

Feminist Interventions and Intercultural Mobilities in Satoshi Miyagi's '*Othello* in *Noh* Style'

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Abstract

I shall examine the ways in which moving the excluded female body onto the *Noh* stage in this production constitutes a materialist feminist intervention both into the 'form' of historically all-male *Noh* performance, and into the 'focalisation' of Shakespeare's narrative, providing a specifically female articulation of the memory and experience of trauma. Desdemona's memory of the past becomes the dramatic plot of *Othello* re-constructed, to enact a new subject position: Desdemona's ghost. This material intervention facilitates temporal and spatial mobilities unique to intercultural performance, opening possibilities for theorising at the intersection of interculturalism and gender. *Noh* is a classical Japanese performance form from the 14th century. However, *Noh* performance only allowed male actors, so there emerges a disjunction between female character-types, and codified performances that did not involve the actual participation of female actors. Consequently, feminine identity and subjectivity is rendered always performative, an effect of the citation and repetition of formal aesthetic codes. Casting actresses intervenes in the performance history of *Noh* – particularly because the visual presentation of the actress's distinctly feminine features foregrounds the materiality of the female body on the *Noh* stage. Desdemona's ghost inhabits the multiple temporal and spatial configurations of the narrative as well as that of the *Noh* stage, allowing for a complex working-through of her trauma. The material presence of the actress intervenes in the narrative focalisation of Shakespeare's *Othello* – which concludes with the effacement and silencing of Desdemona's agency and voice through death. By fracturing the temporality of Shakespeare's *Othello* narrative, this intercultural *Noh* performance mobilises and re-constructs the working-through of traumatised female subjectivity as taking place in the present, shifting narrative authority to Desdemona's ghost. The narrative is now focalised through her perspective as *shite*, the primary character in *Noh*, and is articulated in her own narrative voice: she is effectively wresting her narrative voice and agency from Shakespeare's text in this intercultural performance.

1 I shall examine the ways in which moving the historically excluded female body onto the *Noh* stage in Satoshi Miyagi's "*Othello* in *Noh* Style" (2005-2006), available on *The Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive*¹, constitutes a contemporary materialist intervention of the feminine, both into the 'form' of historically all-male *Noh* performance, and into the 'focalisation' of Shakespeare's narrative. This intervention allows for a specifically female articulation of traumatic memory and experience – which in turn stages an intervention into the gender politics in both Shakespeare's *Othello* narrative, and in the performance history of *Noh* theatre. This is not to suggest a dichotomous distinction between performance forms and narrative focalisation; rather, this production becomes a site through which to examine the

¹ All images in the article have been obtained from this archive.

ways in which contemporary intercultural performance stages the negotiation between gender and power in relation to both the cultural capital of the Shakespearean text, and the “homosocial and patriarchal” structure of *Noh* theatre (Geilhorn 36). In this production, Desdemona’s memory of the past is effectively the dramatic plot of *Othello* re-constructed, so that a new subject position can be mobilised in relation to both Shakespeare’s narrative as well as the dramatic structure and conventions of *Mugen Noh*: the ghostly yet distinctly embodied female subjectivity of Desdemona’s ghost. This material intervention – both into Shakespeare’s narrative and into *Noh* performance – facilitates temporal and spatial mobilities unique to intercultural performance, and opens possibilities for theorising at the intersections of interculturalism and gender.

2 The plot of the play is as follows: a travelling monk from Venice arrives in Cyprus, and encounters four female jug bearers. The monk asks after the story of the place, and one of them emerges, revealing herself to be the ghost of Desdemona. She recounts the narrative of Shakespeare’s *Othello* briefly, and her narrative is interspersed with enactments of the *Othello* plot, particularly the scenes in which Iago is manipulating Othello. The play concludes with Desdemona performing an extended dance sequence, as she gradually recedes from the stage.

