Performance Reviews

Kinoshita Kabuki, *Sakurahime Azuma no Bunsho* (The Scarlet Princess of Edo). Tokyo (Owlspot Theater) and Kyoto (ROHM Theater), February 2023.

Rina Tanaka

Tour Date and Venues:
Owl Spot (Tokyo, February 2-12, 2023), Toyohashi Arts Theater PLAT (Aichi, February 18-19, 2023), Rohm Theater Kyoto (Kyoto, February 22-23, 2023), Ryutopia Niigata City Performing Arts Center (Niigata, February 26, 2023), and Kurume City Plaza: Kurume-za (Fukuoka, March 4-5, 2023).
Review based on two performances, one in Tokyo on February 2, 2023, and the other in Kyoto on February 23, 2023.

Cast and Crew:
Supervisor: Yuichi Kinoshita
Hotetsu (Text director): Yuichi Kinoshita, Takatoshi Inagaki
Playwright/director: Toshiki Okada

Sound design: Masamitsu Araki
Set design: Michiko Inada
Lighting: Yukiko Yoshimoto
Sound: Toru Koda
Costume: Kyoko Fujitani
Hair & Make up: Rumi Hirose
Fight scene choreograph & Instructor for Kabuki gestures: Hashigo Nakamura
Stage direction: Nobuaki Oshika
Planned and produced by Kinoshita Kabuki/Jurai-sha
Performer:
Songha (Seigen/Tsurigane Gonsuke/Denroku)
Shizuka Ishibashi (Sakura-hime/Shiragiku-maru/Kurōhachi)
Mikio Taketani (Nagaura/Yamada Gunjibē/Jikutani Sōdoku)
Tomomitsu Adachi (Iruma Akugorō/Inanoya Hanbē/Tsunaemon)
Tomohiro Taniyama (Zangetsu/Gunsuke/Jindayū/Samurai)
Masakazu Morita (Awazu Shichirō/Ushijima Ganzō/Ariake Sentarō)
Yuri Itabashi (Matsui Gengo/Kohina/Kimbē)
Megumi Abe (Matsuwaka-maru/Ojū)
Riki Ishikura (Inanoya Hanjūrō/Hinin people/Dotesuke/Kanroku/Santa)
Masamitsu Araki

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In February 2023, a unique contemporary kabuki theater, *Sakurahime Azuma no Bunsho* 桜姫東文章 (The Scarlet Princess of Edo, hereafter *Sakurahime*) celebrated its world premiere and the beginning of Japan tour at the Owlspot Theater, Tokyo. This was a highly challenging and inspiring collaboration of two prominent artists who have been working on classical and contemporary performing arts in Japan: Kinoshita Kabuki and Toshiki Okada.

Since being founded in 2006, Kinoshita Kabuki has attracted attention by the faithful and creative adaptation of classic Japanese performing arts (mainly kabuki) into contemporary Japanese theater. Each production was created under the co-leadership of Yuichi Kinoshita 木ノ下裕一, the leader of Kinoshita Kabuki, and a guest director coming from contemporary drama (Kunio Sugihara and Jun'nosuke Tada), choreography (Momoko Shirakami and Kitamari), and musical theater (Kōnosuke Itoi). Among these previous cases, the name of Toshiki Okada 岡田利規 might not be very surprising, when we consider that the playwright and director—known for having founded the theater company chelfitsch—recently focused on Japanese classics. Since his translation of six noh and kyogen plays in the tenth volume of *Japanese Literature Collection Natsuki Ikezawa Edition* 池澤夏樹＝個人編集 日本文学全集 (2016), Okada was acclaimed for his original plays highly inspired by the format of noh theater, including *NŌ THEATER* (2018, Münchner Kammerspiele) and *Miren no Yūrei to Kaibutsu* 未練の幽霊と怪物 (Unfulfilled Ghost and the Monster, 2021, KAAT Kanagawa Arts Theater).

This time, Kinoshita and Okada tackled a popular but complicated kabuki play, *Sakurahime Azuma no Bunsho*, originally written by Tsuruya Nanboku IV 四代目鶴屋南北 (1755–1829) and first performed in 1817 at the Kawarazaki-za theater in Edo (now Tokyo). Traditionally, a kabuki playwright would compose a new work by borrowing and recontextualizing preexisting popular materials of characters and stories. Nanboku notably excelled at writing intertextual works weaving more than one set of materials, exemplified by his combination of two different materials in *Sakurahime*: the "Sumidagawa-mono 隅田川物" (the Sumida River plays) about the story of the kidnapped and then murdered son of the Kyotoite noble clan, Yoshida, and the "Seigen-Sakurahime-mono 清玄桜姫物" (the plays about Seigen and Princess Sakura) about a Buddhist priest, Seigen, who loves a noble princess, Sakurahime, even after his death.

