

Tadashi Uchino, *Crucible Bodies: Postwar Japanese Performance from Brecht to the New Millennium*

(London: Seagull Books, 2009)

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Introduction

As readers of *Pacific and American Studies* are no doubt aware, throughout the past decade Japanese popular culture has been enjoying (yet another) vogue in the United States. Anne Allison writes that this “boom” is characterized by a “far greater level of influence of Japanese goods in the U.S. marketplace these days and upon the American national imaginary/imagination.”¹⁾ As a generation of U.S. Americans raised on “Speed Racer” (Mach GoGoGo) and “Atom Boy” (Tetsuwan Atomu) now approach middle age, their children, raised in turn on Pokemon, Yu-gi-oh, and the films of Hayao Miyazaki, are in turn reaching consumerist adulthood. From its food to its technologies, Japanese contemporary culture figures prominently in U.S. popular and academic media. Notably, these cultural products—or at least U.S. fascination with them—emphasize their performed/performative aspects: American cosplay/“otaku” subcultures (indeed, often organized under the Japanese terms) flourish²⁾; the sub-cuisine of “bento” cooking has spawned numerous English-language fan/recipe websites (many authored by U.S. adherents) and a recent New York Times feature³⁾; and 2009 U.S. sales of Nintendo Wii systems were up by nearly 40% from the previous year.⁴⁾

That *performance* should be central to U.S. interest in Japan is not new: as performance scholar Emily Roxworthy notes, “the discursive construction of Japan as ‘the most esthetic nation in the present world’ [quoting journalist Upton Close] became the commonsensical understanding that structures Western encounters with ‘the Japanese.’”⁵⁾ Certainly in the

¹⁾ Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 2.

²⁾ See for example <http://www.thecosplayproject.com/cosplay-in-the-us.html> (accessed 22 January 2010); <http://www.animematsuri.com/> (annual convention held in the U.S.; accessed 22 January 2010); and <http://www.cosplayteamusa.com/> (homepage for the USA representatives to the annual “World Cosplay Summit”; accessed 22 January 2010).

³⁾ Samantha Storey, “Bento Boxes Win Lunch Fans,” *The New York Times*, 8 September 2009, Style Section, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/09/dining/09bento.html?scp=1&sq=bento&st=cse> (accessed 14 January 2010).

⁴⁾ Lindsay Whipp, “Record US Sales For Nintendo’s Wii,” *Financial Times*, 6 January 2010, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/73bc90b6-fa7b-11de-beed-00144feab49a.html> (accessed 10 January 2010).

⁵⁾ Emily Roxworthy, *The Spectacle of Japanese American Trauma: Racial Performativity and World War II* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2008), 20.

academic field of theater/performance studies, Japan has long been a site of interest and specialization: classic texts from Nô drama and Kabuki are now considered “canonical” (albeit often in the category of “world drama”) in most theater studies programs; these traditional forms were placed under a new spotlight in the 1980s, with the rise of “intercultural performance” (of the “East-West” variety, as in the work of Ariane Mnouchkine, Lee Breuer, Peter Brook, etc.); and the influence of butoh on contemporary/postmodern dance in the U.S. is ongoing.

But if in the above examples U.S. scholarly interest in Japanese theater and dance has focused on *live* performance, it is curious that these are genres whose forms and conventions were established in the past. In the current moment of globalization (U.S. Department of Homeland Security regulations notwithstanding) global *travel* has never been easier for artists and audiences, and the transport of information and images easier still. Yet contemporary (non-butoh) Japanese performance rarely has been part of that conversation.

Tadashi Uchino’s excellent study—one of the only book-length examinations of postwar/contemporary Japanese performance (not focusing exclusively on butoh) in English—makes an important effort toward filling that gap. *Crucible Bodies* provides a valuable introduction to postwar Japanese performance, situating it within the larger political, social, and aesthetic contexts that give rise to, and are reflected by, the works analyzed. Additionally, Uchino locates this trajectory in relation to poststructural critical/performance theories of nationalism, the body, and identity. What is particularly illuminating about Uchino’s approach is that he does not attempt to “explain” Japanese postwar performance by way of analogy or simple comparison: a figure like Tadashi Suzuki, for example, so often (in the United States) associated with/compared to Anne Bogart (with whom he has collaborated extensively) or Yukio Ninagawa (whose “intercultural” work is frequently categorized as similar to that of Mnouchkine et al.) is discussed diachronically in relation to *Japanese* political and aesthetic histories (even while the synchronic links to sites beyond Japan’s borders are noted).