3 Miyagi’s decision to foreground the material presence of the female actor on the *Noh* stage alters both Shakespeare’s narrative and the conventions of *Noh* drama. In Miyagi’s production, the essence of the Shakespearean narrative of *Othello* previously encountered by the audience is presented in the form of *Mugen Noh* – which itself is shown to be adaptive according to certain parameters, such as Miyagi’s gendered casting decision. Miyagi’s decision to cast female actors must be considered in relation to both the performance history of *Noh* theatre, and to the notion of feminine subjectivity in Shakespeare’s play. *Noh* is a classical all-male Japanese performance form that developed from sacred rituals and festivals in the fourteenth century, and has been historically preserved and performed according to highly codified conventions, even as its contemporary manifestations in performance remain deeply inscribed within and concerned about the historicity of its form and themes (Komparu xv). *Noh* plays were historically performed in a five-part cycle – and *Mugen Noh* – to which Miyagi’s production is most closely associated – is a type of *Noh* play about ghosts and supernatural figures in the main role of *shite*. Temporality is conventionally non-linear in *Mugen Noh*, and the play progresses through accounts of prior events given by the *shite*, the primary character, to the *waki*, the character who functions as the auditor and the mediator between the audience and the *shite*. In this production, Desdemona’s ghost is the *shite*, and

the *waki* is a monk who has travelled from Venice to Cyprus very much after the events in Shakespeare's *Othello*.

4 Working in intercultural theatre inevitably involves working from within the interstices: between text and performance, and between cultures. According to Yong Li Lan, the intercultural performance of Shakespeare is thought to be “a reproduction of the play in non-Western performance conventions, as a means of exploring another culture’s relationship to the culture represented by the Shakespearean classic text and its authority” (527). Multiple confrontations take place in each intercultural performance, within and among dramatic texts, performance forms, and cultural histories and relations, so that both text and performance have to be mobilised and placed in relation to each other in order to examine the specific ideological and aesthetic relationship each performance enacts in relation to Shakespeare’s text. The malleability (or mobility) of the *Othello* narrative renders it open to appropriation through intertextuality and through intercultural performance in this production: it is shown to be continuously evoked, altered, and reworked across cultural and historical territories and boundaries. Julie Sanders observes that any act of appropriation facilitates a “journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain” (26), and the journey in Miyagi’s production involves epistemological, cultural, and ideological shifts away from the conventions of Western realism in the history of Shakespearean performance, towards the conventions of Japanese *Mugen Noh* performance – while simultaneously acknowledging the textual and performative processes and legacies through which Shakespeare’s *Othello* as “source text” informs and inflects Miyagi’s “cultural product and domain” (Sanders 26).

5 Initially, scholarship on intercultural theatre had not considered the relationship between intercultural theatrical performance and theories of gender. In writing about intercultural theatre, Patrice Pavis limits his approach to aesthetic considerations of performance forms, insofar as it conceived as “the exchange or reciprocal influence of theatre practices...as a crucible in which performance techniques are tested against and amalgamated with the techniques that receive and fashion them” (2). Crucially, he goes on to stress that “one should avoid turning intercultural theatre into a vague terrain for comparing themes of cultural identities...or for contrasting ways of thinking” (2). Similarly, in writing about the spectatorship of intercultural theatre, Yong considers how a spectator might relate to “what resists access as the foreign in a performance” (530). However, the “foreign” is conceived in terms of cultural identity, to the exclusion of other categories of identity such as gender and sexuality – and therefore, to the exclusion of other forms of domination and oppression or

othering. Meanwhile, as Laura Lengel and John T. Warren observe in their Introduction to the edited collection, *Casting Gender: Women and Performance in Intercultural Context*, while much work has been done to address the role of women in Western theatre², “in studies of performance, intercultural performance, and intercultural communication, there is a lack of scholarship by and about women” (5). What emerges, then, is a parallel pattern within both intercultural theatre and feminism, of not taking the other into sufficient account - and thereby neglecting the productive discourse that might be generated at their intersections with each other in considering the politics of identities as performed and received in theatrical performance. More recently, however, scholars have begun to consider “the cultural processes underlying women and performance in intercultural contexts”, particularly in relation to gendered power relations and the material lived experiences of women (Lengel and Warren 9).

