

Considering Focus of Joint Research: Joint Research Project “The Body in the Japanese Performing Arts: Death and Life, Puppets and Artificial Bodies”

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From 1 September 2015 to 31 August 2016, I fortunately had an opportunity to participate in a one-year research residency at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken), participating in the Joint Research Project “The Body in the Japanese Performing Arts—Death and Life, Puppets and Artificial Bodies.” I served as the representative of a project team of 23 members (plus a few graduate students and guests from inside and outside Nichibunken), and was able to conduct very fulfilling research activities in collaboration with them.

Based on my experience, I would like to review what we did in this joint research at Nichibunken.

While such a broad research theme can never be tackled through solitary efforts, collaborative exploration into such a theme with many experts from various fields is an exciting challenge with possible remarkable achievements. The advantage of joint research lies there. With four members from abroad and the rest from around Japan, the joint research team comprised professionals from various performing art genres—including an active Noh actor, a dance professional who had directed some dance works, and a music specialist—, and researchers specializing in the cultures and performing arts of various European countries, such as Italy, Spain, France, and the UK, in addition to Japan.

By the grace of the diversity of members, which acted favorably on the joint research, we were able to have a place for insightful discussions about how the body had been treated in Japanese culture and thought, and especially in Japanese theatrical arts, from a wide range of perspectives, including those of the history of theater, aesthetics, comparative cultural studies, the history of religion, and dance studies. A report on the achievements of the joint research comprises papers written by the members to deal with the subject of the “body” in folk performing arts, *niwaka* farces, Noh, Kabuki, the *jōruri* puppet theater, mechanical dolls, modern drama, dance, *butoh*-style performances, and contemporary drama.

The theme I proposed was never a novel one. There was already a long list of studies on the “body” in a wide variety of fields, including sciences and the humanities. In addition, performance art experts in not only Japan but also the rest of the world had written innumerable treatises on the “body.”

Then, what was the significance of Nichibunken’s attempt to reconsider views of the body found in Japanese performance arts?

First of all, the field of performing arts is unique in that human bodies themselves are the primary, essential means there, and artworks are created with body movements, voices coming from human bodies, and music performed through body movements. The archetype of the Japanese theatrical arts is originally dancing and singing. Works of the performing arts are created from human bodies and voices themselves, and developed through use of other tools (including musical instruments). Dancing and music are the oldest forms of art.

The performing arts would be certainly impossible without the bodies of performers, actors/actresses, dancers, or characters, and the existence of the bodies, but what views of the body have the Japanese performing arts, including traditional, modern, and *butoh*-style dancing using body language as a medium of communication, as well as from traditional drama, such as Noh, Kyōgen, and Kabuki, to contemporary drama, been founded on? How have they changed? Can any original concept of the body and any peculiar process of the series of changes be found there?

Next, despite such universal nature of the performing arts, the Japanese varieties have special conditions. As you may know, Japan is a unique country where most possible genres of the performing arts co-exist at the same time, including still-vigorous traditional drama, modern and contemporary drama that has transformed and developed since the modern age, and various styles of dancing—not only traditional styles, such as *mai* characterized by evolution, *odori* featuring jumps, and *Nihon buyō* (Japanese dance) as an early modern combination of the two above, which have their origins in the diverse world of folk performing arts, but also modern dance, *butoh*, and contemporary dance.

In addition to human bodies, dolls have been subjects of deep attachment and strong affinity, based on which puppet plays have developed, with the *jōruri* puppet theater as the most renowned example. Moreover, artificial bodies, such as robots and androids, have recently appeared in the field of contemporary drama and performance.

Therefore, we now should tackle the challenges of not only considering, while focusing on the “body,” views of the body in Japanese culture and thought, and differences between the traditional and modern/contemporary performing arts, but also examining whether face-to-face encounters between performers and audiences are different from encounters between “dolls” and state-of-the-art “artificial bodies,” instead of human bodies, and, if so, where the differences are.

The first step to take is tracing the origin of theatrical and performing arts. There seems to have been a universal belief that dancing is a divine gift, so dancing occupied an important position along with other forms of art.

