

Hesitant Japan: Queering Relationalities in Theater der Welt 2023

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The phrase “decentering Japan” connotes a collective attitude that has haunted Japan throughout modernization. The prefix “de-” suggests the distinctly ambivalent desire of Japan displayed explicitly in the twentieth century; that is, first expressing the fervent wish to approach and join the Western liberal order, yet, soon exhibiting hesitance to become the West. Within the liberal global hegemony, Japan has positioned itself as the satellite nation of the West, orbiting around the epicentre of politics and culture though rarely placing itself at the core to stave off consequential responsibilities. Decentering, thus, seems to be connected to the contradictory wish for simultaneously wanting and evading power, status, autonomy, and accountability. Decentering also harkens back to the well-known Japanese cultural conundrum Roland Barthes posed roughly forty years ago in *The Empire of Signs*. Unwillingly yet surely, the action of decentering reveals that the actual centre is somewhere elsewhere, or to borrow from Barthes, “the centre is [left] empty” (1983, 30). Through the cultural habit of deliberately maintaining the centre vacant, Japan has constantly, sometimes shockingly swiftly, repositioned itself in the global hegemony and made new relationalities with whoever is next in line to the political and economic throne.

Since 1945, the central reference point for Japan has undoubtedly been the United States. However, as Naoki Sakai admits, for the past two decades, “the fatigue or exhaustion of Pax Americana” has been observed not as a one-time blow or surprise like “the fall of the Berlin Wall” but, instead, as a “long and gradual phenomenon” (Sakai 2022, 4).[1] In one way or another, as Sakai continues, we are “facing the proliferating sense of the worthlessness of such categories as the West, the Rest of the World, and so forth, whose cogency we used to take for granted” (ibid., 4). The schematism of the modern international world is going beyond binaries, beyond nation-states, and becoming queer. And I suggest in this paper later that this movement towards queering the world should be embraced rather than feared or deterred as a mode of ontological condition and agentic resistance against flag-waving political battles we now observe across the globe. When discussing the shift in global geopolitics, the fact that Sakai mentions the fall of the Berlin Wall is intriguing. The wall, whether with or without a capital letter, symbolises an object that divides two geographic locations, but in the case of the Berlin Wall, it represents not only the collapse of spatial binaries but also a landslide shift in epistemological assumptions on the state, history, subject, and even humanity. It was a watershed moment when people entered the postcolonial,

It's Going To Get Dark
Samara Hersch

Photo: Gregory Lorenzutti



post-Cold War, and much later, the posthuman condition, whereby the position of liberal modern humanism commenced wilting.

The two renditions of the Theater der Welt festival I discuss in this paper can be situated before and after the political turn of 1989: the festival in 1985 and 2023. The reason why I have specifically selected these two years is quite personal: the upcoming fifteenth version of the festival held in Frankfurt and Offenbach will be curated by a team of Japanese and German programmers: Director Chiaki Soma, the dramaturgs Maria Rössler and Hanna Steinmair, and myself serving as a program collaborator. As a suitable comparison, I decided to focus on the festival that was organised 38 years ago in the same city which invited Japanese artists such as Tadashi Suzuki. [2] Theater der Welt is a triennial German theater festival launched in Cologne in 1981 at the suggestion of the theater scholar Ivan Nagel and the German ITI (International Theater Institute). Since then, the festival has been held in different cities nationwide. The slightly colonialist naming of the festival, reminiscent of the turn-of-the-century international expositions, suggests that, at the outset, the intention of the festival was, as Erika Fischer-Lichte informs, to “deliberately expose the spectators to ‘strange’ unknown forms of theater” (Fischer-Lichte 2020, 95). Although I will not go into details, as we know, the 1980s witnessed the emergence of intercultural theater, and various theorists and practitioners made an effort to diminish the cultural gap between the West and the rest, though quite often ending in adverse results. And Theater der Welt was at the forefront of these intercultural projects.