Perhaps no one is better suited to the task: Professor Uchino is not only one of the foremost scholars of the subject, he is also uniquely qualified to explicate Japanese performance to a non-Japanese, English-language audience. As a product of performance studies in its formative years, Uchino has a keen understanding of the relationship between “theater,” “performance,” and cultural politics. And his work as an interpreter for Tadashi Suzuki in the 1980s provided an excellent vantage point from which to comprehend how what came before (Shingeki and Little Theater) was related to what came thereafter (Angura, Quiet Theater, etc.). Now internationally recognized as a leading expert on contemporary Japanese performance, he is especially adept in his theorization of the post-bubble era as it informs a new generation of artists and arguably plays a significant role in shaping, if not the aesthetics of that generation, then our understanding of those aesthetics.

Chapter 1 (“Political Displacements”) begins from an unusual starting point: the influence of the dramaturgical theories and plays of German dramatist Bertolt Brecht —unusual in that Uchino notes the curious paucity of attention paid to Brecht’s work on the occasion of his

centennial (1998): “nobody is thinking seriously about Brecht on his 100th birthday when it would be, in fact, commercially and/or critically feasible to ‘do’ so.”⁶⁾ Uchino notes the tension (which appears elsewhere as well, including in the United States) between Brechtian staging/technique (as a script or theatrical device) and Brechtian performance/praxis (as an ideological project) and, reflecting on the reliance on the former and the absence of the latter in a high-profile production at the New National Theater during that year he wonders, “Is this meant to be one of the end products of the ‘democratization’ of high culture in this country? Why is political and historical consciousness omitted from this particular production? Why do even aesthetics have no place in it? What does Brecht in Japan mean in this context?”⁷⁾

In order to answer this question, Uchino astutely examines the uses of “Brecht” in Japan throughout the 20th century as a way of tracing Japanese theater history more generally, beginning with Koreya Senda’s early forays into agitprop theater (such as *Blue Uniforms* and his adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera*, *The Beggar’s Play*, in 1932). By following Senda into the postwar period (when Brecht became more widely read in Japan) Uchino gives us a sense of the complex, shifting relationships between Shingeki, “Leftist” politics, and the emerging Angura theater movement (specifically, Makoto Sato and the Black Tent Theater Company). The story of Brecht in Japan, in Uchino’s rendering, becomes the story of the “Left” becoming the “Old Left”: “the political Brecht was consensually erased from Japan’s cultural memory,” he laments, “and we were given Brecht, the great playwright” and as a result, “the potential of his political perspective was mostly lost or was not even a subject for radical theater practitioners in Japan.”⁸⁾ The efforts of Sato and Black Tent during the 1970s notwithstanding, “political Brecht” is gradually elided or aestheticized, its radical potential (along with that of the New Left?) defused; Uchino thus suggests that the revolutionary potential of Brecht’s theoretical and practical theater work simply cannot be realized in contemporary Japan—at least not in the form of explicit quotation or reenactment.

Chapter 2 (“Images of Armageddon”) and Chapter 3 (“Deconstructing Japaneseness”) explore this argument further, pursuing the remnants of that revolutionary impulse in the 1980s and early 1990s. For U.S. readers/audiences, Uchino’s insistence (in Chapter 2) on the centrality of 1995 as a pivot point in Japanese culture is illuminating; while it has become somewhat common practice in U.S. performance criticism (and perhaps justifiably so) to orient our perspective around the “pre-” and “post-” demarcation of 9/11, the profound effects of the the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake and Aum Shinri-kyo’s sarin gas attack, as well as the deepening economic crisis caused by Japan’s “bubble” bursting, seems to pre-figure our own sense of “before” and “after.” But if what came before 1995, in Uchino’s rendering was “not Quiet Theatre” by implied contrast, he asks us to examine the clues it offers us in trying to

⁶⁾ Tadashi Uchino, *Crucible Bodies: Postwar Japanese Performance from Brecht to the New Millennium* (London: Seagull Press, 2009), 31.

