

Okada Toshiki & Japanese Theatre
**– Peter ECKERSALL, Barbara GEILHORN, Andreas
REGELSBERGER & Cody POULTON (eds)**

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Since emerging on the scene in the 1990s, influenced especially by the work of Hirata Oriza, playwright Okada Toshiki has written dozens of works, a selection of which have toured throughout the world. *Okada Toshiki & Japanese Theatre* tells the reader that “he is the only Japanese theatre artist of his generation to have a significant international career and his work is known widely in Europe, North America, Asia and Australia” (1). Okada’s work encompasses colloquial yet troubled language, slowed tempos coupled with abstract physical scores, rich visual and aural designs and collaborations, and close engagement with events such as the Iraq War, precarious employment, the 2011 disasters, and post-Anthropocene modes of dramatic exploration. The book “aims to explore this diversity of Okada’s work and its importance to the development of Japanese theatre and to contemporary performance around the world” (3). This is the first book in English dedicated entirely to Okada despite his familiarity to theatre circles around the world for quite a few years. Recognition of Okada’s contribution to drama in Japan and the world is well warranted, as is more visible and thorough examination of his work.

This book makes a significant contribution to that examination. The book stakes claims not so much to Okada’s stature within Japan, which is sometimes minimised, but especially to the importance and relatability of his works on the international stage. Overall, the argument is that Okada’s works are created and situated within a Japanese context, but that they also speak to global struggles with precarity in livelihoods, emotions, and relationships. Therefore, they can teach us both about the specifics of

Japan's present and future and about a larger human present and future. Okada is presented as an artist who evolves alongside the times, especially on international currents: the interviews show him as ready to change methods and alter his ways of thinking and working. He is also shown to be an artist who positions himself quite consciously as an international artist whose works are often conceived with an eye toward international reach.

Under a team of editors with rich qualifications in working on Okada specifically, this edited volume is accessibly written with short chapters that stand alone, but also build a complex and complementary view on Okada Toshiki and the works of the chelfitsch performance troupe. The book, beautifully enlivened with still photos from performances and installations, is well-placed to be of use to students and specialists alike, and might be very handy for teaching international/global theatre or Asian theatre as well as specifically Japanese theatre. The book features a broadly international group of contributors, with professional ties to Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Japan, the UAE, and the US, a variety that reflects the reach of Okada's drama, though there is not necessarily a representative for every place Okada's works have toured.

The book is organised into three sections: "Section One: Okada's Dramaturgy" focuses on the aesthetics of Okada's narrative, direction and staging style, vision, and methods. "Section 2: Art, Society, and Globality" considers Okada's work in its contexts: the social contexts of the plays' narratives in Japan and the world, the context of Okada's place in international/global drama, and the ways in which Okada's works move through the world. Finally, "Section 3: Documents, Interview and Plays" features a new interview between Okada and Iwaki Kyōko, some of Okada's theory on drama, as well as Aya Ogawa's expert translations of three plays. Textually, the plays are short, which is not reflective of the works' typically longer running times when fully staged. This is a common situation for Okada's plays, which is why it is valuable to collect translations of his work along with scholarly examination and description. Two of the plays have been published in Ogawa's English translation elsewhere in the past, *Ground and Floor* being the new offering, but it is convenient to have several collected together along with the preceding analysis. The structure of the book is well-conceived; Cody Poulton's first chapter on "Okada Toshiki's Narrative Method" is an excellent introduction to Okada for readers who may be unfamiliar with his work, covering all

the crucial features of Okada's hallmark style in a short space. The reader is well-prepared to move forward to more granular examinations of specific plays, aspects, or approaches thereafter. Likewise, Section 2 first grounds the reader in urban space with Noda Manabu's "Seen From Close-up in the Distance: Shibuya as a Bubble Downtown" before broadening to global and international perspectives. Finally, section three offers Iwaki Kyōko's new and illuminating "Interview with Okada Toshiki" before proceeding to the playwright's own theory.