However, it is not through the scope of the intercultural theater, or what Daphne P. Lei terms “hegemonic intercultural theater (HIT)” practice, that I will be analysing the two theater festivals (Lei 2011, 571). Instead, in this paper, I adopt the queer criticality of the “minor” that Hentyle Yapp argues in his *Minor China* as a method to rethink the major narrative purported by modern liberal humanism. In Yapp’s words: by adopting the minor, we should reconsider “the epistemological assumptions and ontological conditions that uphold the order of things” (Yapp 2021, 5). Whereas interculturalism still resorts to a binary rendition of narratives which always seems to put the periphery at the mercy of the centre, the minor as method conversely approaches minoritarian ends and highlights how not all minor subjects are seeking to be centred or asking to be included. Instead, the method moves away from the already-subjugated position of pleading inclusion and contends with an autonomous fight to open up “an alternative understanding of the social structuration of the world” (ibid.,11). By rendering themselves legible and proper, the minor subjects willingly become an object of consumption and surveillance by those in hegemonic power. Instead of appealing to the demand of the major, Yapp suggests that non-normative people, whether in ethnicity, race, gender, or class, should take a counter-intuitive path: we should not “make ourselves intelligible as subjects worthy of entering a modern liberal humanist [but rather] hesitate from doing so.” (Yapp 2021, 9). Echoing bell hooks, who pronounced “marginality as a site of resistance,” I argue that this mode of hesitation becomes an act of political resistance against commodified representationalism (bell cited in Ferguson and Minh-ha 1990, 341).

The issue I wish to take up here is the different tonalities of the hesitance exhibited by the Japanese artists and programmers in the two festivals. When invited to Germany, one of the hegemonic centres of art in the late-twentieth century, many Japanese theater professionals

expressed uneasiness, awkwardness, discomfort, or nervousness, which are various modes of hesitance. However, what should not be misconstrued when observing the hesitance in 1985 and 2023, is that though similar in appearance, they are rooted in contrasting motives. As it will be later clarified through the words and works of Suzuki, in 1985, the hesitance emerged from the fear of failure, of losing, or of being unable to deliver aesthetics and narratives that contend with and appeal to those of the West. Conversely, for the 2023 issue, through the last year or so of the festival's preparation period, I sensed feelings of reluctance emerging from successfully delivering performances with overly legible and visible Japaneseness and thus being rendered singular, consumable, or worse still, mute, through what Denise Ferreira da Silva and others have called as the "ethnographic entrapment" (Halberstam 2011, 3; da Silva 2007, 169). I am now refusing to be both "the 'useful' supplement to the institutionalized history or be marked as marginal and disregarded" (Iwaki 2021, 99).[3] To put it simply, in 1985, the vector was centripetal: the desire for Japanese artists was to hesitantly and temporarily join the centre; in 2023, I feel the invited artworks should be more scattered, queered, and "dispersed" in politics and in dramaturgy through the centrifugal force hesitating to be subsumed to a singular centralised narrative (Iwaki 2021, 104). The narratives of the festival should not serve for the sake of drawing a world map from the perspective of the German city but rather maintain peripheral, or to borrow from Meiling Chang, retain "multicentricity" as what we observe now as margins are those places that are only "not yet center" (Chang 2002, 4).

Many believe Tadashi Suzuki is the first Japanese artist to participate in Theater der Welt. However, it was Yoshi Oida who was invited four years before to Cologne to present his solo act *Interrogations: Words of the Zen Master*. Zen was an extremely appealing concept around the time, as the West was at one of its heights for consuming the Orient, even to the extent that in the 1970s, a tobacco brand named Zen was sold in France with an advertisement copy of "cigarettes of the samurai." The reason why Suzuki's name is more strongly linked with Theater der Welt is due to the sheer scale of the productions that the director demonstrated four years afterward in Frankfurt. In 1985, the Programme Director Thomas Petz promised the German public to organise a spectacular "theater messe [Theater-Messe]," in which Suzuki was the sole artist to be provided with the luxury to present three productions: namely, *The Trojan Women*, *Clytemnestra*, and *The Three Sisters* (Petz 1985, 6). All three were presented on the stages of Schauspielhaus Frankfurt, though

Suzuki Company of Toga
 „Troerinnen“
 „Drei Schwestern“
 „Klytaimnestra“

„Drei Schwestern“
 Nach Tschekow

Konzept und Regie:
 Tadashi Suzuki
 Organisation:
 Ikuko Matsumoto
 Darsteller:
 Hiroko Takahashi
 Kayoko Shiraiishi
 Keiko Tada
 Rie Nouchi
 Yasushi Kimura
 Masaharu Kato
 Takahisa Nishikibe
 Minoru Togawa

