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Hanjo and Hell Screen

Yukio Mishima
Stone Crabs Theatre
Oval House Theatre
(2009)

Both these plays are Mishima's reworking of older stories: the first a fifteenth-century Noh play by Zeama based on an older Chinese story and the second a story by Akutagawa, itself originating in a thirteenth-century folktale. Although Mishima put them into modern dress they keep some of the formality of their earlier origins and this is reflected in these productions. They are very much the work of a novelist attempting to become a dramatist with speeches which could be the first person narrations and descriptive passages of a book. Some of the dialogue may seem artificial to a British ear but perhaps fitted more naturally into Japanese theatrical tradition at the time Mishima wrote them in the 1950s.

They are very stylishly mounted. Just as the Japanese like to present their food carefully arranged and purchases beautifully wrapped, designer Wai-Yin Kwok has given them a very elegant setting and Dinah Mullen has furnished them with a sound score that is very supportive.

For *Hanjo*, which opens this double bill, there is a twelve-mat tatami floor around which fallen maple leaves cover the stage. Behind them is a screen which reinterprets the traditional painted paper or lacquered wood with a video projection (by James Scott) of a stylized branch whose red leaves being to fall, one by one, as the play progresses. The same autumn leaf motif is carried on a stool to one side of the stage, beyond the room marked out by mats, and on the kimono of a young woman who is sitting on it singing a traditional song in Japanese and then performing a dance with a fan. The trailing skirt of her kimono is not as worn today but suggests an earlier period or the style of Kabuki theatre. This prepares us for an ancient story but into the room now comes a very different woman carrying an artist's portfolio. She not only wears modern dress but trousers, visibly held up by braces, which, with her severe hairstyle, makes her look very masculine.

The artist is Jitsuko, strikingly played by Meg Kubota, who reads a passage from a newspaper describing a young woman who waits on a railway station platform inspecting the face of every male arrival. She cuts out the article and then scissors it into tiny pieces - suggestive of a performance piece by Yoko Ono - and recounts how she met a beautiful geisha who had become deranged waiting for a lover to whom she was committed after exchanging fans. She bought out the geisha's contract and brought her to this town. It is the same woman, the one we have already seen. She is in love with her, and with her beauty and nakedness that she wants to draw. This is Hanako, who believes her lover will come and find her and insists on waiting. Masayo Okayasu plays her as stubborn in her refusal to cooperate in Jitsuko's plans and enclosed in her own world.

What will happen if the lover Yoshio turns up? And he does after a three year absence: a returning soldier played en travestie by Ecco Shirasaka, which emphasises the rejected lesbian attraction, while her performance suggests a boyish youthfulness that brings age as well as gender into the

equation. What happens makes one think both about the nature of obsessive love, on how love changes and about the way in which the love object exists in the mind of the lover.

In *Hanjo* much of Frank Figueirado's production echoes the formality of the writing but it has a directness that keeps you interested in the story. Kwonge Loke has a more difficult job directing *Hell Screen*, for its structure uses chorus narration, spectacular horror (here given a danced treatment) and melodramatic confrontation. It is not easy to make these blend together without the stylisation of Kabuki or Noh, though again the formal setting helps with the central tatami mats removed to become a pool scattered with pebbles and the screen turned around and drawn open as two shoji screens

In both plays, but in *Hell Screen* especially, the text seems consciously literary. Is this Mishima's intention or perhaps a problem of too precise a translation which has not sufficiently adapted to normal speech patterns? The result was some naturalistic acting conflicting with some rather stilted delivery on the part of the British actors, to which was added the difficulty of understanding those performers with foreign stresses and speech patterns.

Loke succeeds most when he emphasises the formal structure in this story of an artist commissioned to paint a screen depicting Hell. The painter (Rufus Graham) claims only to be able to paint from life, so tortures his models and finally asks for an immolation. The Lord commissioning him (Seamus Newham) will have him killed if he does not complete it. How can his daughter Tsuyukusa (Yuka You-Ri), an attendant upon the Lord's wife, save him? There is a way - but thankfully we witness it in Yamanaka's choreography.

These plays about two artists and different kinds of love are an interesting mid twentieth-century reworking of a very formal kind of theatre and clearly reflect Mishima's obsessions with traditional ideology, though their effect is likely to make us question it.

At Oval House theatre until 4th July 2009, this production is part of Japan-Uk 150

Reviewer: Howard Loxton