWA**

It is moving to be talking about Yukio Ninagawa the day after his famous production of Macbeth has opened at the Barbican. For it was that production that, at the 1985 Edinburgh Festival, changed our whole perception of Japanese theatre. Before that we had seen Noh Theatre productions in the World Theatre seasons at the Aldwych. Kabuki had, I believe, made occasional visits to Sadler’s Wells. We were also, of course, familiar with the films of the Kurosawa.

But that Macbeth was then- and remains today- a revelation. It showed, for a start, that it was possible to harmonise Eastern and Western traditions: to combine samurai iconography with the music of Faure and Samuel Barber. That fluidity remained a hallmark of Ninagawa’s productions. But Ninagawa’s production also opened up new possibilities with that particular play.

Macbeth, often problematic in British theatre, was often staged in Stygian darkness: I’ve always thought that it was that, rather than the superstition that there was some buried evil in the text itself, that caused so many near-fatal accidents in British productions with people hacking away at each other with swords in semi-darkness. But Ninagawa showed that Macbeth could also staged as a thing of beauty and as a melancholy poem on transience and mortality, symbolized by that famous image of cascading cherry-blossom. After that production, we all became devotees of Ninagawa.

He did, of course, train as a painter and it was his ability to treat the stage as a living canvas that made his productions so memorable. In 1986, the year after Macbeth, Ninagawa brought his production of Medea to the Edinburgh Festival. It was staged in the open-air courtyard of the Old College at Edinburgh University. So one had the unusual sight of a play about savage infanticide being played against a background of neo-classical columns.

Ninagawa’s production, played by an all-male cast, was also full of extraordinary images. The Chorus, plucking shamisen, wheeled and careered around Medea like attendant bats. As Medea plucked a knife from the ground and advanced murderously towards her children, the Chorus’s black-lined cloaks were reversed to reveal a blood-red lining. Most famously, Medea was last seen flying through the night-sky in a dragon-winged chariot rising above the perimeter of the college buildings. To this day, I never enter that courtyard without seeing a vision of Mikijiro Hira in that airborne chariot.

That production was also typical of Ninagawa in its blend of east and west. Medea with her silvery headgear, tasselled veil hanging from her cheeks and artificial breasts felt like a figure from a highly-coloured Kabuki production. But beneath the extravagant ritual there was great emotional truth.

In Ninagawa’s hands this became a play about overwhelming maternal passion, as much as revenge, and about the cost to Medea herself of killing her children. You saw that in the final despairing wave that Mikijiro Hira’s Medea gave to the children she was about to sacrifice. If Ninagawa used the stage like a painter, it was one seeking after a core of emotional reality.

The more one saw of Ninagawa’s work, the more one realized that he loved the theatricality of theatre. But, although his productions were often stylized and drew on the traditions of Noh and Kabuki, they were not in any way remote, exotic or removed from life as it is lived: one should remember that early in his career he founded in 1968 an agitational group called Contemporary People’s Theatre. He also had a great capacity to convey meaning through images. I remember a strange experience I had in the late 1980s when I was part of a group of Guardian journalists who made an investigative trip to Japan. I was deputed to explore Tokyo theatre and found, to my delight, that Ninagawa’s production of a modern play by Kunio Shimizu, which in English became Tango At The End of Winter, was playing in a theatre situated- as I recall- on the top storey of a fashionable department store. I decided to attend even though, for some reason, my translator was not available that evening. I had to deduce the play’s meaning from its images. Afterwards, I met Mr Ninagawa and his producer, Mr Nakane, and I was relieved to discover that I hadn’t totally misunderstood it. I later saw the play in its English production with Alan Rickman giving a memorable performance as an actor who had quit the stage and now lived, haunted by dreams, in a clapped-out-mist-wreathed cinema.

It was by his Shakespeare productions, however, that Ninagawa was best-known in Britain and they were many, varied and brilliant. The only one that was not that well received was a production of King Lear that he did, in English, for the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1999 with Nigel Hawthorne. I always felt that both the actor and the director were somewhat unfairly attacked and there were images in the production that stay with one to this day: the storm of boulder-like hailstones that thundered onto the stage or the glowing-red sun that appeared on the cyclorama at the play’s climax. I remember a superb Pericles at the National in 2003 framed by the image of refugees first seen shambling across the stage to the sound of gunfire and, at the last, crawling up to a set of on-stage taps to quench their thirst. In Ninagawa’s hands, Pericles became an archetypal spiritual odyssey about, as I recall, the re-education of contemporary Japan.

Ninagawa in 2006 did a wonderful Titus Andronicus at Stratford-on-Avon that, like Peter Brook half a century earlier, treated the play as a stylized tragedy: one in which there was not a trace of fake blood but simply rivers of red silk pouring from the mouths of the maimed and murdered. But it was Hamlet that clearly obsessed Ninagawa. In all he directed it eight times and it was good that his final version came to the Barbican in 2015. He set the action in the late 19th century when Hamlet was first staged in Japan and, as always, there were unforgettable images such as the sight of Claudius, stripped of his ceremonial robes, literally scouring himself for his sins. It was touching to see the role played by Mikijiro Hiro who, thirty years earlier, had been Ninagawa’s samurai Macbeth.

So why, in the end, did the work of Ninagawa have such a hypnotic effect on British audiences? It was partly because he offered a radical new perspective on Shakespeare plays with which we thought ourselves familiar. It was also because he had an eclecticism that enabled him to fuse the best parts of eastern and western tradition and show that a love of Noh and Kabuki could be combined with an understanding of Brecht and Stanislavski. But it was perhaps, above all, because a respect of text and a love of actors was blended with the eye of a great theatrical painter that Ninagawa was able to create images that- as we saw last night in Macbeth- brand themselves for ever on the memory.