„Troerinnen“
 Nach Euripides

Konzept und Regie:
 Tadashi Suzuki
 Darsteller:
 Kayoko Shiraiishi
 Hiroko Takahashi
 Keiko Tada
 Yoko Ebata
 Michiko Ishida
 Rie Nouchi
 Yasushi Kimura
 Michio Sakakibara
 Kenji Numata
 Toshihiro Sakato
 Takahisa Nishikibe
 Haruo Takayama
 Yoichi Takemori
 Hiroshi Ike
 Kenji Suzuki
 Minoru Togawa
 Uichiro Fueda
 Kosuke Tsutamori



Über Tadashi Suzuki Tradition japanischer Theaterarbeiten, vor allem bei der Beschäftigung mit den altgriechischen Klassikern, zeigt Suzuki, welche Möglichkeiten er sieht, kulturelle Qualitäten sehr verschiedener, weit entfernter Kulturkreise zu einer neuen Qualität zu verbinden. Erst seit 1901 hat sich Japan dem

A program page introduces Suzuki's three invited projects from the Theater der Welt 1985 Frankfurt brochure
 Courtesy of ITI (Internationales Theaterinstitut) Germany
 ©Kyoko Iwaki

Chekhov's adaptation was installed in the Kammerpiele: the smaller of the two spaces in the same theater. Alongside those contemporaries such as Robert Wilson, Peter Brook, Jan Fabre, and Andrzej Wajda, Suzuki decided to present three Western plays adapted through the corporealities of Japanese performers; or, to borrow from Suzuki's terminology, using the '*honkadori*' method to only extract the essence of Western narratives for the sake of serving and prioritising local histories inseparable from Japanese bodies and mores (Suzuki 1973, 229).

As Senda Akihiko succinctly puts it, from the late-1960s, the generation of *angura* theater-makers, including Suzuki, has "opened up a strikingly new horizon of theater through the negation of *shingeki*" (Senda 1972, 412). The *via negativa* of *shingeki*, or the parting from the Japanese theatrical central axis, underpinned the rebellious young artists' political and philosophical core. What I wish to reinforce at this point is that although these *angura* artists have cut themselves apart from the aesthetics of *shingeki*, that is, the Japanese replication of Western naturalism theater, they neither imagined nor wished for the end of the hegemonic dominance of the white male Western canon at least at this point. Just like the political theorist Maruyama Masao who argued a generation before Suzuki that the Japanese have to look to the centre from the edges to seek veritable culture different from their own, the primary theoretical references for many *angura* artists were Samuel Beckett, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the likes. Suzuki admits that during his university days, Sartre had "an enormous influence on [his] generation" (Suzuki 1986, 102).

Although it goes beyond the remit of this paper to explain the full context of why Japanese artists in the 60s often resorted to the Western canon, to grasp at least a better idea, it is useful to refer to the words of the Maruyama mentioned above who, in 1981, gave a lecture at the Institute of Asian Cultural Studies, at International Christian University, to respond to the topic of "Archetype of Japanese Culture." In this lecture, he famously asserted that the archetypal behaviour, or in Maruyama's words, "*basso ostinato*," of Japanese people is the act of restlessly looking around from the periphery.

We do not have to even think of high theories such as philosophy, but simply in the level of everyday spirit, we [Japanese] are always looking around restlessly [*kyoro kyoro shiteiru*] to seek new things from the external world, yet we ourselves do not change much.[In Japan,] the main melodic themes used to arrive from the [Asian] continent, and after Meiji, they came from Europe. But those melodies were modified by and fused with the obstinately repetitive sound at the base layer (Maruyama 2004, 138-9).

An issue that should be raised concerning Maruyama's theory of *basso ostinato* is that the one-way path of the authentic cultures coming from afar and the vessel called the Japaneseness perceiving those influences are kept obstinately intact. The heritage, the origin, or the root of the culture is still considered paramount when thinking of the model for cultural transmission and development, compared to the later post-Deleuzian models where becoming other through assemblage, alliances, and rhizomatic contagion is prioritised over filiation and heredity (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 277). For Japanese scholars of Maruyama's generation, and for that matter Suzuki as well, it was impossible to align with the worldviews of queer criticality as those theories were not even around.

They lived in a male-oriented, nation-based, West-East binary world as an autological subject, which had nothing to do with queer worldings, identity-plus politics, or futurities that does not align with “origin stories.” For Suzuki, Elizabeth Povinelli’s queer suggestion that “the inheritance is not a root, but the routes [...] that form, conform, and deform existing cultures of circulation” should sound clueless and hollow, if not absurd (Povinelli 2022).

