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Archi-Cultural Interactions through the Silk Road
4th International Conference, Mukogawa Women's Univ., Nishinomiya, Japan, July 16-18,2016
Proceedings

TRADITIONAL NOH THEATRE AND ANCIENT GREEK TRAGEDY: COMPARATIVE STUDY TOWARDS A COMMON PERFORMANCE

Tsaras Giannis[1], Chrysafidis Evangelos[2], Giouzepas Dimitris[2]

[1] *Bahcesehir University, Turkey*
[2] *Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece*

Keywords: Noh theatre, ancient Greek Tragedy, hybrid theatre plays

Introduction

In 1899, Greece and Japan established diplomatic relations with various agreements. In 1999 cultural events were organized in both countries to celebrate a century of political, cultural and economic relations. Since then, there has been an intense cultural exchange that includes exhibitions, academics and theatre performances. Theatre holds an important position in the culture of both countries. Since its appearance has had a great impact in social and political life, arts and architecture. Apart from the two millennia time gap between Ancient Greek and Japanese theatre, the two theatre types offer interesting points of comparison [1]. A certain analogy can be seen in both types concerning the three elements that define every theatre play: social reaction, performance and architecture [2]; a comparison between Japanese traditional Noh theatre and ancient Greek Tragedy, would be beneficent for the study of both. It is of particular interest the production of ancient Greek plays by Japanese theatre groups, translated into Japanese but also adapted to the logic of Noh theatre, as reflected in the works of Tadashi Suzuki and Yukio Ninagawa.

Origins

Although there was an independent development under different circumstances and cultural context, both types of theatre initiated from the worship of a god, Dionysus and Shinto. The ancient Greek drama passed over to Rome stage and from there, to the first renaissance plays, influencing the western drama. The latest form of the 2nd century B.C., came in direct contact with the early forms of Indian Sanskrit theatre. Through Alexander's the Great conquers to the east, the type of Hellenistic theatre was spread, influencing Indian and Chinese drama, and eventually the traditional Noh theatre of Japan [3], although the effect of western theatre to Noh drama is considered to be significantly small in comparison with that of the native Shinto influences [4]. Pre Noh theatre includes the performances of a great number celebrating traditions including Chinese origin sangaku [5], which is considered to have had a great impact on it. Certain variations of sangaku referred to various types of performance with song and dance, along with small farce plays formed a mixture that lead to the Nogaku, both Noh and Kyogen theatre. Maintaining a main structure of drama, Noh pass all the external to drama elements to Kyogen, achieving a clear theatrical form focused on the symbolic presentation. In early Noh plays, the dance dominated over drama, as in the tragedies of Aisxilos where lyrics were more emphasized than the epic element. On the other hand, Kyogen theatre was used as an intermission between Noh acts, emphasizing in the comic element as the primary goal was to make its audience laugh. Traditionally, a Noh program includes five Noh plays with comedic Kyogen intermissions in between. Kyogen

play it is often compared to the Italian Commedia dell' Arte, due to the more realistic dialogues and a certain amount of improvisation. A straight connection can be seen though to Greek Satiric Drama, since both plays serve as an intermission to the dramatic parts. The moment that marks the very beginning of ancient Greek drama, is when Thespis, the father of Tragedy, turns and addresses to the chorus starting for the first time a dialogue within the context of a spiritual performance. This dialogue sets the beginning of a presentation of a play, instead of a representation; it first appeared in Athens of 6th century B.C.[6], and evolved to the final form of the performance: "the enrichment of poetry with image and movement" [7] at the mid of 5th century. On the contrary, Japanese theatre even from the initial form of spiritual plays, narration and forms of dialogue existed in balance with dance and music. Despite the differences, in terms of performance style, themes and impact to the audience, there is a connection between the two theatre types, as both are focusing on a symbolic presentation of a fact inspired from history or mythology.

