


THEATRE TRAINING

Where



Making the
whole body speak:
Yukiko Saito
in the title role of
Tadashi Suzuki's
Electra.

Mystique meets technique

the

body-centered

boot-camp

training of

**Tadashi
Suzuki**

gives actors a

new medley

of tools

AMONG THE MAJOR FIGURES of Japanese avant-garde theatre, Tadashi Suzuki—with his rigorous method of physical training that virtually remakes actors' bodies—has exerted the most powerful influence in this country over what an actor should be. Since his work came to the attention of American theatre practitioners in the early 1980s, the Suzuki method of actor training has swept through the acting community like foxfire. His training exercises re-ignited a landscape that, constrained by the boundaries of realism, was said in some quarters to be disintegrating into kitchen-sink clichés and self-indulgence.

KEIZO YAMAGUCHI

Steeped in the austere performance styles of Noh and Kabuki, Suzuki seeks to create an actor who can "make the whole body speak, even when one is silent." This approach has been catnip to experimental seekers and utopian types who remain convinced that the key to the actor's craft lies in the nonverbal aspects of theatre—in physical actions and a heightened means of expression. Like Jerzy Grotowski's notion of "the holy actor," Suzuki's disciplined method fed the disillusionment that many actors and directors felt with the various Americanized variations of the Stanislavsky system.

Through an international exchange program that allowed young American actors to join Suzuki's Company of Toga in the mountains of Togamura (about 250 miles northwest of Tokyo), Suzuki quickly gained a worldwide following. None of his contemporaries in Japan's little-theatre movement (*shogekijo*) have inspired so many non-Japanese proselytes and disciples. Not Juro Kara, whose open-air Situation Theatre has only recently been called to New York's attention, thanks to the tireless efforts of the Japan Society. Not Shuji Terayama, whose meta-theatrical call for a "drama with no theatre" ended when he died in 1983. Not Satoh Makoto, whose anti-colonial politics have kept him rooted to the

people's theatre in Asia, especially in the Philippines.

Other Japanese directors who have worked extensively in the international scene can't claim a comparable impact. Koichi Kimura's collaborations with Japanese playwright Hisashi Inoue and British playwright Arnold Wesker have largely been focused in Tokyo and London's West End. Yukio Ninagawa is internationally famous for his flamboyant productions of *Macbeth*, *Medea*, *The Tempest* and *King Lear*, but he has never theorized about acting or articulated his ideas about theatre in book form.

Suzuki, by contrast, has distinguished himself as a heady theorist of performance, thanks to the 1986 appearance of his first collection of theatre writings, *The Way of Acting* (TCG). In the United States he is a founder (with American experimental director Anne Bogart) of the international theatre institute and actor-training program in Saratoga, N.Y., known as the SITI Company. Universities and institutions like the American Conservatory Theater, Columbia University, University of Washington, University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee and Juilliard offer his regimen as part of their overall actor-training packages.

"I'm very interested in excesses of human energy that push our actions beyond the generally acceptable," said the 62-year-old director in a

brightly lit conference room at the Japan Society in New York last November. After a 10-year absence, Suzuki was on the first leg of a month-long, four-city tour featuring members of the Shizouka Performing Arts Center, where he is currently artistic director. "I am not interested in naturalism. I am not interested in addressing plays that are realistic. All of the great plays by Shakespeare, the Greeks or Tennessee Williams feature protagonists who are criminals or are insane. They cheat, lie, kill. Beckett's plays are filled with weirdos listening to the sound of their own voices. The questions I am posing in my productions are: Who are these people? What are they about?"

"Under the glare of the Sept. 11 tragedy, *Electra* plays like an ode to ruination, a hoarse symphony of scabrous eruptions and apoplectic fury."

ILLNESS OF THE HUMAN PSYCHE AND MAD power struggles in social institutions are recurring motifs for Suzuki. Fusing Western dramatic literature with the influence of traditional Asian styles, his austere productions ask us to identify with archetypal or trans-historical figures locked in the grip of insoluble conflicts (war, religious strife, sex, economic problems). In public appearances, essays, brochures and program notes, Suzuki reiterates and reaffirms his belief that "all the world is a hospital and all men and women are merely patients."