6 Nevertheless, as Arya Madhavan notes, the investigation of women’s roles in Asian performance practices “still remains marginalised” and underdeveloped³, such that addressing “a lack of discourse constructing and generating multiple female narratives within the wider Asian performance strands” is becoming an increasingly urgent imperative in theatre scholarship (346)⁴. In her article on women in Asian theatrical traditions, Madhavan contemplates the possibilities offered by “female intercultural theatre forms”, which “may not share the conceptual paradigms of intercultural theatre practice” such as those offered by Pavis (349). However, while feminist performance scholars call for conceptual, political, and aesthetic paradigms that might account for women’s participation and contribution to intercultural theatre in Asia, the very contours of a critical apparatus are disparate and only beginning to emerge, that might account for these diverse theatrical endeavours⁵. In response, this paper is part of a larger project in which I shall attempt to uncover the epistemological, aesthetic, social, and political stakes embedded in the critical and performance praxes of intercultural Shakespeare in Asia, particularly concerning women’s participation in theatrical

² See Sue Ellen-Case *Feminism and Theatre* (reissued 2008); Elaine Aston *Feminist Theatre Practice: A Handbook* (1999).

³ Despite the commitment in the Introduction to “move beyond the Western-centred nature of intercultural performance and intercultural communication theory and practice by creating a forum for voices outside socio-politically dominant nations to be heard” (3), most of the chapters in *Casting Gender: Women and Performance in Intercultural Context* (2005) are based on contemporary theatrical practice in Europe and America, with barely any reference to Asian theatrical practices and contexts.

⁴ Responding to this imperative, *Women in Asian Performance: Aesthetics and Politics*, has been edited by Madhavan (2017), which addresses the historical roles of women in various Asian performance contexts, and the aesthetic and political interventions they are enacting in contemporary practice.

⁵ *Women’s Intercultural Performance*, ed. Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins (2000) is the first sustained and comprehensive attempt at providing “examples in which intercultural performance by women is refracted through culture and gender, or how the self meets the other (in terms of both gender and culture) in theatre” (2).

productions in various roles and capacities, as well as the (re-)presentation of feminine subjectivities – stakes that may be underrepresented or elided when the current critical preoccupation in intercultural scholarship remains centred on the dimension of cultural identity. In “*Othello* in *Noh* Style”, various strategies of text and performance come together to create an intercultural performance that allows for interventions into the gender politics problematised in both Shakespeare’s narrative and in *Noh* theatre. I hope to critically engage with both Western feminist performance criticism, and with Asian intercultural performances of Shakespeare, in order to offer possibilities towards invoking an intercultural feminist perspective. This perspective must necessarily attend to the intersections between gender and culture, as the nexus between two domains not only of identity, but as discursive and representational categories.

7 On the one hand, the ‘formal’ presence of Desdemona’s ghost as a character in *Mugen Noh* is accounted for by the fact that the *Noh* canon contained five categories, one of which was the Woman Play, or *kazura mono* (“wig pieces”), so called because the male actor playing the female character would have to wear a wig (Komparu 36). Crucially, *Noh* performance only allowed for the presence of male actors on stage; only wigs, masks and robes indicate a female character. As a result, there emerges a disjunction between the formal demands of *Noh* for female character-types, and codified performances of these character-types that did not involve the actual participation of female actors. Even in the present day, while there are a few women who are allowed to perform *Noh*, they are very much a minority: in an article for the *Japan Times*, Eric Prideaux notes that there are “some 250 female *Noh* professionals nationwide”, which comprises “a sixth of the total of 1,540” professional practitioners (11th April 2004). Moreover, women are often excluded from access to professional training, as well as the symbolic social network “modelled on the patriarchic (sic.) family system (*ie seido*)” (Geilhorn 31). For instance, women are not allowed to participate in certain rituals within the *Noh* schools due to the historical concept of *kegare* (“defilement”) associated with biological processes of menstruation and childbirth. Consequently, feminine identity and subjectivity is rendered as always performative, an effect of the citation and repetition of formal performance codes of *Noh*. In response to this, Takakuwa Yoko asks whether the putting on of “the theatrical mask of womanliness” by the opposite sex in all-male theatrical traditions can ever fulfil female identity sufficiently (202), or whether femininity can only ever be a series of performed attributes and behaviours in this non-realist theatrical form, and not an essential identity category, as is often expected in Western realism.