Needless to say, it seems that differences between nomadic or pastoral society and agricultural society relying on paddy rice cultivation, as well as the natural environment surrounding humans and their productive and cultural activities, have massive impacts on the real and creative spaces of dance, and its body expressions.

In ancient Greece, which was the cradle of European civilization, music and dance education was recognized as more powerful than education in other fields because of the resonance of rhythms and harmonies deep into human souls. The ancient Greek system of thoughts on music and dance (including thoughts of Plato and Lucian of Samosata) was handed down to ancient Rome, providing the foundation for views of music and dance in various European countries, including Italy. Together with music, dance was thought to represent the universe, planets, and harmony in the celestial sphere, and it was praised as a good physical discipline and consequently as beneficial for education and health.

The Greek (Pythagorean) thought that all things, or even the entire universe, were in harmony that could be expressed in mathematical relationships also influenced European civilization, viewing the universe as a harmonious, resonant world and cradling not only various

forms of art but also scientific thought. This worldview took human bodies as microcosms that represent the vast universe and expressing its harmony through dancing. It was believed that body rhythms could rejoin cosmic rhythms as their old home and create space, and body movements could represent logos, and the harmony and fundamental principles of the universe.

To take an example from Eastern thoughts, it is thought that a system in conformity with ancient Chinese cosmic dichotomy provided a foundation for the belief in a world structure comprising such principles as the five directions and five colors, as well as relationships between heaven, earth and mankind, based on the doctrine of Yin-Yang and Five Elements. In this system, music and dance as praise to the Buddhist Pure Land and Buddha was admired. Heian-Period Japanese court music and dance, called Gagaku and Bugaku, respectively, placed importance on dichotomy based on antithesis, symmetry, or alternation between the negative and the positive, between the dark and the bright, between the left and the right, etc. as the constitutional principle of the universe.

Japan was not an exception in terms of the divine status of dancing. For example, *Kyōkun shō* (completed in 1233) authored by 13th-century Gagaku performer Koma no Chikazane explains that the origin of the divinity of dancing lies in the Buddhist world. In addition, the two oldest Japanese chronicles—*Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*—, as well as Zeami's treatises on Noh in a later era, mention the legend of Ame no Uzume, a female deity, and her dancing in front of the Ama no Iwato (Celestial Rock Cave). In the myth, Ame no Uzume dances to have divine communication and to demonstrate to humans her skills in *wazaogi*, that is, dancing to entertain others. This may be viewed as the archetype of Kagura, dance for entertaining deities, and as the origin of rituals, festivals, and performing arts featuring dancing to the accompaniment of divine songs or other musical pieces, including instrumental ones. The myth also seems to represent the process of a human using her body as a divine medium, going into a trance, or an altered state of consciousness, getting possessed by a deity, and seeking the deity's oracles or the like. It is said that, in sharp contrast to shamanism on the Asian Continent, there was a stronger tendency toward divine possession in Japan.

As matter of course, the role of the human body differs according to the type of trance: the ecstasy type or the possession type. In the ecstasy type, only the human soul/spirit escapes confinement and goes on a journey in search of a divine encounter, so there is no need for the body, or rather, escape from the body is the focus there, with high importance placed on a spiritual experience. The human soul escapes the body and visits a different dimension or space called the other world or the next world. It seems that division between the soul and body enables ecstasies. Meanwhile, in the possession type, the body serves as a medium for a divine or spiritual existence, and plays the role of a necessary instrument, together with sacred props, in leading the human medium to a trance. The body is the vital tool for possession skills in inviting a deity to possess the person and appear in a ritual.

Here, the human body serves the purposes of putting a person into a trance through dancing, summoning up divine energies and souls, inviting a deity to possess the dancer, bringing out divine or spiritual power, and obtaining sacred oracles. Dancing movements performed by the medium before she/he is possessed and begins to voice oracles, including stamping, and vehement evolutions and jumps, together with songs and musical pieces, may

have been the archetype of Kagura and other traditional Japanese performing arts. The medium's dancing body, repeatedly evolving to the left and the right alternately, represents death and rebirth, decline and restoration, and the death and revival of a season, and functions to summon up and console divine souls in order to restore and increase vitality on the earth.