As a result, *Sakurahime* deals with a turbulent story about the princess of the prestigious Yoshida clan. She secretly gave birth to the child of the

man who raped her. His name is Tsurigane Gonsuke, a man who secretly killed her father and brother and stole the clan heirloom scroll. For the crime of adultery, Sakurahime falls into the lowest social class. Not only that, but she also accidentally kills Seigen, a Buddhist priest who knows and obsesses Sakurahime as a reincarnation of his beloved acolyte. The ghost of Seigen appears nightly to Sakurahime, who now works for Gonsuke as a courtesan, and tells her Gonsuke's secret. As soon as Sakurahime knows who her clan's enemy is, she kills Gonsuke and her own baby and gets her family's heirloom back. In the end, thanks to Sakurahime, the Yoshida clan has succeeded in its restoration.

Despite its popularity today—recently, the kabuki version (2021, Kabuki-za) starring Kataoka Nizaemon XV and Bandō Tamasaburō V caused a sensation, while Romanian stage director, Silviu Purcarete, presented a gender-reversed *Scarlet Princess* (2018, Sibiu International Festival)—, this play was long forgotten until its revival in 1927. Nevertheless, modern productions underwent revision and omitted scenes and lines to meet various constraints for staging. An attempt to examine existing incomplete copies of original scripts and edit them as close as possible to the complete text was presented in 1967 at the National Theater of Japan by kabuki scholar and director Masakatsu Gunji 郡司正勝. For Kinoshita Kabuki's version, as customary in their previous productions, Yuichi Kinoshita and Takatoshi Inagaki carefully examined the textual history of this kabuki play and restored scenes that had not been performed since the 1817 premiere. However, this is not the only feature of this controversial and difficult-to-digest theater production.

If someone was expecting to see the performance in a traditional kabuki style, they would definitely be at a loss for three hours in the audience seat. It might be hard to believe that this is *Sakurahime* up until the first five minutes. Instead, the stage is made of crumbling ruins with a swimming pool on it. The sun is shining through broken, frosted windows on the stage right. In a dilapidated atmosphere, it looks like a sunset. The ruin seems to be ready for some fashionable club event. Colorful clothes are displayed on the two sides of the stage. On the right of the swimming pool, a DJ (Masamitsu Araki 荒木優光) constantly improvises music made of ambient reggae tracks, noise, and sampled voices of dogs, cats, and babies to chill out. Performers in Japanese street fashion hang around on the stage.

During the next scene, one realizes that *Sakurahime* is going to be played as a play-within-a-play. At the beginning of each scene, Brechtian captions

are displayed on the wall at the back of the stage, showing the title and summary of the scene. The performers look at the captions and start playing the relative scene. Lines are spoken with a monotonous voice; movements are awkwardly enacted. What happens on stage is that the professional performers imitate something like a very poor theatrical performance by Japanese teenagers without any vocal or physical training. That makes the audience more aware of the performer's corporeality than the character in the drama.

This combination of the performer's clumsy body movement and flat utterance maintained an absolute distance which prevented them from impersonating the character and at times even added a critical perspective to the drama (though it greatly depends on each performer whether they can naturally embody this unique, chelfitsch-style performative corporeality). In this regard, Megumi Abe 安部萌 had a very strong presence on stage. Her swaying body in a sullen mood even while she is impersonating the character Ojū—who is treated like a man's property in the drama—shakes the main plot grounded on such sacrifices. While describing the protagonist Sakurahime as an independent woman living for her desires, this version of *Sakurahime* sheds light on the female subordinate characters such as Ojū or a stammering girl Kohina (Yuri Itabashi 板橋優里) and lets us think of what their past and present role in the play is.

The performers who don't play any role during a scene stay in the front of the stage, peacefully watching the performance. They seem to act like those kabuki audiences who insert the shouts of *yagō* 屋号 (the stage family names of kabuki actors) or specific phrases in praise of the performer at the right moment of each dramatic climax. However, such pseudo-audience shouts completely inappropriate funny words that sound closer to the proper ones ("Sylvania シルバニア!" "Tofu-ya 豆腐屋!")[1] and calls out slang expressions never heard in kabuki theater (for example, "Niko-ichi ニコイチ!"—"two as one" in Japanese language—for the romantic climax). The real audience watches this autopoietic closed world generated between the performers on the ruined stage.

1 However, some words, especially for the scene of the Yoshida clan dispute, can function as a satire on the kabuki play. For example, the term "Sylvania" refers to Sylvanian Families, a set of well-known Japanese anthropomorphic animal figures for children to be played with in dollhouses, and possibly juxtaposes it with a theatrical dispute within the noble Yoshida clan in the play *Sakurahime*. Additionally, other words refer to the specific breeds of dogs, such as "Pomerania(n)" and "Dalmatia(n)." Together with hearing the music sampling from dog barks, these callouts sound ironic when interpreting the clan dispute as a sort of dogfight.

In contrast to the absurd, nihilistic direction, there are battle scenes and dramatic climaxes too, as usual in previous Kinoshita Kabuki productions. In these scenes, the performers dedicate themselves to the imitation of traditional acting styles as kabuki actors did in their performance of the same play. This created cathartic moments. Strikingly, the last scene with Sakurahime (Shizuka Ishibashi 石橋静河) was a beautiful homage to kabuki. Songha 成河, as Seigen and Gonsuke in the performance, made the best use of Okada's unsteady performative form and the kabuki's formal expression to play his two rolesin a persuasively and convincingly manner, even for the contemporary audience.