8 Hence, Miyagi's decision to cast actresses in the roles of both *waki*, and especially *shite*, can be said to intervene in the performance history of *Noh* theatre – particularly because of the uninhibited visual presentation of the material embodiment of the lead actress, Mikari's, distinctly feminine features. At once liminal and ghostly, Mikari is also profoundly embodied and female. For instance, she does not wear a mask for the role, unlike most *shite* actors. Instead, the feminine features of her face are highlighted by the application of make-up: the contours of the eyes are accentuated with strong black eyeliner and sparkling eyeshadow, which also contrasts with the dim lighting on the stage; her lips are painted a sensuous red, and the whiteness of her skin is emphasised, in line with both Shakespeare's reference to Desdemona as a "white ewe" (*Oth.* 1.1.94-95), as well as with the *haiku* by Natsume Soseki, appears on the screen during the performance: "A chrysanthemum whiter than snow...". Consequently, even when her expressions are inscrutable and masklike, the vivid presentation of Mikari's distinctly feminine features foregrounds the materiality of the actress's body in this particular *Noh* performance (Fig.1).



Fig.1 The use of make-up

Similarly, the costume design by Takahashi Kayo emphasises the slightness of Mikari's waist and highlights the languid movements of her figure on stage (Fig.2).



Fig. 2 The various costumes worn by the *shite*

Therefore, the visual presentation of make-up and costumes, as well as the lack of masks for the female characters in Miyagi's production, all serve to draw attention to the distinctiveness of female corporeality. For a classical form like *Noh*, where the concept of character is as conventional archetype, this intercultural production visually foregrounds the corporeality of the female *shite*, and while she cannot quite be conceived as an individuated character in the style of Western realism, her material presence certainly constitutes an intervention of the feminine into the performance history of *Noh* theatre. In this way, therefore, the body of the woman can be read as a corporeal, embodied text that intervenes in and complicates both the history of Shakespearean performance and dramatic criticism, as well as that of *Noh* theatre.

9 Mikari's physical presence on stage as the ghost of Desdemona is also laden with 'symbolic' purpose for both text and performance, insofar as the narrative of trauma in Shakespeare is now focalised through her perspective as the *shite*. Kunio Komparu explains

that the *shite* “not only serves the practical function of showing a series of events, but also mediates a shared dramatic experience, guiding the consciousness of the audience as the imaginary symbol dominating the *Noh* space” (157-8). At the beginning of the production, the *waki* encounters a group of four female jug-bearers, from which the individuated subjectivity of Desdemona’s ghost emerges as both narrator and spectator of her own trauma, guiding the consciousness of the audience towards a re-construction and a working through of her traumatic death and subsequent afterlife. This is how the opening scene is described by the *waki*, who enters into the present moment of performance, which is also set in the aftermath of events in Shakespeare:

MONK

I am a traveller from Venice.

I have visited all the famous sites of the Mediterranean except for one, Cyprus.

...

Under the light from the setting sun the dense olive mountains on the left draw towards the shore.

The deep blue Mediterranean Sea is on the right.

The two complement each other perfectly.

The landscape of Botticelli’s masterpiece must be like this.

The crisp shadows of the trees captured in the sea forever.

10 In conjunction with the vivid language used in the opening scene, which establishes the spatial setting as that of Cyprus, the *mise-en-scène* evokes a haunted atmosphere of “shadows” and “the setting sun”, with barely any light on stage, so that the white dresses of the jug-bearing women appear translucent. Such is the present in which the travelling-monk *waki* encounters the ghost-*shite*. There is an aura of mysticism – of traces of things that have already happened in the past, prior to the narrative events unfolding on stage – which immediately shrouds the audience’s first encounter with this *Mugen Noh* production and its characters. In this way, therefore, Miyagi’s production is “doubly haunted”, since “the pre-existing story is known not only to the audience” through the historical processes of transmission of Shakespeare’s narrative, but also through “the central figure of the play, who now looks back upon it as a spirit”, in this case the spirit of Desdemona’s ghost as *shite*, whose memories form the substance and content of the production (Carlson 20). The substance of the play is eventually revealed to be a re-enactment of Desdemona’s memory as contained within the myth of *Othello*, focalised through her perspective and articulated in her own narrative voice.