Rituals where myths telling the origin of the cosmos, the world, and various phenomena were represented and creator deities appear turned into performing arts in Kagura, where the existence of deities and the community was staged and confirmed. Prior to the development of sacred spaces dedicated to those purposes, such as shrines, performance halls, and stages, rituals where dancers played an important role gradually became more complex, with new elements added, such as the dances of *okina* (old men) or longevity, where the dancers acted as deities. When the vital energies of souls and other spiritual beings flagged in difficult times or during some seasons, the bodies of dancers occupy a crucial role in offering prayers to control such energies and have them radiate.

Songs and dances as divine languages are means to communicate with deities and the cosmos in search of an ecstatic union with deities. In Japan, a combination of songs and dances has been steadily handed down in theatrical arts, dances, and performing arts. While the power of dances and songs is sometimes attributed to their relationships with words and spiritual power inherent in them, songs as necessary language for communication with deities, and words themselves are recognized as embodiments of magical energies, just as dances are.

In Japan, the profound relationship between songs and dances provides the foundation for theatrical arts, as clearly exemplified by Zeami's emphasis on *monomane* (role-playing) and the two arts of dance and singing. Since then, Japanese dances have generally maintained their relationships with verse and prose until modern times. Modern Japan in particular has seen the origination of verse and other literary forms separated from music and dancing, and so-called "pure dance" separated from verse.

In addition, when shrine maidens as divine mediums who communicate oracles summon up deities, their *torimono* (sacred props) play an important role. They continue to turn in one direction and another alternately on the same spots while holding sacred props in their hands, such as branches of *sakaki* (*Cleyera japonica*), bells, folding fans, swords, and *gohei* (sacred wands with white paper strips). In a wide range of performing arts traditions, from Kagura to Kamigatamai-style dance, which originated in western Japan, such narrow spaces in which dancers continue to turn have been viewed as sacred spaces where deities are summoned up, and have served as stages on which dances and other performances are intensively done. In Japanese performing arts, the bodies of shrine maidens and actors/actresses serve as mediums. Their bodies themselves are not important, and focus is placed on the beauty of costumes (masks), rather than the beauty of the performers' bodies.

As seen above, the world of religious rituals originates in performing arts with highly religious content, and human bodies in such performing arts have special significance. They transform from bodies as vessels, bodies that can resonate with deities, bodies that can communicate with deities, or bodies as divine mediums to bodies that can manifest deities, bodies with masks that are possessed by deities, or bodies that represent deities and show them to the community or audience.

Among the “tools” that have special significance in rituals and performing arts in Japan, masks and dolls have particularly high importance. Moreover, the belief that even objects serve as vessels of divinity probably functions. In Japan, people’s affection or affinity for dolls, artificial objects, robots, and the like may owe its origin to people’s belief in objects as divine vessels.

Just as the bodies of shrine maidens do, the bodies of actors/actresses represent deities, spirits, etc., communicate their oracles to other people, and manifest those divine beings. Being in a trance or appearing as deities, bodies that manifest deities become transient bodies or incarnations. Furthermore, indigenous Japanese deities began to be treated as *gongen*, or avatars of buddhas and bodhisattvas, because of their relationships to Buddhism, the belief that indigenous Japanese deities are manifestations of buddhas and bodhisattvas, and other factors, getting more and more complex with a double or triple nested structure. In such cases, the appearances of divine mediums are just those of transient incarnations, and when seen from a Buddhist perspective, their appearances become colors and shapes as objects of sight, visual images, representations, fantasies, or mere illusions.

Dancing is per se an act of transformation. During rituals, shrine maidens are transformed into divine mediums in a trance while dancing. In dramas, stages serve as places where actors/actresses transform themselves into objects of sight. Just as shamans who preside over festivals, rituals, and rites do, the bodies of actors/actresses are means to play roles, and become bodies that can transform themselves. Since embodying divine spirits on stage requires actors/actresses to spiritualize their bodies, they purify their spirits and bodies in preparation for the spiritualization, just as in *okina* and *sanbasō* Noh dances. Masks, dolls, and other objects are sometimes used in place of the bodies of actors/actresses, leading to the origination of various forms of dramas.