⁷⁾ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

⁸⁾ *Ibid.*, 46, 50.

make sense of the cataclysmic events and social transformations of the mid-decade.

Noting a kind of contracted perspective in the performance work of the 1980s (what he terms “theater of the private”) Uchino identifies a strain of nihilism riding beneath the cresting wave of economic prosperity: “In the subcultural genres of the 1980s,” he writes, “everybody was concerned with describing the end of the world and post-Armageddon (i.e., nuclear holocaust) dystopia.”⁹⁾ Paradoxically, theater artists in this period (including So Kitamura, Takeshi Kawamura and Shoji Kokami) look to the moment *after* the cataclysm: “The message is very clear,” writes Uchino. “Even if a nuclear holocaust devastates Japan, some people will survive and will have to live...What will they do after the holocaust?”¹⁰⁾ Thus, the anomie of the bubble years gives rise to not only apocalyptic fantasies, but to a “melodramatic,” “sentimental” yearning for a new-found, purified sense of shared purpose and sensibility. It is this aspect of the “Aum-esque,” Uchino insists, that must not be forgotten when considering the post-1995 rise of “Quiet Theatre,” a less disturbing (“politically conservative and artistically innovative,” in Uchino’s words¹¹⁾) brand of performance.

Considering this period from a different perspective, Chapter 3 (“Deconstructing Japaneseness”) focuses on “theatre culture of the Angura paradigm in the 1980s” (using the characterization of theater critic Kojin Nishido). The 1980s, Uchino argues, was the decade in which the process of Japanese modernization entered a new phase, during which Angura and butoh emerged as sites in which an inquiry into originary “Japaneseness” resulted in a reductive essentialism, a claim for “the supposedly never-changing and everlasting Japanese cultural ‘tradition,’ an ahistorically constructed image of ‘Japaneseness.’”¹²⁾ While this is a tantalizing and plausible claim, however, it remains somewhat abstract with regard to actual performances; Suzuki’s and Juro Kara’s forays into “Kabuki” are referenced, but not analyzed in detail. Uchino seems much more interested in turning to more salutary examples, of artists and performances responding to that essentialist impulse: Gekidan Kaitai-sha’s *Tokyo Ghetto: Hard Core* (1996), which “tries to locate the female and male bodies of its performers within Japan’s sociocultural context”¹³⁾—that is, to illustrate the socially-constructed and—contingent nature of identity—and the work of performance/installation artists Dumb Type (*pH* and *S/N*), which often gestured toward transnational networks, communities, and aesthetics that worked against an originary definition of “Japanese” identity.

The “Interlude” that separates Chapters 3 and 4 provides useful aesthetic-historical context, tracing the progression “From ‘Beautiful’ to ‘Cute.’” As noted in the opening, “Japan” is readily understood in the United States in aesthetic—and frequently feminized—terms;

⁹⁾ Ibid., 56.

¹⁰⁾ Ibid., 59.

¹¹⁾ Ibid., 53, 54.

¹²⁾ Ibid., 86.

¹³⁾ Ibid., 90.

yet the relationship between the more austere version of beauty (figured as spare, cool, minimalist, etc.) and the more riotous (and, for puritanical Americans, erotically ambivalent) “kawaii” is somewhat obscure. Uchino provides something of a primer on Japanese visual aesthetic history here, which clarifies that aesthetic development in part by setting it against a geopolitical backdrop, namely, the rise of neoliberal capitalism.