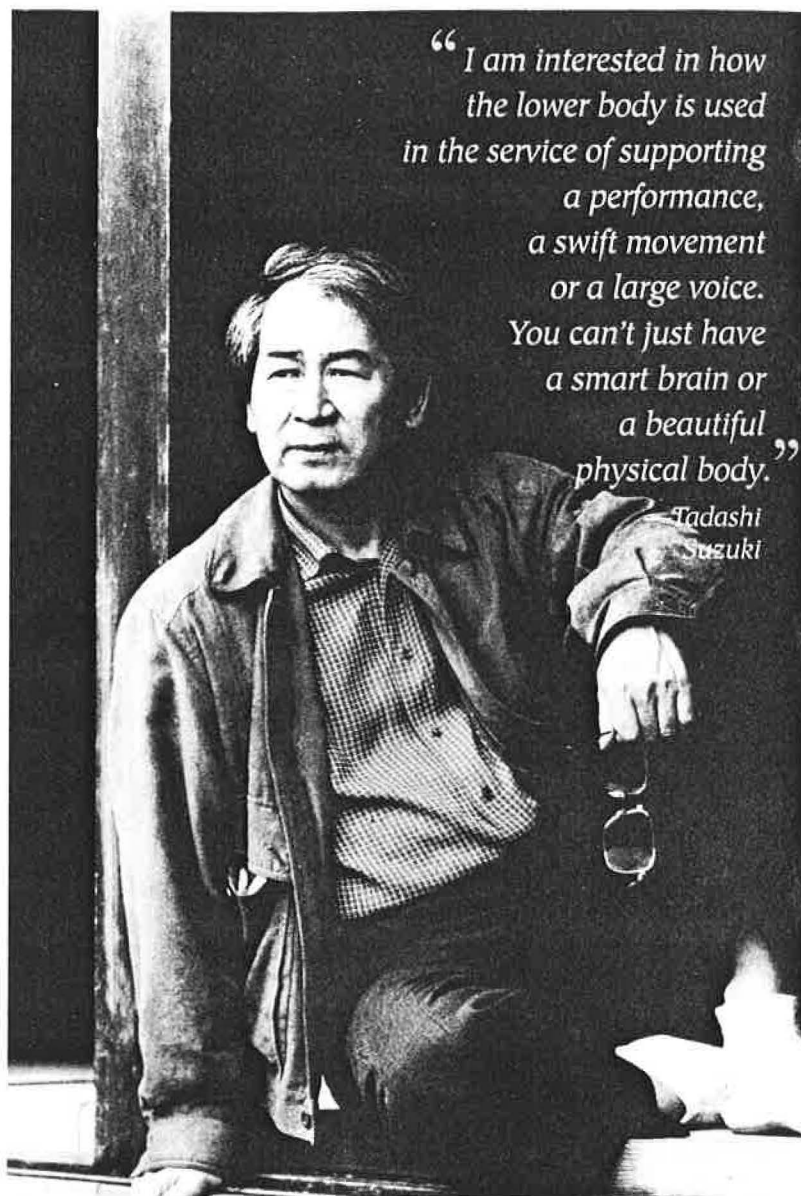
In fact, many of Suzuki's productions, past and present, literally situate classical figures in hospitals and insane asylums. In *The Tale of Lear*, Suzuki relocates Shakespeare's tragedy to a nursing home where an old man hallucinates that he is Shakespeare's mournful hero, betrayed and abandoned by his children, while a Nurse/Fool in a starched white uniform sits besides him reading the text of the play. The plight of *The Trojan Women* is seen through the eyes of a deranged Tokyo woman (played in the original production by Suzuki's one-time leading lady, the powerhouse actress Kayoko Shiraishi); a victim of the bombings of World War II, she relives the loss of her family in a cemetery and imagines herself as Hecuba and Cassandra.