For the above-mentioned reasons, folk performing arts studies should be the foundation for theatrical arts studies and theater studies, and should be always treated as the basics of them. I believe that thought about the body, beliefs in the connection between the body and the sacred, thought about life and death, and the concepts of the relationship between the mind and body should be explored as unignorable issues while referring to the history of folk performing arts cherished by villages, rituals and festivals performed at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples, and other elements. Tracing their origin will probably allow us to find their significance and true meanings.

Throughout history, the fertile world of Japanese folk performing arts has sophisticated and developed indigenous performing arts fostered in Japan while absorbing cultural elements from the Asian Continent, and has preserved and handed down those performing arts so that they can give us suggestions about what those performing arts looked like in olden times. In some senses, I believe, folk performing arts handed down in provincial areas in Japan look more like what they were at their starting point than those in the national centers do. Meanwhile, however, the centralized national governments played an important role in collecting various performing arts, songs and dances from the continent and domestic provincial areas, while trying to beautify and stylize those artistic elements during their process of further centralizing and strengthening themselves. The rich cultural activities of singing, dancing, performing arts, and theatrical arts have helped safeguard, liven up, and foster the lives of people.

Our joint research team held six sessions.

At the first research meeting, we as members of the joint research team discussed and decided on order of presentations, and the themes and subjects of the presentations, and determined that one or more members would present their research findings at each research meeting. The themes that we discussed first of all included thoughts about the “body” found in the history of folk performing arts; the roles of performers’ bodies; the relationship between training, preparation, and improvisation; the role of the bodies of individual performers and company performers; differences between the bodies of amateur performers and professional performers, and the significance of the differences; and “laughter” expressed in words and by bodies. We defined our research themes through active exchanges of questions and answers, and open discussions, while some members pointed out problems with the themes.

While the subsequent research meetings progressed in line with the historical process as long as possible, we avoided fixing particular borders between eras or fields to ensure that participating members as experts in different eras and fields could have open discussions while placing importance on periodizations. I believe that the process of eliminating and overcoming prejudices and stereotypes while gradually shifting the focuses of members’ knowledge and images to bridge the gap between them can be viewed as an achievement of interdisciplinary joint research.

The second meeting was dedicated to discussions on the “bodies” of actors/actresses, performers, dancers, etc. in the traditional theater. For this purpose, we examined Zeami’s theory about Nohgaku, where his heightened awareness of bodies can be found, subsequent theories about Nohgaku and performing arts, and the corporeality of performers expressed in Noh and Kyōgen dramas. Focusing on role-playing and *yūgen*, and the bodies of performers and characters, we discussed medieval thought about bodies, performers’ bodily expressions in contemporary Nohgaku, and even actual performances.

The third meeting focused on the early modern theater. To consider the bodies and expressions of Kabuki actors and their particularity in various settings, from *furyū* (group dances), *nenbutsu* (prayer) dances, early Kabuki dances, and dances performed on stage, to *monomane* (role-playing), we began by examining the bodies of Kabuki actors depicted by *shibai e* and *yakusha e* (woodblock prints depicting theatrical scenes and Kabuki actors), examples of the bodies of actors playing the roles of boys and women, body movements to the accompaniment of Kabuki music, puppets in the Bunraku puppet theater, and a comparison between puppets and actors moving to the accompaniment of *gidayū* storytelling and its music (and their Kabuki adaptation). At the level of written plays, we also explored the view on the human body in the early modern theater, focusing on the view on the human body seen in *jōruri* works by Chikamatsu Monzaemon, and the bodies of puppets.

At the fourth meeting, we analyzed thoughts about “bodies” found in the history of folk performing arts, the roles of bodies in popular Kagura and festivals as the archetypes of folk performing arts, and performers’ physical training and preparedness, and then paid attention to not only regional differences but also historical changes due to modernization and other factors. We also took up the theme of dolls/puppets again, which covered a wide range of topics, from techniques in operating *karakuri ningyō* (mechanical dolls) and *tezuma ningyō* (manually

operated dolls), which are traditions originating in early modern times, to the latest multimedia phenomena with virtual “dolls” created through contemporary visual culture.

