

***A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Inoue Takāki, Nissay Theatre, Tokyo, 20 September 2022, mid stalls, centre.**

"If we shadows have *offended*,
Think but this, and all is *mended*,
That you have but slumber'd here,
While these visions did appear,
And this *weak and idle* theme,
No more yielding but a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend,
If you pardon, we will mend.
Else the Puck a liar call.
Give me your hands, if we be friends,
And the Robin shall *restore amends*" (emphasis mine).

I am in the theatre hearing these lines from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, translated into Japanese by the famed scholar-translator Kawai Shoichiro. The day before, I had seen Kawai share his approaches to translating Shakespeare, including the text for this production. He spoke with conviction about his method of sublimating himself to Shakespeare, especially his rhythms and rhymes - the latter are particularly strong in Puck's closing speech. This might be understood as a source text-oriented approach to translation, emphasising fidelity to the source-text as perceived by the translator, usually contrasted with target-oriented translation i.e. working to the needs of its audience. However, in practice much translation works somewhere on the continuum between these extremes. 'Kept' is Kawai's preferred opposite to 'lost', he explained to the Found in Translation conference (held at Waseda University, Tokyo, in September 2022). So, for Kawai, an antonymic version of 'lost in translation' would be 'kept in translation'. Much of what follows in this review makes a possibly flawed assumption, based on Kawai's presentation, that much of Shakespeare's text was 'kept' in making this script. As I speak little Japanese, and there were no subtitles, the appropriate, Shakespearean English lines ran in my mind as I (mostly) uncomprehendingly heard the Japanese lines and watched the action.

The translation of the lines above is spoken by Puck, played as a child who can't walk by a boy with no known impairment (Kato Gaku). This practice is also known as 'crip drag' or 'cripping up', a reappropriation of the pejorative term by disability scholars. Some disability rights activists argue that this practice should be viewed as equally offensive to 'blacking up' (Ryan). They denounce scenes like the following, which frame this production's action: as Puck, Gaku wheeled himself centre stage, used his hands labouredly to manipulate his feet out of the wheelchair, repeatedly tried to stand up but fell to the floor, while sad Gymnopédie-like piano music played. Then, his Puck discovered powers of flight and joined a band of fairy children floating, flitting and tumbling mid-air, before being given his mission by Oberon (see Daniel Gallimore's article earlier in this issue for the tradition of Tokyo *Dream's* 'obsession with fairy magic'). As the woods, the carnival period, and his magic deserted him, his character tried repeatedly to heave himself upright, managing only to get his head and shoulders high enough to speak the lines with his face to the audience. He was evidently distraught. Lysander (Takachi Yugo) cradled him and they whispered, heads together, before Nick Bottom (Ukaji Takeshi) carried him offstage.

The use of Puck's scenes by the director, Inoue Takāki, to frame this 'dream' as a disabled boy's fleeting fantasy of a miracle cure reminded me strongly of a sentimental, Southern gospel song of the seventies: 'A Crippled Boy's Prayer'. It portrays a boy in a wheelchair, watching other children running around and playing, plaintively describing his faith that:

'I won't be a crippled boy in Heaven/
I know my wings will sail through the air/
I can run and play with/
All the other children/
There will be no crippled boys up there'.

These lyrics express traditional, Christian attitudes to disability as requiring divine intervention, achieved either through a miracle or, through patient life and death, attaining heaven (although not a topic of this song, religious or moral models of disability also hold that impairment has a divine purpose, such as punishment for a wrong done by the person or one of their forbears). The narrator of this song, a young wheelchair user, can be understood as wishing his life away – as wishing he were dead – rather than live with his disability. Such plot points are still common in the international film industry. For example, the blockbuster *Me Before You*, familiar to audiences internationally, including in Japan, attracted sustained criticism from disability activists for perpetuating the popular 'bury your disabled' trope (a better-known equivalent 'bury your gays' exists in queer studies). At the very least, the boy in this song puts all his hopes for enjoyment in a curative afterlife.