Suzuki's potent 90-minute version of *Electra* is no different. (*Electra* is one of three Suzuki-helmed productions—none brand new—that recently completed touring the U.S. The others are *Oedipus Rex* and *Dionysus*.) Derived from an adaptation of the Greek myth by Austrian dramatist and poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal, the play finds the main characters trapped in a mental asylum where a chorus of nurses and orderlies observes their every move and listens to their ghastly exhortations. Locked in solitary confinement, raging over the murder of her father Agamemnon, Electra plots and fantasizes the murder of his killer Clytemnestra, Electra's mother, at the hands of her brother Orestes. Pushed onstage and off in a wheelchair, Clytemnestra gutturally recounts her nightmare visions of the return of Orestes, whom she has exiled. A nubile, pretty Chrysothemis, whose dreams of getting hitched and bearing children have been stymied, wheels herself forward to rebuke her sister Electra's vengeful intransigence and murderous impulses.

Under the glare of the Sept. 11 tragedy, *Electra* plays like an ode to ruination, a hoarse symphony of scabrous eruptions and apoplectic fury. Moaning and groaning, virtually unable to speak, Electra embodies the disfigured shape of mourning and grief. Garrulous and bejeweled, Clytemnestra is the face of scathing guilt itself. "Greek plays overflow with characters driven to heinous deeds by excesses of energy," Suzuki said. "They depict how forces or systems beyond the control of the individual bring on misfortune. It is fair to say that Electra's abiding passion redirected is the passion of a terrorist. In my version, she is unable to execute her desire for revenge. She can only live it out in her imagination. She is relying on Orestes to do it, but then he turns out to be mad as well.

"I am interested in how the lower body is used in the service of supporting a performance, a swift movement or a large voice. You can't just have a smart brain or a beautiful physical body."

Tadashi Suzuki



The struggle between Orestes and Electra also reflects the battle between matriarchy and patriarchal lineage, which ultimately proved victorious in Europe. Because her abandon, energy and passion remain unexecuted, Electra is driven to madness."

SUZUKI'S PERSONAL VISION THROBS WITH THE KINETIC pulse of metaphor and mysticism. And it is never more bracing and visceral than when it is at a standstill: Suzuki's 70-minute adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*—unlike the eye-and-ear engaging *Electra*—dissolves into a formalistic series of tense moments and unwitting disclosures. In the simplest analysis, it is about the agonizing strain of unwitting discovery. With faces virtually still and impassive and movements sparse and formalistic, Oedipus and Jocasta look like totemic figures stuck in a crucible of indictment and prophecy. The pacing is deliberate, the action ritualized, the stage setting stark and shadowy. The production would have felt like a vacuum of tension and stasis had it not been leavened by rhythmic choral dancing, a lilting musical score and opulent costumes.

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KEIZO YAMAGUCHI

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Where Mystique Meets Technique *continued from page 44*

This is not an Oedipus who disgorges his eye sockets. “I actually had come to realize that Oedipus was sick,” Suzuki said. “The play ends with the beginning of his illness. As long as he remains unconscious of what he did, the pollution that has struck Thebes was just weird or different. But once he comes into consciousness, he realizes that there is no way but to live with his disease. Only in the process of discovery does Oedipus become sick.” So while achieving a healthy state of mind and body is a worthy aspiration, what’s incredible about Oedipus is his will to action—his confident resolve to know what ails him.

“All of the characters in my plays are mentally unstable, and so am I,” Suzuki declared during a post-performance discussion. “I’m drawn to the criminal within myself.” His message, if you want to call it that, is that the root of our self-destruction lies in our own imagination. The virtue of the classical repertory is that it offers a profound and pitiless analysis of our spiritual crisis—if we are to survive, we must change in fundamental ways to be the kind of people that we are. Human perfection may be sheer impossibility, but Suzuki does hold out a glimmer of optimism. “Patients, at least, have a hope of getting better,” he said. “Even prisoners are usually under a fixed sentence. I tend to portray humans as we must not be. Hope is all-important.”