The fifth meeting was dedicated to the theme of bodies seen from the perspective of comparative studies of the theater. We examined Japanese people’s first encounter with an outer world (Europe), traditional Japanese performing arts and the art of tea ceremonies seen from the perspectives of *nanbanjin* (Europeans who visited Japan from the late 16th century onward), differences between Japan and Europe in terms of the theater, music, performing arts, views on bodies, etc., which are found in the Europeans’ reaction to those elements in Japan, and the relationship between direction and bodies in early-modern Kabuki. In addition, focusing on “bodies” in the ever-changing modern and contemporary Japanese theater, and dancing styles such as *buyō*, *shin buyō* and modern dance, we discussed differences between the views on bodies in modern times, which marked a turning point, and those in the traditional Japanese theater.

At the sixth meeting, we analyzed artistic rebellion through the “body” and the “flesh” in post-WWII Japan, issues about new body revolution led by Tatsumi Hijikata and other *butoh* performers, and prominent works by theater people and *butoh* performers. In post-WWII Japan, issues about the “flesh” itself were given key importance in the theatrical world. It is thought that leaders in this field went back to the traditional Japanese mode of bodies that had been nurtured in popular performing arts and farming since ancient times, while featuring violent and even grotesque body movements with sensual charms, to shed new light on the relationship between life and death.

The scope of our discussions about a future vision covered the latest trends in the body/flesh in contemporary theater and dances, the creation of philosophies about dolls and artificial bodies equivalent to the body/flesh, the roles that robots and androids play in dramas written and directed by Oriza Hirata in particular, and even characters in the virtual world (such as Hatsune Miku).

Based on the above-mentioned issues, we conducted research activities to shed new light on what the body means to Japanese people, building on the traditional theater’s view on the body to consider a new mode of the flesh unique to modern and contemporary times, and the creation and development of the roles of, and philosophies about, dolls and artificial bodies equivalent to the flesh. Traditional Japanese performing arts have been unique in that bodies had possibilities of transforming themselves into any kinds of things, and performers acting as characters built their own bodies in suitable forms for the characters, and established a structure of styles. It seems that performers aim to resonate with the audience through the flow of energies and breaths while dancing to represent kaleidoscopic transformations, and achieve communication through the unique charms of dances using body language. By contrast, the modern Japanese theater and especially *shingeki*, which have been oriented toward Western theatrical arts, have to adopt a play-focused style of drama, where actors/actresses perform as characters through words, which take a vital part in this theatrical style, in conformity with the play. Trying to remain loyal to the conceptual world created by the playwright while tackling the setting of the play, the bodies of actors/actresses are forced into subordinate positions in relation to the setting and characters. Moreover, in modern dramas, focus is placed on the inner worlds of characters, so their bodies function just as visual representations of those inner worlds,

suggesting a completely different view on human beings from those found in other theatrical styles.

Our research meetings mainly contained presentations, Q & A sessions, and discussions, and dealt only quickly with visual materials, in addition to literary materials. Although our joint research may not be described as very original in terms of both themes and methods, it included comprehensive, interdisciplinary approaches, such as ones based on comparative studies of cultures, which are suitable for the tradition of Nichibunken. I believe that the theme we tackled helped reveal the essence of theatrical arts.

Anyway, I understand that this joint research was the first attempt to tackle various issues in this field from a wide variety of perspectives using a wide range of methods with the participation of experts in diverse fields, and introduce these issues to other experts and general readers.

From fall 2018, I began to edit articles written by members of the joint research team, and a collection of the articles was scheduled to be published as a volume of the Nichibunken Japanese studies series by a publisher. I am very happy that the book was published in February 2019¹.

We still have many challenges yet to address and many issues yet to discuss, which will be tackled from now on.

¹ Bonaventura Ruperti, ed. 2019 *The Body in the Japanese Performing Arts—Death and Life, Puppets and Artificial Bodies* (in Japanese), Kōyō Shobō, Kyoto.