This song is half-a-century old, but *still*, in this production, a character with a disability is shown as tragic, unable to experience a sense of fulfilment except through a fantasy of being magically healed. This Puck demonstrates that we still overwhelmingly show people with an impairment as *dis-abled*, literally *not* able, *unable*, *helpless*: all words that express negativity and lack. This Puck demonstrates that we still fail to show people with disabilities as full human beings who bring a range of abilities, talents and contributions to the world. Many societies internationally still prefer to create stories where people with disabilities are pitied and pitiable, to telling narratives of people with disabilities who have rich, meaningful, and fulfilling lives. This is a problem because these representations are not hermetically sealed within the auditorium or television screen. Rather, media effects theory holds that such representations shape actual attitudes towards, and the real experiences of, people with disabilities in society. Moreover, such cultural narratives, underpinning and perpetuated by this production, continue to speak over people with disabilities who don't feel sorry for themselves and who emphatically broadcast this (Wright). In the words of @grindmastrgrant, a Twitter user with disabilities remonstrating with existing representations of his disability in the aforementioned film, "I'm not your inspiration porn and I'm not a thing to be pitied or ... to make the audience cry".

During the curtain call, the mostly young, female, Tokyoite audience wave wildly at the child actor as he takes his bow, perhaps elated by his 'recovery' from the disability he had just performed. I gave only 'my hands', but the largely standing ovation for this production is a reminder that responsibility for changing the representation of people with disabilities lies not just with individual directors or productions. When an audience takes up their invitation to fetishize, and to unproblematically applaud, the performance of sad-eyed, youthful, beautiful, but pitiable disability, it is complicit in perpetuating harmful

representations of the disabled body as an object of, and dependent on, charity from people without disabilities. It is complicit in denying that a body with disabilities is one that has sufficiency and value, let alone that it can be loved and celebrated – including by the person with the impairment. It is also complicit in using bodies with disabilities to feel better about themselves and their own good fortune; to feel virtuous about their own bodies and/or being sympathetic to others with bodies perceived as inferior; or to be uplifted by stories of other people's struggles and accomplishments against the odds. It is worth remembering that I am spectating outside the Japanese being spoken in the auditorium and written in the programme. There may be a line or note in Japanese, or local context of which I am ignorant, which means those with Japanese linguistic abilities and cultural sensibilities will receive this production differently and, ideally, have discerned in the production more potential for the production to critique dominant disability narratives than I could.

Besides Puck and (mostly) beyond language, there were other worrying aspects of the production in relation to cultural narratives around disability. The actor playing Robin Starveling (Pretty Ota), one of the mechanicals, is a little person (I use the terminology preferred by the activist organisation for people with dwarfism, Little People of America) and I felt uncomfortable: not about his presence, which could be inclusive, but the way his body was made to signify in the production. He was hit by more characters (usually by Bottom) than the other mechanicals, as part of the physical comedy that is often used to present their scenes. That he was repeatedly the butt of the 'joke', the target for comedic violence sits awkwardly with the fact that disabled people are disproportionately the victims of violent crime, including by perpetrators they know. In responding to such scenes, it is useful to think about whether this production is likely to encourage audiences to critique or condone this violence. I struggled to notice anything that encouraged a critical stance, but I may have missed some cues. Additionally, in a tussle with Bottom in the guise of a donkey, performed with incredible physical and technological alacrity as a slow-motion flight of the mechanicals from this terrifying sight, Starveling's ordinary clothes were torn off. The other mechanicals were somewhat in disarray, but not to this extent. Uniquely, he was revealed in neon green shorts and arm bands, trimmed with silver, perhaps as a festive wrestler – Ota also works as a professional wrestler in Japan, so perhaps the production in alluding to that through his spectacular appearance and the violence directed at him, though I did not notice much suggestion of sparring prowess, much was made of unlikeliness. People with disabilities consistently speak out against their bodies being rendered, and consumed, as spectacles, of success or not.

A short while later, Starveling plays a character in *Pyramus and Thisbe* known as 'Moonshine' or 'The man i'th' moon' (V.i.251). Here, Moonshine, 'this man, with lanthorne, dog, and bush of thorn' in Shakespeare's English, appeared with a toy dog on a leash and a lantern, wearing a crown of thorns in reference to the 'thorned bush'/'horned moon'/'lanthorne' word play in Shakespeare (V.i.237-251). He was naked, bar a loincloth and a drawn-on, caricature of a six-pack. Again, this time the spectacle of his almost naked body bore the added dimension of directors – the character Peter Quince, the production's Inoue – using it for comic irony: the smaller, often-maligned little person's body was used to portray a big, idealised, masculine physique. On director Inoue's part, this might be intended to show the ineptitude of the mechanicals in their staging of the show; or to call attention to theatre-goers' own normative, ableist ideas of the male body beautiful; but, without careful framing, it risks charges of exploitation or insensitivity being aimed at the

production. Casting and seeing people with diverse bodies on stage is important, but inequality persists if such actors never get to play roles where their divergence is not the focus. Empowering actors with disabilities to control the ways in which their bodies are used to create meaning must be prioritised by theatre companies.