A DISTILLATION OF TECHNIQUES from Noh and Kabuki, Suzuki’s training exercises build an actor’s will, stamina and concentration. Somewhat akin to boot camp, they begin with the lower body, with an initial emphasis on the feet, and progress to an actor’s breath, voice, energy and physicality. “It’s really about maintaining a constant center of gravity,” Suzuki explained. “When you see a ballerina turn or watch Michael Johnson on the track field, their heads never go up and down—there’s a constant center of gravity. It’s the same with actors.”

Even those who know little about

Suzuki’s method know that it is “foot-oriented,” but the director explains: “Instead of the emphasis being specifically on the feet, it’s really about the lower body. You want actors to learn how to position their feet in relationship to the ground or the earth. What I am interested in is how the lower body is used in the service of supporting a performance, a swift movement or a large voice. You can’t just have a smart brain or a beautiful physical body. The lower part of the body sustains the action and supports the voice over time. You can see this in flamenco dancers, Noh as well as Kabuki performers or in classical ballet.”

The Suzuki method proposes a primal means of communication through bodies and actions rather than words. It was originally designed to accommodate his non-lingual, body-centered vision of how a play should be presented. This has led to the criticism that his method is applicable only to his own ascetic productions, an appraisal that is not without merit but which the director dismissed as a fallacy. Suzuki insists that his system does not conflict with the American acting tradition inspired by Stanislavsky and should pose no obstacle for actors working in realistic plays or even musicals. “If they find that there is friction, it’s probably because the actor is not gifted,” he said.

Suzuki cited the American actor Tom Hewitt as a model example. The Tony-nominated star of the Broadway revival of *The Rocky Horror Show* has previously tackled the role of Scar in Julie Taymor’s *The Lion King*, and his work has ranged from classical Shakespeare to contemporary comedies by Wendy Wasserstein. After studying acting at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, he commuted for six years to attend Suzuki’s master classes in Toga-mura.

“When I did *Lear* with American actors, I cast Tom as the lead,” Suzuki recalled. “Tom himself has told me how useful the Suzuki method has been. Even though *The Rocky Horror Show* bears no relationship whatsoever to the kind of *King Lear* he did in Toga,

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TAI GRADUATES: Kasey Reus, *Singin' in the Rain*, photo by Duane Morris; Elizabeth Campisi, *The Boy Who Swam with Piranhas*, photo by Duane Morris; Nichole Tung, *Tim Konecny & Eric Kline, Till Can't Wait*, photo by Jeff Peters



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Where Mystique Meets Technique *continued from page 114*

Tom asked me to come and see *Rocky Horror*, which I did. I can see how he's utilized aspects of the Suzuki method because he's a gifted, intelligent actor who can take what he's learned and alter it for the present circumstances. What this shows is that for all the years of commuting to Toga, he is able to be completely and totally adaptable, whether it's a musical on Broadway or a realistic drama at Arena Stage. What I don't want is a slavish mimicking of the exterior aspects of the training—robots of the Suzuki method—but an intelligent, gifted actor who can take the training and make it their own."

Although he understood English, Suzuki spoke through an interpreter, Linda Hoaglund. He confessed that he isn't aware of the extent to which his training method is being taught, used, exploited or put into practice in America. He has confidence in the quality of work being done by a select few former students with whom he has kept in close contact over the years, but he acknowledged there are potential problems in what he called "second- and third-generation teachings of the Suzuki method." There are about 15 Americans who have taken his master classes in Toga and are fully certified to teach the Suzuki technique. "The best way is to contact my office to find out who is or is not authentically trained," Suzuki added.

The Suzuki method requires a fairly long-term involvement. "I would say that three years would make sense," he said. "There are universities across the United States that have teachers who are certified instructors. So a person would have to start out there for a year or two. And then they may indicate an interest in coming to Japan. If they do well in their courses, they are eligible for master classes, which are about two months long."