Social Aspect

Noh considered being the theatre to entertain the nobles, and as such it was addressed to the upper class. This conservative audience prevented any reformations and novelties to its evolution, thus the moves on the stage, the language and the performance itself, were formed in a way that can be addressed to the specific social class [8]. On the other hand, ancient Greek Tragedy through the context of the Drama Games every year was addressed to all citizens including women, children and foreigners. The city - state of Athens provided the price of the ticket to the poor citizens in order to participate as audience, taking under consideration the educational aspect of the theatrical play. In both cases actors formed a separate social class. In ancient Athens acting was an occupation only for men, as only men were allowed to perform [9], while the actors of Noh theatre were members of families specialized in the performing arts; families that had performed various traditional performances for many generations. Women in pre Noh era participated in rituals and performances, but were excluded from traditional Noh plays until recently. In both cases the female character was performed by a man wearing a mask.

Performance and Performance Elements

The three Aristotelian unities of drama are the unities of time, place and action, where a play should have one main action that it follows, with no or few subplots. A play should cover a single physical space, the stage should represent no more than one place, and the action in should take place no more than a day. During this space - time frame, a Greek tragedy opens with a prologue so the audience can have an introduction to the drama. The prologue is followed by the "parodos", after which the story unfolds through three or more episodes. The episodes are interspersed by "stasima", choral interludes explaining or commenting on the situation developing in the play. The tragedy ends with the exodus, concluding the story. The use of space and time in Noh theatre is not portrayed realistically. Rather, there is a freedom of portrayal which requires the members of the audience to use their imagination, as they perceive time and space through certain moves or songs of the actors. Movement in Noh theatre is highly stylized and prescribed, and requires its own slow rhythm of performance [10]. Ancient Greek Tragedy on the other hand was based on the interaction of dance with performers, a dance which is a remnant of the past from the religious origins of drama, freer both in expression and in kinesiology. Regarding performance elements, both theatres introduce costumes and masks with a variety of designs, details and colorful combinations, as means of expression and visual impact. The audience could understand

the social status, the emotion or the character of the hero [11]. There are many references to the origins of the masks of Noh theatre that focus on the similarity with the grotesque comic masks of the Hellenistic era [12].

Architecture

Regarding architecture, the differences between the two theatre types are significant as to, scale, morphology and means of construction. The form of architecture of the Greek Theatre reflects the society, as it reproduces the gatherings in "agora" and the public life [13]. The Greek theatre to a greater degree to any of its successors was depended on the natural conditions of the site, and therefore was located in various parts of the city [14]. The natural terrain provided to the viewers a good visual and acoustics towards the orchestra [15], where a permeant elevated stage was placed at the rear. Actors were performing on the stage while the rest of the performers where on the orchestra without any additional scenery [16]. The whole theatre was made of stone and marble forming a permanent structure. Various mechanical constructions for hovering or appearances from the under stage formed a system of stenographic elements as part of both theatre architecture and performance [17]. The Greek theatre reduced the place of dramatic action to its most basic expression, combining stage and auditorium in a single open air space, something that only the Elizabethan theatre model was close to [18]. At the very beginning of the Noh theatre, plays were performed on existing stages of shrines and temples [19]. Temporary stages constructed for each occasion until the permanent wood structures of the 17th century. The organization of the stage and the stage action is simple as viewers are within the immediacy of the scene, necessary for monitoring the ritual movements of Noh theatre. Actors are performing on an elevated stage, with a roof top which is serving as a diffuser while the under stage as a bass amplifier.