Chapter 4 (“Playing Betwixt and Between”) takes on the vexed field of “intercultural performance” and quite adroitly avoids the dead-end debates on “East-West” binarism, cultural appropriation, etc. Rather, Uchino productively looks to more recent intra-Asian collaborations: Pappa Tarahumara’s 1996 collaboration with Hong Kong’s Zuni Icoshedron based on Kyoka Izumi’s *Kusa Meikyu*, Gekidan Kaitai-sha’s ongoing project with Australia’s Not Yet It’s Difficult titled *Journey to Con-fusion*, and Singaporean director Ong Keng Sen’s production *The Spirits Play* (2000) featuring The Grindermen, Nishijima Atsushi, Dumb Type’s Bubu, and Yoshiko Shimada. Each production in its own way takes on the complicated, often contentious issues of cross-cultural exchange, not only in terms of the content or subject matter at hand, but also (and crucially) in the process of creation. Whereas an older model of “intercultural performance” typically involves a (Western) contemporary auteur (as a deviser/innovator) and an (Eastern) “traditional” art form (typically figured as formally static), these projects are each in their own way contemporary (in subject matter, collaborative process, and aesthetics), reflective of a more dynamic, multi-directional, politically fraught vision of “Asia” in the era of globalization.

The second “Interlude” (“Fictional Body Versus Junk Body”) marks the turn toward contemporary performance in earnest, and it is from this point on that Uchino makes his most generative claims. The “junk” body, as Uchino argues, is a departure from the “fictional body” theorized by Moriaki Watanabe to describe the work of Tadashi Suzuki. That body is highly trained, citational, and expressive/connotative; the “junk body,” in contrast, is “untrained, undisciplined, a loose kind of body-in-performance.”¹⁴⁾ Drawing together the work of Takashi Murakami on “Super flat,” as well as dance critic Keisuke Sakurai’s notion of the “child’s body” as a leitmotif in contemporary Japanese performance, Uchino arrives at something (perhaps) approaching a Deleuzean “body without organs,” de-organized and yet-to-be-potentiated.

This is a key concept for Uchino, and this “junk” body animates the remainder of the book. Diagnosing Murakami’s “Super Flat Manifesto” (2000) using the formulations of psychiatrist Rika Kayama (who views contemporary Japanese society as suffering from “depersonalization disorder” writ large), Uchino sees the junk body as, perhaps, both the symptom and the cure: “At the peripher[y] of dominant theatre culture,” he writes, is emerging “the ‘junk body,’ wherein the notion of the character as a linguistically constructed whole does not function at all.”¹⁵⁾ Having undergone radical evisceration in mainstream

¹⁴⁾ Ibid., 118.

¹⁵⁾ Ibid., 126.

performance through over-textualization, the body emerges in the work of new artists like Gokiburi Kombinat, Yubiwa Hotel, and most notably Chelfitsch, as “physically present, burdened with nothing.”¹⁶⁾

The chapter closes with a brief nod to Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*,¹⁷⁾ suggesting a link between their formulation of “the multitude” produced by globalization and the societal “depersonalization disorder” diagnosed by Kayama. It is a provocative claim, though it serves as little more than a provocation in this brief reference. While *Empire* is never explicitly taken up in the Chapter 6, the fine analyses of the performances/artworks there serve to develop retroactively this thesis. Murakami’s *Hiropon* (1997), the lactating superhero featured on the cover of *Crucible Bodies*, as well as Yubiwa Hotel’s 2003 *Passion* both interrogate the gaps *and* intersections between the lived realities of “the multitude” and the body of neoliberal consumption—specifically, the commodity of the “shojo.” Describing the rooftop performance of *Passion* (featuring high-school girls dressed in school uniforms), Uchino concludes, “By the through the masquerading, the audience was made aware of the discrepancy between the *shojo* image that the performers tried in vain to embody and a different kind of junk-body-ness— aesthetically undesirable physicality—that they nevertheless inscribed onto the performance space.”¹⁸⁾ The chapter closes with an analysis of a different engagement with “junk-body-ness”: Chelfitsch’s *Five Days in March* (2005) in which the actors speak idiomatic contemporary, colloquial Japanese, and use similarly hyperreal, jaggedly contemporary physical movements—but the two are radically disconnected. “In [director/playwright] Okada’s performance,” writes Uchino, “rupture is everything, making Okada’s theatrical use of the body not metaphorical but metonymic to the ‘lived body.’ Not an aesthetic translation but a performative reconfiguration of the ‘lived body.’”¹⁹⁾ An important and internationally-recognized company, Chelfitsch (and especially *Five Days*) perhaps best illustrates Uchino’s notion of the “junk body,” and this chapter provides an excellent introduction for U.S. readers/audiences.