BUT WHAT ULTIMATELY MATTERS to Suzuki is that an actor has prior experience, as opposed to someone who has no training or some training in a different system. "The reason I like working with experienced actors, even maybe actors who learned from other kinds of

training methods (especially if they come from abroad), is that many people tend to feel confused about my training method," he said. "People tend to find what is exotic and different about my training methods. They think it's some Japanese cultural gobbledygook. It is nothing of the sort. It is not some strange Japanese cult or bizarre behavior. It's a very rigorous training method. I think the people who get the best results are those who are able to see for themselves that this method is a way of improving their range of technique."

He winced at the criticism that rasping, growling and throaty screams are a characteristic affectation of his method. "There is a theory that the Suzuki method is damaging to vocal chords, and that it's more akin to a calisthenics of the voice rather than actual acting training," Suzuki said. "I would like to know who are these teachers who are instituting it poorly. What's really important isn't just the rote transmission of the Suzuki training. It's really about understanding what the training is for and how a director will make it work on stage."

Despite the almost inhuman effort it takes to learn Suzuki's exercises for centering, breath-control, a powerful speaking voice, alignment and concentration, it is the mastery over stress and strain that makes it possible for a talented actor to play the heightened emotions that are laid bare in the great plays of dramatic literature. Its integrity lies precisely in the extremity of his technique. As Suzuki himself is quick to point out: "It's training, after all. It's not the act of creation. It helps as a *springboard* for the act of creation. The analogy I'd take is that for a plane to take off, you need a runway. In order for a car to drive fast, you need a highway. That's what the Suzuki training is. It's the runway. It's the highway. Whether or not the actor will really take off or not is up to the individual actor."

Amid the atmosphere of multiculturalism and the idealization of ritual forms that characterize so much of the postmodernist search for new acting techniques and directing styles, Suzuki's

Where Mystique Meets Technique *continued from page 116*

system calls into ideological question the weaknesses of so-called Method acting. During the 1980s and 1990s, the Suzuki system took stronger root in part because it had stimulating things to say about the nature of cross-cultural performance. Suzuki's innovative synthesis of traditional and avant-garde techniques, echoing back to Vsevolod Meyerhold's biomechanical ideas about gesture and Michael Chekhov's interest in the grammar of the feet, represents an advance in the evolution of intercultural theatre activity.

"When we in Japan want to learn, use or absorb something from outside our culture, we do so with the expectation that it's going to be modified when we use it in our system," Suzuki said. "No system can survive completely intact. I think the mark of a truly lasting art form, whether it's a cultural phenomenon or a training method such as the Suzuki method, is that it can survive in an

altered form in another culture and still maintain its integrity. In this day and age of international understanding and global communication, it would be strange if something survived exactly as it was in the original culture—rigidly in the secondary culture."

Since so much actor training depends so profoundly on gurus and their disciples, it remains an open question whether Suzuki's presentational approach will survive the ravages of time. Will it reign in the American acting community alongside Stanislavsky's representational system?

"I think what is upon us now is the necessary work of identifying indigenous practices and rituals," Suzuki said. "We really need to hold on to them and make them part of our world heritage. It's not just up to a particular region to try to protect its own culture. It's our collective responsibility. It's up to artists to devise a new strategy for unique and indi-

vidual cultures to coexist in the future. We need to begin to identify which cultural or artistic practices need to be preserved and should belong to the world—instead of just letting them fall under the sway of a particular language or be dominated by a particular culture that's becoming too powerful."

If nothing else, then, this disciplined training method offers a way out of what some have called the "Stanislavskian cul-de-sac." Breathing a new theatricality back into the actor's life, the Suzuki method fills a void in actor training in America. **AT**

Randy Gener writes about the theatre for the Star Ledger, the New York Times and the New York Theatre Wire (www.nytheatre-wire.com), which he founded. As a director, he is currently collaborating on Love Seats for Virginia Woolf at Brooklyn's A/D: B Project Space.

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