Merging

Every theatre play defines a specific space of performance, as it forms the architecture of the stage. Despite the significand differences between the two types as described, a hybrid play towards a common performance merging characteristics of architecture, stage organization and acting can be achieved due to the adaptability of the theatre play itself [20]. Every play is composed on the basis of two factors: the actors and the spectators; theatrical play is a message that is constantly moving between these two poles. This set, actors - spectacle, spectators and message is autonomous, and thus can easily be adapted to various situations. An example of the adaptability of the theatrical play has to do with representation. Modern representations of classical plays have exploited from every aspect of the dramatic text and have it filtered out through almost all contemporary sociological, historical and anthropological aspects. Events from the current political scene become objects of new approaches of classical play. Issues, problems and forms of the past are updated so as to have an immediate impact on contemporary audiences. In relation to the spoken language, drastic changes are also applied. The text-to-performance process belongs entirely to the director's personal assessment [21]. Therefore, each play translation could be considered as an adaptation; and no kind of performance has been given so many different interpretations like the ancient drama, which since it first appeared in the post - Renaissance scene in 1585, is being re-translated, commented, modified and reformed until the present day. In the case of Suzuki Tadashi, the ancient drama is degraded to be reformed again in a hybrid that moves in the thematic of the ancient Greek tragedy but through directing and stenographic approach of the Noh theatre. Thus the evolution of the plot acquires a non-space, non-time continuation of Noh performance, whilst does not hesitate to give the main characters

elements from the particular Japanese culture. By contrast, Yukio Ninagawa orientated to a more "universal" theatre **[22]**. His production of "Oedipus Rex" in Athens in 2004, showcases a unique blend of methods, ranging from contemporary drama to traditional Noh, with monk-like costumes and stage installations that include a decayed lotus reflecting Japanese and Asian art styles, within the context of a strictly western music.

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19. Michiko Young and David Young, *Introduction to Japanese Architecture*, Periplus Editions, 2004.

20. Giannis Tsaras, *Theatres with Transformation Capabilities. Investigation of flexibility parameters and requirements of contemporary performance spaces,* PhD dissertation Aristotel University of Thessaloniki, 2012, p. 197 – 203. (In Greek)

21. Maria Thomadaki, *Theatricos Antikatoptrismos, Eisagogi stin Parastasiologia*, [Theatre Reflection, Introduction to Performance], Ellinika Grammata, Athens, p. 9, 1999. (In Greek).

22. Helene P. Foley, *Modern Performance and Adaptation of Greek Tragedy,* https://classicalstudies.org/sites/default/files/documents/FOLEY98.pdf

In Greek tragedy, when a playwright was unable to solve the problem he would often use a machina, a crane like device mounted on the roof of the skene (scene house) to lower a god into the action to solve the character's problem. Watch the "Top 10 Deus Ex Machina Moments in the Movies" as chosen by WatchMojo.com. Each tragic playwright, when he entered the competition for performance at the City Dionysia, would submit four plays, a trilogy (3 tragedies) and a satyr play. Aeschylus, the earliest of the three tragic playwrights, built his trilogies around a common plot line. Ground Plan of a Greek Theatre To the left is the ground plan of a typical Greek Theatre as published by William Smith in A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities (1875). If students have not studied Greek Theater this Web site will give them an overall perspective and then they can begin the lesson by brainstorming the essential elements. The same with the elements for Elizabethan and Modern drama. Brainstorming the elements of the three types of theater mentioned above is basically a refresher activity. 1. Have students look at the picture gallery of a traditional Noh stage and theater in Japan located within the Resource Carousel. Students should be aware of the following terms related to seating: Shoumen (front seat), Waki-Shoumen (side seat), and Nak-Shoumen (diagonal seat). 2. Have students create a list of similar and different elements of stages for Greek, Elizabethan and Modern theater. His particular interests lie in comparative performance theory, dramaturgy, performance in the ancient Greek theatre, and British Asian theatre. He held a Leverhulme Fellowship in 2000-2001, and was the award-holder for an AHRC-funded research project on the history of British Asian Theatre, active from October 2004 to March 2009 (and see Publications). He is an editor of the series Performance Studies for the University of Exeter Press, and joint editor with Dr Jane Milling of Theatre and Performance Studies for Palgrave. In July 2010 he was invited to give a keynote on British Asian Theatre