

The First, Second, and Third Premiere of HANJO at Japan Society

DEC 16, 2017 *by* AUDREY MOYCE *in* THEATER

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Photo by Julie Lemberger

Japan Society presented the SITI Company premiere of Yukio Mishima's *Hanjo* on December 7, 8, and 9.

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It's difficult to write about the show you love. There's the pressure, for one thing. But more, there's the issue of as you write about it, you no longer get to hold the memory of it intact. Forced to become a co-creator in these situations feels almost violent, the thought of inserting myself into it hurts.

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It's seldom that a show does silence / stillness precisely in a way that I like. Either it's too long, not quite intentional enough to hold my interest for its duration, or it's too short – the idea of stillness interests the makers but they don't commit. Now it helps that SITI Company's training – especially the Suzuki Method, from SCOT – is built to aid in precisely this dilemma, but the weight of the stillness was not just a result of well-executed performance.

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The story of *Hanjo* is simple and ancient. Jit-suko (emphasize the first syllable) reads a newspaper. She is a 40 year old single woman and mostly unsuccessful painter, and an article in the paper troubles her because it

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has exposed the odd facts of her life. For some time she has been keeping a roommate / ward in her home named Hanako (emphasize the first syllable again), who has gone mad waiting for Yoshio (ditto), her beloved. Jitsuko is sure this article will bring Yoshio knocking, so Jitsuko attempts to bring Hanako “on a trip” to go find him, but really to prolong their odd companionship forever.

But Hanako dislikes this idea, and while she goes to take a nap after they argue, Yoshio arrives like a bit of fate. Jitsuko argues with him but ultimately he sweeps past Jitsuko to wake Hanako up anyway. Hanako recognizes Yoshio’s face, recognizes the fan he carries – the fan she exchanged with him years ago to ensure their reunion. But she does not believe it really IS him. He’s a test, she decides, sent by Jitsuko, to tempt her into breaking her devotion to (waiting for) Yoshio. Yoshio leaves, and Jitsuko and Hanako remain together, in sickness, presumably forever.

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The story is layered. Its first origins trace to the Han Dynasty, then to the 1400s, then to the 1950s. At this last time, Yukio Mishima wrote several modern Noh plays, and this is one. I don’t wish to spend too much time on the history of Noh, but I do want you to know about it. So let’s call this work instructional: Google Noh theater, please.

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I'll wait.

If you know lots about Noh, Google Yukio Mishima. He's quite impressive. Mishima, as director Leon Ingulsrud says in his director's note, wanted to extract the stories from Noh but leave Noh's performance conventions behind. And now, in this production, Ingulsrud wants to bring them back in a partial way, and the result is a style completely its own: stark, meticulous, striking. The set is highly minimal and of a piece with the props. Color is used sparingly. Shiny and translucent material everywhere. Christian Frederickson on a single viola sits onstage left, underscoring the razor-sharp line we seemed to be walking on ("The true path is along a rope, not a rope suspended way up in the air, but rather only just over the ground. It seems more like a tripwire than a tightrope." –Kafka's *Zarau Aphorism* Number One) Simple but distinctive costumes worn by the three performers. They are Akiko Aizawa, Gian-Murray Gianino and Stephen Duff Webber. If you are not familiar with them, I want you to now Google them.

(Again I'll wait.)

Now, picture each of them in each role: Jit-suko, the 40 year old Japanese woman, dissatisfied, bitter, worried, protective, paranoid. Hanako, the younger woman, eternally preoccupied, speaking in complete and lucid sentences that upon careful listening reveal a Möbius strip-like mind that as soon as it dips into our plane of sense... cause and effect and

our plane of sense – cause and effect and reasonable unreason – it submerges into a plane below or in some other e/se, driven there by a purpose so single-minded, only she can follow its winding. Lastly, Yoshio. He is both the most important character – the catalyst of all this distress – and the most unreal. He arrives like a Grim Reaper, a Delphic Oracle, an omen, the grinning shabby man in Joyce Carol Oates' "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?", the personification of death arriving by carriage in Emily Dickinson's "Because I Could Not Stop for Death." He brings with him the unstoppable force of Yeats' rough beast in "The Second Coming," the figure slowly marching forward, the reckoning.

Have you pictured Aizawa, Gianino, and Webber as each of these characters yet?

Good.

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When I have learned, studied and trained in the Suzuki Method, I have always had difficulty seeing its direct application in performance. I loved the rigidity of its forms, the perfection it encourages you to achieve while never letting you forget the impossibility of such a task. But the emphasis placed on deep breath, from the gut, from the pelvis, always seemed to produce speech that more often than not tended towards harsh, overloud monotone from my mouth

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But in this piece for the first time I saw the training exquisitely in action – in the precision and stylization of the movement and gestures of the performers. Remember how I asked you to imagine each actor in each role? Now, I want you to imagine this story played out three times, and in every iteration, one of the character speaks the entire part in Japanese.