Kinoshita Kabuki and Toshiki Okada are artists (or artist collectives) who have already established their own style and brand through several successful productions. If they keep going forward such paved roads, audiences can foresee their future productions. Therefore, I believe that such a collaboration would be truly successful in a situation where the established creation styles would no longer be the best solution and the unprecedented would appear from interactions between such heterogeneous styles. In this respect, I think Kinoshita Kabuki's *Sakurahime* succeeded, despite strong malaise remaining after the performance, especially for the following two points.

This version of *Sakurahime* ends before the reconstruction of the Yoshida clan. Sakurahime dares to kill her man and child and get the heirloom back for her clan, just as in the kabuki play, but in another moment she throws the heirloom far away. In response to this climax moment, Ojū calls out "Hallelujah!" (In the performance in Kyoto, it was Ojū instead who threw the heirloom far away with the call out.) At first glance, I interpreted it as an attempt for two female characters who got pushed around in a patriarchal feudal worldview to strip away the heirloom—a symbol of the *Sakurahime* world—from the man's hands and get rid of it by themselves. However, the question remains: if Sakurahime wishes to abandon the clan, why did she kill Gonsuke and her child without hesitation following a patriarchal feudalistic principle? Of course, contemporary audiences who are uncomfortable with the pre-modern perspective cannot help but feel catharsis with this ending of liberation. Nevertheless, this interpretation can be applied to any other kabuki plays as well. Did Okada intend it to be a self-homage to the opera *Yūzuru* 夕鶴 (Twilight Crane, 2021, Tokyo Metropolitan Theater)?

The same problem appeared during the Terakoya scene, which was revived for the first time in 200 years since the premiere. Riki Ishikura 石

倉来輝, who perfectly embodied the unsteady, chelfitsch-style movement, played the role of Hanjūrō, a son of the Yoshida clan's loyal vassal. Hanjūrō is soon killed by his brother as a substitute of Yoshida's other son. After Hanjūrō's death, Ishikura changes his clothes at the corner of the stage and quickly comes back on stage as another vassal who fakes Yoshida's son with Hanjūrō's chopped head. Meanwhile, he smoothly interrupts playing any role and says that the vassals' loyal acts are "certainly eccentric behavior often seen in kabuki." That self-mockery to what his role just performed in the sense of *bushidō*—the vassals' loyality to the clan and Confucian seniority in a family—seems appropriate to add for performance today. The word "often" also implicitly explains this scene's intertextual composition that every Kabuki fan knows: The Terakoya scene in *Sakurahime is a parody of the famous kabuki play Sugawara Denju Tenarai Kagami* 菅原伝授手習鑑 (Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy, 1746). Nevertheless, despite such rich implication, the lines rather objectify kabuki as something incomprehensible with a certain distance in the end than demonstrate a self-critical performative act somehow trying to communicate with the original play, which this production could have accomplished. Such a distance—or rather, a sense of abandoning understanding—pervading not only this scene but the whole performance generates an atmosphere of moratorium, which ultimately suspends and refuses to understand the Nanboku's play.

I don't want to complain about creative adaptations from the classics, at all. Considering even more radical examples such as Nicolas Stemann's *Die Dreigroschenoper* (2011) or *Faust I + II* (2010–11), their drastic, deconstructive adaptation came from carefully dredging and investigating the text with clinging to pursue reasons, why it had to be *Die Dreigroschenoper* or *Faust*, and why theater had to perform that play today. That added a critical perspective to each performance.

Did the nineteenth-century Nanboku play already have a dramaturgy that could work as criticism against the old moral code first after thoroughly watching the play from the beginning to the end? Who knows. In any case, what Nanboku wrote in *Sakurahime* was not entirely a kabuki play of loyalty. The vessels strived for the Yoshida clan, including Hanjūrō's sacrifice, but in vain. Sakurahime finally avenged her father's death, but she was persecuted as a murderer in the end. For me, that plot sounds more critical than what this version of *Sakurahime* highlighted as absurd and eccentric.

Additionally, *Sakurahime* was striking in its ambition to use improvised electronic music in place of kabuki's *geza* 下座 music. This attempted to add another musical layer of creative homage to *Sakurahime*. At least, its

glimpse was traceable in the performance in Kyoto. During the month-long tour from Tokyo to Fukuoka, this production was changing, especially in relation to music. Instead of a caption-driven Brechtian staging as it happened in Tokyo at the beginning of this tour production, DJ Araki's sound design led the development of the scenes almost at the tour's end. However, music and drama interplay could have gone further, as seen in Okada's *NŌ THEATER* and *Miren no Yūrei to Kaibutsu* 未練の幽霊と怪物 (both music composed by Kazuhisa Uchihashi), and *Super Premium Soft W Vanilla Rich* スーパープレミアムソフトWバニラリッチ (2014, Nationaltheater Mannheim, with Bach's *Well-tempered Clavier*).