When transposing Maruyama’s words to Suzuki’s theater, for the artist, the *basso ostinato* was the Japanese corporeality, and the imported different melodies were the Western plays and philosophies. And I argue that his success in the West owed mainly to the fact that his Western counterparts were playing contrapuntal music at the time: their basso ostinato was the Western hegemonic culture, and the imported melodies were the oriental aesthetics and philosophies. In *The Trojan Women*, the first Western play that Suzuki directed after he found Waseda shōgekijō in 1966, the dethroned Queen Hecuba, performed by Kayoko Shiraishi, did not mourn in front of the grand gate of Troy to gracefully appeal to her tragic state, but instead she was portrayed as a miserable woman dressed in a ragged kimono, who mumbled madness and sung *enka* songs in piles of rubbles reminiscent of war-defeated Japan. The performance was first presented in Iwanami Hall in 1974, a hall established by a famous humanities publisher, which Suzuki amongst many others of his generation, described the venue as “the gateway of Japan to the Western world” (Suzuki 2009). For Suzuki and his contemporaries, the West was still considered the unequivocal epicentre of the art world that lay far away beyond the gateway in Jimbōchō. It was only when Suzuki was invited to Europe for the first time in the summer of 1972 that he presented fragments of *On the Dramatic Passions II* within the lexicon of festival de Théâtre Nations in Paris, that his hesitance or fear of failing in the Western world withered. Since the Western theater makers were ludicrously infatuated with including “orientalist flavours [*tōyō shumi*]” in their productions, Suzuki quickly realised that he could place himself in the position of authority and win over the Western audience (Suzuki 1973, 244). In the notes of 1972, Suzuki clearly describes the degree of appropriation that was happening in Paris:

In production by a British theater company, [...] surprisingly *gion* drums and *sensu* fans appeared on stage. In a French pantomime piece, the melody of *koto* playing *Rokudan* was used, a Japanese sword descended from the ceiling, and to my surprise, a long gesture of *seppuku* was performed. Additionally, even in Peter Brook’s stage, *kyogen* and *utai* were referenced. [...] Honestly, at the end of all this, I felt I had enough (Suzuki 1973, 245).

After witnessing this orientalist fever and returning from France, Suzuki interpreted Brook and other artists’ naive appropriations of orientalist aesthetics as a movement comparable to Japanese *shingeki* that blindly adopted Western dramaturgy. And after thorough contemplation, he boldly concluded that “I am no longer interested in European avant-garde theater[...] because when expressions are uprooted from the way of life connected to a certain ethnicity, it is already proven [by *shingeki*] that they will never gain universality” (Suzuki 1973, 245). With this audacious universalist judgment, a decade afterward in Theater der Welt, Suzuki confidently presented to the Western audience the correct handling of the Japanese dramaturgies through Western plays, which, as planned, ended in great success. In other words, Suzuki succeeded in being included in

the proper theater history of Western liberalism canon through his modernisation of *nō* and *kabuki* aesthetics, which were visible and legible to the German audience.

When collaborating in the programming for Theater der Welt 2023, I do not wish to take the same strategies as Suzuki because, amongst various reasons, during the past thirty-eight years, the schematization of the word has become more pluralized, fragmented, and queered beyond binary representationalism undergirded by the West. To return to the terms of Yapp, in 2022, many of us already know that the increase in “inclusion, representation, and interests of minor subjects in the polity does not necessarily mitigate the tyranny of the majority” but rather contributes to hiding the shortcomings and inequalities embedded in the hegemonic “project of liberal inclusion” (Yapp 2022, 70). Aligning with the proposition that various queer studies scholars such as Jack Halberstam, among others have already argued, our dramaturgical team in Theater der Welt, consisting of Japanese and German women of different ages, ethnicity, and gender orientation, questions why white male standards almost-always measure our success. Further, I contend that under certain circumstances, failing could be “more creative, more cooperative, and more surprising ways of being in the world” (Halberstam 2011, 3-4). To avoid commodified representationalism, we should follow the logic of failure rather than capitalist success and “fugitivity” more so than visibility and imagine multiple world-makings: hence, to begin with, proposing to make the festival name plural to Theater der Welten (Harney and Morton, 2013, 11). [4]