There was a point during this show that I momentarily thought how well this production would tour outside Japan, with its generous and bright visuals, carefully-curated soundtrack, and ambitious blocking, satisfying sustained Japanophile appetites globally, some of which are catered to through state-led marketing strategies like 'Cool Japan'. The production had a spectacular set, with wide, punishingly steep, stone stairs, like those that often mark the entrance to a shrine or temple, also connoting the auditoria of ancient Greece in which the play is set. There were tall, straight tree trunks lining the steps which reminded me of the torii at nearby shrine, Meiji-jingu. The mechanicals were a kabuki troupe, with the actors wonderfully reproducing, perhaps affectionately parodying, this national theatre form – indeed, Oberon was played by an actor renowned for his work in kabuki – Nakamura Shinkan. The design and choreography had Puck use a folding, paper fan to spread the love potion as part of Oberon's scheming; folkloric and Shinto ceremonial garb in costuming; and wonderful movement direction drawing on multiple Japanese martial arts, theatre, and dance traditions. These include the use of *kurogo*, stage assistants dressed in dark colours, to lift the children playing the fairies, making it appear as though they are 'flying' through the air. These are the stunning, tremendously skillful aspects of the production to which I thrilled; these are the exotic/ised, alluring aspects of Japan that visitors like to notice, and that some Japanese theatre producers like foreigners to observe – in particular, I am thinking here of seeing Yukio Ninagawa's famous *Macbeth* with its set made up of a wooden temple and cherry blossom trees on tour in the UK. However, the grossly sentimental and out-moded framing of the entire play as the fleeting vision of a happier world, in which Puck's condition is magically cured, might preclude this production having such success overseas.

The old-fashioned, pathologising views that this production feeds on, and in turn perpetuates, of impairment as *disability* and lack, spectacular and comedic, might negatively affect its reception in countries where a social model of disability has been more-widely embraced. This model of disability views individuals with impairments (physical or mental) not as *inherently* disabled but as disabled *by* mainstream *society*, through the physical and intangible structures it builds, which create barriers for people with impairments and exclude them from realising their full potential. These barriers are both material and cultural. They include public architecture, vocabulary, cultural narratives and stereotypes. Additionally, social models of disability strongly contest the universal desirability of a 'fix', about which this Puck dreams. Not all people with impairments want to, or can, be 'fixed', but they are under pressure to engage with treatments that will mould them to fit society's expectations of 'normalcy' and make people without disabilities feel more comfortable around them. To quote Puck, there is huge pressure for people with bodies that may appear 'weak and idle' to be 'mended' and 'restored' – rather than for society to adapt its attitudes, physical infrastructure and social structure to be more inclusive. There are many uniquely Japanese elements of this production, many of them delicious, but the ableism this production perpetuates is not one of them. Directors like to book-end productions in ways that put their distinctive mark on Shakespeare's plays – and it can pay dividends if the approach gels with an audience. My recommendation for touring this play would be to consign this frame to history, where it can keep *crip-drag* and 1970s *pity porn* company.

Theatres, audiences and, as David Bolt and Claire Penketh recently observed, academic institutions worldwide must do more to be proactively *anti-ableist*. I am thinking here of Ibrahim X. Kendi's argument, in *How to be an Antiracist*, that it is not sufficient to be 'not racist'. Nor is it sufficient to be 'not ableist'.

When I began writing this review in September, I was ignorant of the work of Mark Bookman, a historian of disability policy and rights in Japan. I sought it out on the warm recommendation of his friends and colleagues, as I revised and presented this review to an audience at Kobe College. Mark died suddenly in Tokyo in December 2022. I dedicate this review to his memory. I hope readers will seek out his work and enable his influence to live on.

References:

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