11 The intercultural relationship between Shakespeare's text and *Noh* performance in "Othello in *Noh* Style" is enacted through the appropriation of Shakespeare's tragic narrative as Desdemona's personal history, so that the narrative is "relocated" not only into a new social and cultural geography – that of contemporary Japan – but also into a different temporal frame, as it is displaced into the past within this contemporary *Noh* performance. This narrative allows for a complex intervention in the temporality of the plot of Shakespeare's *Othello* – which, as we know, concludes with the ultimate effacement and silencing of Desdemona's feminine agency and voice through death. By fracturing the temporality of Shakespeare's *Othello* narrative in order to make it serve as personal and mythic history, this *Mugen Noh* performance is able to mobilise and re-construct the working-through of traumatised female subjectivity as taking place in the present, shifting narrative authority and focalisation back to the female ghost. The narrative of trauma is now focalised through her perspective as *shite*, the primary character in *Noh*, and is articulated in her own narrative voice: she is effectively reclaiming her identity and wresting back her narrative voice and agency from Shakespeare's text, so that the "truth may be revealed" from her subjective perspective in the present moment of performance.

12 The dramatic structure of *Mugen Noh* is profoundly concerned about temporality: "the time of right now is interrupted...by memories of the past, and this creates a 'present' that corresponds to our own consciousness and that carries forward the dramatic action" (Komparu 77). In Miyagi's play, narratives of both past and present are shown to be contained within the performance of *Noh* in ways that reveal the extent to which time itself is gendered through performance. The narrative provided for by Desdemona's ghost in the present is interspersed with the re-enactment of anterior events in Shakespeare by male actors playing Othello and Iago, accompanied by a male chorus (Fig. 3). The stage becomes brightly lit with the first appearance of the male actors, whose presentation of masculine military authority harks back to the martial past of Cyprus in Shakespeare. In contrast to the soft, languid movements of the female actors in the previous scene where Desdemona introduces herself to the monk, the dynamic, angular, and tightly coordinated dancing of the male actors, accompanied by the strong rhythmic beating of the drums, serves to heighten the performance of masculinity in this martial scene, where the Venetians are shown to have 'captured' the island of Cyprus. The abrupt change in musical rhythm and volume, as well as the increased dynamism in movement, renders the juxtaposition between past and present in the two scenes even more apparent not only in terms of atmosphere, but also in terms of rhythm. *Noh* is governed by the *jo-ha-kyu* rhythm: *jo* refers to the beginning, signalled by a

non-beat; *ha* means break or ruin, suggesting “the destruction of an existing state”; finally, *kyu* means “fast”, indicating the speed of the rhythm that signals the end of the play (Komparu 25): the scene with the male performers marks a *ha* rupture in the rhythm and temporality of the opening scene.



Fig. 3 The *ai-kyogen*, with Othello in the foreground, and the ghost of Desdemona stage right

13 Structurally, this can be accounted for as the *ai-kyogen* segment in classical *Noh*, which is an interlude between the two parts of the entire play. Significantly, the *ai-kyogen* is enacted to account for the *shite*'s narrative. Interestingly, Komparu notes how typically, the *ai-kyogen* actor “introduces a period of real time into the fantasy time by coming on as a person in the present” (163). However, this principle is inverted in Miyagi's production: instead of “coming on as (people) in the present”, Iago and Othello are male figures relegated to and framed by Desdemona's past, so that the *ai-kyogen* effectively constitutes a re-enactment and re-construction of anteriority, of the masculine and martial past that is Shakespeare's *Othello*, which in turn is rendered as the substance of the ghost of Desdemona's memory. Instead, the time of the present belongs to the feminine, and is inhabited by the bodily presence of female actors.

14 When it comes to spatial mobility, Miyagi incorporates certain dramaturgical strategies to distinguish the temporal ordering of space in the production, evoking both the history and the present of Cyprus. Desdemona's ghost is able to mobilise and occupy the multiple temporal and spatial configurations of the narrative as well as that of the *Noh* stage, allowing for a complex working-through of her trauma. As *shite*, she is able to mobilise and physically negotiate spatial possibilities on the *Noh* stage in two ways: first, in her liminal

presence as both narrator of her trauma on the main stage, and second, as a spectator watching anterior events that lead to her trauma, at the threshold of the *Noh* passageway, called the *hashigakari*. This spatial mobility allows for her liminal presence in the production, perceptibility visible – with the ghostly capacity to be present everywhere and at all times.