At least initially, at the start of the programming for the next iteration of the German festival, I intended to focus on those artworks that intentionally *do not* follow the logic of the legible and the visible. Although I cannot illuminate the full view of the programming because it is still in a gestation period, I will provide a few examples. Going counter to the successful narratives that constrain minor subjects to reiterate suppressed, strange, or specific political voices, we will first question the overreliance on language through more haptic and aural performances; second, inquire about anthropocentric accounts through more-than-human productions; and, third, queer the comprehensive representation of the world that only seems to reiterate the binary and colonial episteme of the heteronormative West. In other words, the modern liberalist human narrative that presumes its privilege through the global inclusion of the minor is dislodged not only through a juxtaposition of multiple interconnected perspectives but also through its more-than-visual dramaturgies.

In the new production of Thai film director Apichatpong Weerathetukul titled *Dialogue with the Sun*, a vast screen and surrounding sound system will be used to form ominous landscapes, windows to the ocean, and dwellings for ghosts, which the audience can physically experience, with the aid of VR headsets, the visual and aural stimulation through the atmospheric designing of the space. The production, which the director calls “cinema as body,” will focus on Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti’s view on living with non-linearity, in which our consciousness and memory will be interwoven through the moving bodies of the audience like waves of the ocean (Weerasethakul 2022, 2). In Australian director Samara Hersch’s commissioned trans-generational work *It’s Going to Get Dark*, the director continues her interrogation in the series “performance as conversation.” However, this time, the conversation, with human and non-human bodies, will take



Performing Acupuncture
Aya Momose

Photo: Shun Sato

place in a pitch-black room to evade any optics tied to representation. It also urges us to reinterpret the materiality of darkness not as the obverse of enlightenment but as a source of collective intimacy after the pandemic (Hersch 2021, 2). In Japanese artist Momose Aya's *Performing Acupuncture*, hapticity, aurality, and various shades of pain will be brought to the fore as audience members will be lying down on beds with headsets to experience a full-body participatory performance which includes being perforated by a needle. The performance questions are where the periphery of the skin shifts with sounds and touch; how pain instantly reorients the channels of thoughts; and how simulations which are pre-linguistic and pre-visual, can be formed into a shape of performance.

The programming process of gathering approximately thirty productions, however, cannot be materialized only by following idealistic objectives. As with any significant art event, the German festival is surrounded by capitalist priorities favouring mass audience attendance and political agendas backed by power-imbued funding. I should note that as the beginning of the festival approached, various stakeholders started voicing their political agendas – which became a tacit order – and, thus, the programme became a mishmash of intentions accommodating various German institutions.[5] It is only naïve to say that in any theater festival in today's political climate, the intention of the programmer will be fully realized without any politically and economically induced compromise. However, for now, I would like to tentatively conclude that, from one of the centres of the European art world, a team of multi-identity programmers, together with a handful of international artists, are refusing to serve as a mouthpiece for colonial tropes, reworking the way non-Western art is forced to become legible, and hesitating to only gloss over the centralized mode of global inclusion. Whether or not this hesitant dramaturgy, which espouses failure over success, weakness over strength, relationalities over singularities, and queerness over heteronormative narrative, speaks to and creates bonds with a certain group of the conscientious European audience remains to be seen. (End)

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Notes

[1] Japanese names are written in the Westernized format (first name, then family name) as many introduced in this paper, including myself, function outside academia. In these cases, it is more common to adopt this permutation.

[2] This text was drafted during the summer of 2022, and thus, since then, the themes of the programming as well as included artists, have substantially changed. This text thus reflects my visions and opinions midway through the festival-making process.

[3] Please be aware that throughout the text, I am only voicing my intentions and thus I do not speak on behalf of the programming team. For instance, I know that the festival director Chiaki Soma has less hesitance in delivering a successful narrative that accommodates the system of European theater festivals. Throughout her twenty-plus years of being a Tokyo-based programmer, her primary motive remains in introducing lesser-known Japanese artists, who are capable of adopting Eurocentric dramaturgies so that they can successfully join the Western theater circuit.

[4] I have written a proposal to change the name of the festival, at least for this issue, to the pluralized form of Theater der Welten. However, after I stepped down from Directorship, the proposal itself got lost in cascades of immediate tasks and was, never overtly denied, but gradually forgotten.

[5] Throughout the collaborative process of the festival-making, it became clear that the programming team had to obey the German scope of historicization and thus mapping and suggesting alternative worldings in its full potential turned into a less viable task.

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