Interlude 3 (“Nationalism, Intra-Nationalism”) reflects back on this “junk body” in relation to the re-mapping of boundaries that took place in the wake of 9/11. The theatrical responses in Japan were varied and subdued, in Uchino’s estimation, in part because of the radically ambivalent logic and ethics of globalization that event illuminated and mobilized.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of this text for non-Japanese readers (or those readers unfamiliar with the terrain of contemporary Japanese performance) comes in Chapter 7 (“Mapping/Zapping ‘J’ Theatre At The Moment”). This short section begins with a graphic representation of the spectrum of contemporary Japanese performers/groups, laid out along the axes of “Relativist” to “Essentialist,” “Text” to “Body” and then explicates this “map.” The

¹⁶⁾ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁷⁾ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

¹⁸⁾ *Crucible Bodies*, 138.

¹⁹⁾ *Ibid.*, 143-44.

groups featured here are primarily coming from the post-bubble generation, spanning theater, installation art, and dance. For those readers wanting a quick immersion in contemporary Japanese performance, this chapter will be indispensable.

The last chapter focuses exclusively on the work of Akio Miyazawa, taking up the problem raised in “Interlude 3” regarding spatialization in the wake of 9/11. In Uchino’s formulation, Miyazawa’s three post-9/11 works *Tokyo Body* (2004), *Absence* (2005), and *Motorcycle Don Quixote* (2006) all attempt to grapple with “the locality called ‘J’—where history appears only as a result of a set of uncontrollable contingencies.”²⁰⁾ For Uchino, this “‘J’ locality” signifies Japan, certainly, but less as a geographically-delineated space than as a locus of, or perhaps spatial metaphor for, “junk-body-ness.” Miyazawa’s engagement with Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Heiner Müller’s *Die Hamletmaschine* (1977) in *Tokyo Body* and *Absence*, and Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (among other materials) for *Motorcycle Don Quixote* materializes a strategy Uchino identifies as the most promising, perhaps the only, response to 9/11 and its aftermath: by “explicitly deploying various histories...within his narrative and performative spaces [Miyazawa causes] those histories to be radically undone. Inevitably a losing battle, it is nevertheless the right kind of battle in an age of globalization, especially after 9/11.”²¹⁾

Crucible Bodies is thus an ambitious book—attempting to account for postwar Japanese performance and neoliberalism and poststructural performance theory as they have collided and collaborated over the past 60 years. Uchino’s analysis is most powerful when he is able to bring all of these strands together in a performance analysis—reading the work of Yubiwa Hotel, Chelfitsch, or Miyazawa, for instance. The figure of the “junk body” is both provocative and extremely illuminating for scholars interested in contemporary Japanese theater and dance, and *Crucible Bodies* is an especially valuable resource with respect to this new generation of practitioners. While the earlier chapters (1-3) lay a crucial foundation for the later chapters, they suffer a bit from a lack of concrete performance analysis: many artists and productions are described in broad outlines, and for readers wholly unaware of the genres of performance referenced in those chapters (“Little Theatre,” “Quiet Theater,” “Angura,”) this text may not be sufficient to provide a clear sense of their aesthetic or political distinctions in the absence of detailed close readings of performances. This is, of course, an unavoidable liability in this field of study: the storied (if contested) ephemerality of live performance renders some performance “texts” inaccessible after they’ve ended. Still, Uchino’s overview of the pre-post-bubble years is sufficient to clarify the stakes of the current moment, a task he accomplishes admirably.

²⁰⁾ Ibid., 176.

²¹⁾ Ibid., 181-82.