(Can you begin to picture it now?)

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When asked why he decided to repeat the piece three times (coming in at ninety minutes total, more or less), Ingulsrud mentioned that seeing a Noh play is like seeing a well-known opera or ballet – the connoisseur knows what will happen, what each aria and corps de ballet might look or sound like. Seeing the piece, then, is not so much about waiting to find out The What (plot) but more about The How (style, interpretation). By utilizing repetition as an organizing principle of the piece, Ingulsrud and the cast are able to bring the conversation of craft to each audience.

As I watched, I found something so powerful in Aizawa's merciless Jitsuko, in her eyes just protecting Webber from an evil Gianino. Both men physically tower over her, and yet she stood more resolute than either of them, planted between them. Or in Webber's very calm, straightforward matter of fact Hanako who

straightforward, matter-of-fact Hanako, who was not in any presentational way “womanly” or “feminine,” but whose madness manifested as simply childlike certainty in nonsensical statements and bright-eyed earnestness in gait and gesture. Or the ingratiating Jitsuko that showed up in Gianino, who gave us the first vocal entrance into the play, a poor middle-aged washout to be pitied instead of witnessed with mockery or horror.

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Seeing something three times in a row brings up a few things. Why? Is a simple one (already addressed). I’m bored is another, but one which never floated across my mind. Tediousness is another, one which the four creators admit to feeling whenever they ease into the 3rd iteration.

But I was enthralled by all three for so many reasons: yes, how would Webber do Jitsuko, Gianino do Hanako, and Aizawa do Yoshio? I was also eager to hear the text again – Ingul-srud’s own translation, which (excluding Aizawa speaking the original Japanese) I heard a total of two times per character. Mishima’s writing seems (coherently) weird not poetry but not wholly in this world either. Plausibly contemporary, but also out of time, archetypal or allegorical, it felt. Hanako’s words often clashed with sense, which fits the plot, but then so did Jitsuko’s, whose sort of second-tier insanity the play does not much comment upon.

There was also the fact of the Japanese – me not knowing any, but increasingly having an idea of what Aizawa's character was saying, it was an interesting test to witness her performance and see what I could clearly glean from her speaking, and what I didn't need to because her acting was so fully delivered.

On more thematic levels, though, I loved how repeating this play in particular felt so resonant: I got to meditate on the complexity of Jit-suko's position, which may have seemed macabre or caricature-ish with only one viewing. Got to consider how profound her misery was – by never risking love herself, she finds sick fulfillment in having someone who has risked love close by, to feel important in caring for (Munchausen By Proxy), but also to have as a constant reminder on why never risking at all was the clear better gamble on finding an existence that isn't dominated by pain and specific dissatisfaction and rejection. I got to have it slowly dawn on me the meaning of Hanako's partial recognition of Yoshio; whether conscious or not, at some point her beloved became no longer Yoshio but transferred to a worship and fetishization of the act of waiting itself. Of eternally delayed gratification, or of the fantasy always being more perfect than the real thing, and of that holding a security too precious to give up. Got to form a thesis over time that Yoshio is truly not a real character, just an embodiment of inevitability, a marching forward of fate you are free to reject but are not able to freeze. I had to reckon

just but are not able to freeze. I had to reckon with my ability to be patient in a piece about patience warped and soured.

Going in to the show – the premise of which I knew – my main curiosity was if the piece would feel like it had an arc. As it progressed, I was reminded of a sentiment I have heard from SITI Company and Anne Bogart a lot in the past five years: the human brain’s desperate need to find a narrative. Because of her complexity and lucidity (if not mental sanity), Jitsuko is easily the most real, full character of the three. When Webber donned this role in the final iteration, the rightest way to say it is that he *brought it*. He was brash, a little impatient, full to the brim with feeling. This was an escalation, I thought. An *accumulation*, I thought. Jitsuko, I realized, had gone through this replay twice now already and she had had it; she was fed up. Feeling this elevated the characters to the level of myth for me, made the ancient and recycled quality of the story manifest in front of my very eyes. I could see each character in a hell of neverendingness, where their waiting was even more eternal. As they repeated the show a first time, it was past archetype, past intellectual stimulation: it was a cold, sharp-edged tragedy.

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		ABOUT THE AUTHOR Audrey Moyce
		<div data-bbox="513 768 626 835" style="border: 1px solid #ccc; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin-bottom: 10px;"></div> <p>Audrey likes to write and perform and write about performance. She recently uprooted herself from the Bay Area, and is quite happy to be back in New York. More soon at audreymoyce.com.</p>

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