15 Komparu explains that the *hashigakari*, the bridge on the *Noh* stage, symbolically evoked “time-transcending journeys between this world and the other world of ghosts and spirits” (124). As this liminality is shown to be inherent to the performance of *Noh*, Desdemona’s ghost is able to occupy the multiple temporal and spatial configurations of the narrative as well as that of the *Noh* stage in the capacity of *shite*, allowing for a complex working-through of her personal experience of trauma. When the re-enactment of the narrative takes place through the the male characters on the main stage, for example, the figure of Desdemona’s ghost recedes to the *hashigakari* passageway, by the side of the stage which is barely lit – yet her liminal presence still remains perceptibly visible, endowed with the ghostly capacity to be present everywhere and at all times.

16 The liminal yet profoundly embodied presence of Desdemona’s ghost is rendered manifestly corporeal in the *buyoh* dance she performs at the resolution of the play, as a physicalised act of repeating and working through her trauma on stage, which is shown to intervene in both the myth of Shakespeare’s narrative, as well as in the rhythmic conventions of *Noh* performance. Much like the figure of the ghost, trauma is “unassimilable, not being known in the first instance”, according to Cathy Caruth (181): both have the capacity to transcend and to move beyond categories of understanding and experience. Similarly, the performance of *buyoh* by Desdemona’s ghost evokes the in-betweenness of feminine trauma: simultaneously embodied yet disembodied, verbal yet pre-verbal, visually arresting yet functional, offering the play a formal resolution, yet suggesting cyclical recurrence. The dance gradually becomes a macabre re-enactment of Othello’s stifling of Desdemona in Shakespeare, taking the form of self-strangulation, as an armoured gauntlet is fastened on Desdemona’s right hand to signify the hand of Othello (Fig.4).



Fig. 4 The (self-) strangulation of Desdemona

In effect, the disembodied ghost of Desdemona becomes two bodies at once, that of Othello and that of Desdemona herself. Formally, the dance also intervenes in the *jo-ha-kyu* rhythm of *Noh*, the conventions of which have been previously discussed. The performance of *buyoh* by Desdemona's ghost at once arrests and suspends the *kyu* pacing of the play, which is meant to indicate the fast, dynamic rhythm as the *Noh* play moves towards resolution. Instead, the dance directs and focuses the visual attention of the audience towards her bodily movements, emphasising both female corporeality and offering the *Noh* stage as a site through which the traumatic myth of Shakespeare's *Othello* can be worked through and negotiated. Consequently, the dance becomes an event of rupture, as the female subject enacts the simultaneous process of her own corporeal destruction, and spiritual creation.

17 Yet for all the symbolic possibilities that this act offers towards cathartic resolution, as it might have done in Western tragedy, there is no final sense of closure and reconciliation in this *Noh* production; rather, as Desdemona silently moves back into the *hashigakari* afterwards, the traumatic haunting can be said to continue relentlessly on – and beyond – the *Noh* stage, as the myth of Shakespeare's *Othello* narrative is left unresolved and open to further re-iterations and appropriations in intercultural theatrical practice. As Marvin Carlson writes, “all theatrical cultures have recognised...this ghostly quality, this sense of coming back in the theatre, and so the relationships between theatre and cultural memory are deep and complex” (2). This ambivalent conclusion is also perhaps indicative of both the possibilities and the precarity of intercultural feminist theatre: on the one hand, Madhavan asserts that “modern theatre provides a well-deserved respite for Asian women to experience with exciting new material and spaces hitherto unavailable to them” (349), yet in the case of *Noh* theatre in Japan specifically, Barbara Geilhorn cautions that “all-female *Noh* bears the

risk of self-marginalisation”, insofar as it risks “widening the perceived gap between a male and female aesthetic” (33) – as indeed, the gendered construction of temporality in this production indicates. Nevertheless, various strategies of text and performance have come together in “*Othello* in *Noh* Style” to create an intercultural dramaturgy that allows for interventions into the gender politics formally and symbolically problematised in both Shakespeare’s narrative and in *Noh* theatre, allowing for a hybrid form to emerge that is neither fully Shakespeare(an), nor fully *Noh* – that nevertheless remains haunted by traces of a fraught cultural history and memory in the midst of ongoing cross-cultural and transnational encounters.

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