

Ninagawa speech  
Japanese Embassy  
October 6th 2017  
© Phillip Breen

I've never seen *Pericles* in English. After seeing Ninagawa-San's production in London, I've tried to avoid it in the English language (quite easily done as it happens) lest my perfect memory of this evening be somehow spoiled. It was my birthday, I was just starting out as a director and this made me reassess everything I thought I knew. Every moment seemed so full, teetering on the edge of some epic poetic expression, connected totally to the body and to the imagination - when Yuko Tanaka's Marina, imprisoned in the brothel wished she was a bird she became a bird.

Great art finds a form for the unsayable and most difficult, knotty aspects of being human. Mediocre art finds a form for the eminently sayable. It's in this sense that I talk about Ninagawa-san's greatness as an artist. This sort of truth transcends the banal barriers of language and culture and speaks to what is human about us all. My eyes were opened to what can happen in a play when visual imagery works in tandem with text, when there is a profound connection to the mythic. In this sense he was perhaps giving an experience of that play that was closer to how they might have been experienced by Shakespeare's audience.

Ninagawa is as responsible as anyone for Shakespeare becoming a world figure, not just an English export. And he's greatly influenced a generation of English theatre directors - who follow trends in Japanese theatre with interest. Because of that experience with his *Pericles*, my trips to Japan have felt like something of a pilgrimage. It'll be strange that he won't be there when I travel to Tokyo in two weeks

I remember his famous *Titus Andronicus*, widely regarded as the highlight of the Royal Shakespeare Company's complete works festival. On my wall at home I have a photograph of Tsukasa Nakagoshi's brilliant white set, with Hitomi Manaka as Lavinia, being held in anguished grief by Kotaro Yoshida's Titus, bleeding silk crimson ribbons from her mouth. So much is spoken of the visceral horror of that moment of the play, but Ninagawa gave us an image - that in it's subtly alienating use of the silk - encompassed the horror but in this pristine white world allowed us to consider the tender domestic tragedy of this moment, of a father and daughter being unable to speak to each other after innocence has been lost. It was both brutal and beautiful.

I had the great good fortune to see a matinee of Ninagawa-san's *Richard II* at Saitama in 2015, while I was directing for his Theatre Cocoon in Tokyo. In England we're told over and over again that this is some of Shakespeare's most 'beautiful' language and so it is often 'beautifully spoken' in England - whatever that means - but for that reason, the play is rarely, if ever, radically reinvented. From the first moment when forty or so octogenarians in wheelchairs were rolled on to the stage by forty young people to the strains of a melancholy Beethoven Piano sonata, which suddenly burst in to a mass ensemble tango, young dancing with old who had leapt out of their wheelchairs, it was clear that Ninagawa had put a bomb under this play. This was a *Richard II* for now. A young radical king, crushed by reactionary forces brought to the throne by the 'grey vote'. Once more Ninagawa-san was able to find the 'poem' of the play and express it beautifully, but with an acute eye for what the play might mean in a contemporary context. England

was a far away mythic land; the mere setting, while the production called for compassion and understanding in the political realm.

While there were of course the inevitable visual *coups de theatre* - I've never seen a Welsh beach look quite so ravishing - it was thrilling partly because it introduced a political edge to his work that I hadn't seen before. But it was the fact that this production was done with a huge community company of young aspiring actors and comfortably retired amateurs gave the metaphor huge force, and made the achievement all the more impressive.

I saw him for the last time that afternoon, surrounded by his huge company on a high after the performance, they were laughing, he was delighted for them. He was himself in a wheelchair at that point, occasionally using an oxygen mask. I had seen him direct standing on a platform light as a bird. There was so much I wanted to say but was tongue tied. Anyway I congratulated him on the performance and thanked him. He smiled, inquired after my production and said that I should call him if I needed anything.

CS Lewis perhaps seems an odd place to conclude a reflection on the work of Yukio Ninagawa. However...

He writes in *The Weight Of Glory* "The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not *in* them, it only came *through* them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshipers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited."

Beauty comes *through* Shakespeare, through his mind and his observations, through the silences and the longing and the odd conjunctions, the gaps, the oppositions and through the fractured people who populate the plays who are elusive and don't know themselves, (to borrow from Pinter) Shakespeare's beauty pours out of an 'open wound'.

So often in the UK theatre we mistakenly look for some inherent beauty in the arrangement of the ink on the page; so there are a lot of broken hearted worshippers these days. We look to solve the plays as if they are a puzzle, explain them to the uninitiated as if they are difficult when they are only as difficult as being alive, we want to bend Shakespeare to tell us things we already know. We turn from the poem in all of it's troubling ambiguity and cauterise the wound. Perhaps because we assume we know him, or that we own him or something. We don't.

We're looking for Shakespeare's beauty in all the wrong places.

Ninagawa-san didn't.

Thank you.