The book feels more aligned with theatre or performance studies than specialised Japan studies. Despite a tilt toward the "global," the specificities of Japan are not ignored, with Noda Manabu's aforementioned Chapter 7 centring on local Tokyo urban space and subcultures, Stanca Scholz-Cionca's Chapter 2, "The 'Hyper-Real' and the Shadow of Noh" taking note of resonances with Noh without oversimplifying difference, and Iwaki Kyōko's Chapter 5, "Fuzzy Boundaries, Foggy Pictures: Okada Toshiki's Poesies of Liminality" noting the specific impact of Japan's 2011 disasters and the Fukushima nuclear accident in particular. Iwaki's examination of the permeability of time and space in the context of disaster under capitalism is particularly incisive. Other chapters emphasise Okada's "international" qualities and mark the works' complex moves through European and Asian drama festivals, US Off-Broadway spaces, and beyond. Uchino Tadashi's Chapter 8, "Simultaneous Turns in Globality: Performative and Social Turns in the New Millennium, or Theorizing/Historicizing Okada Toshiki's Welcome to European Festival Cultures" puts the European festival reception of Okada Toshiki into perspective compared with the perception of Okada's troupe in Japan. Barbara Geilhorn's Chapter 9, "Reflections on Precarity and Emotional Fulfillment in Everyday Life in the Theatre of Okada Toshiki" thoughtfully examines how the local circumstances of increasing precarity in Japanese society have contact points that resonate strongly with international audiences. The thread of precarity is picked up elsewhere as well, such as in Carol Martin's Chapter 12, "Foreign Assembly: Okada's *Time's Journey through a Room* in the United States," which examines Okada's lingering connection to the "quiet theater" movement with the uncertainty of his generation and longer reverberations of disaster and crisis. Peter Eckersall's description of "melt" in his Chapter 11, "Okada Toshiki's Dramaturgy in the Post-global Condition" is an intriguing way of tying together the ambient and sometimes non-representative nature of Okada's performances with the playwright's increasing usage of non-human subjects

(from ghosts to objects), while thinking through Okada's position in the specificity of Japanese society as well as the generality of the "post-global condition."

The volume is nuanced overall in how it reads Okada's contribution to international theatre without presenting him as a de-localized and "universal" figure. His work is rightly shown to interact responsively with Japanese social and political events while maintaining a porousness that allows it to be inhabitable by performers, artists, and audiences from other places. There is perhaps some tension between the introduction's assertion that "...compared with other contemporary theatre artists in Japan, Okada uses no overt or classically recognizable Japanese aesthetics or tropes" (2) while at the same time Okada himself and several of the contributors comment on his recent, more direct experimentation with Noh concepts and aesthetics. At the same time, that tension is not untrue to the artist himself, who at times in his career has held overtly Japanese aesthetics at arm's length while at other times drawing them close. Scholz-Cionca deals most in depth with the "affinities" to Noh in Okada's work that has become more prominent over time, especially after the 2011 disasters (19).

Particular attention is given in the volume to translation and language. Andreas Regelsberger's Chapter 4, "Translating Okada Toshiki," speaks from his experience as an Okada translator to methods and choices for translation for the German stage, and asserts that translation is baked into most of Okada's works from the start, with subtitle provisions written into the stage directions. Several other essays also address Okada's characteristic "hyper real" linguistic style, such as Scholz-Cionca's Chapter 2 and Sara Jansen's Chapter 3, "Making Time Material: On Okada Toshiki's *Time's Journey Through a Room*." Scholz-Cionca notes the similarity of Okada's work to Noh in its attention to patterned text as well as patterned movement. Jansen's examination of temporality perceptively equates disjunctures in time with "disarticulation" of language and gesture (36). The final section includes direct translations, not only of plays but also of Okada's own thoughts, providing valuable resources to those who cannot access Okada's writings in Japanese. While the essays rarely delve deeply into close reading, language is at issue in quite a few of the chapters. Besides the topic of translation itself, the complexities of Okada's quirky, occasionally-repetitive or elliptical colloquial style are addressed, including its knots and dead ends.

The topic of language is somewhat counterbalanced by attention to movement in Okada's works, such as in Holger Hartung's Chapter 6, "Ruptures, Gravity, Dwelling.

Reflections on Okada Toshiki's Movement Aesthetic." However, given the peculiarity of the physical styling of most of Okada's plays, and the absence of their description from stage directions in the translated plays included in the final section, this reviewer feels that even more space might have been devoted to describing and analysing Okada's movement style, especially as some international productions feature different patterns of movement when directed by others besides Okada himself. While many of the chapters mention the chelfitsch movement style, the reader unfamiliar with Okada's productions might not fully appreciate the depth, distance, significance, and duration that movement adds to most of the texts in question. However, Hartung helpfully collects and contextualises concepts surrounding Okada's movement style, applying metaphors such as "noise" and "junk," as well as observations regarding gravity, weight, and displacement, bringing together the work of scholars such as Uchino Tadashi, Katherine Mezur, Cody Poulton and many others with his own observation and theory of "rupture." As the beautiful photographs throughout the book illustrate, movement and bodies are as crucial to Okada's works as are the words; therefore, Hartung's chapter will be essential for those who have not viewed Okada's works in practice themselves.

The final section deserves special recognition, as the translations expand access to Okada's own words for English-speakers. As Okada is indeed prominent on the international stage, it is appropriate that his thoughts on drama be made available to non-Japanese-speaking theatre artists and theorists. His "Reflux: A Protean Theatre Theory" offers a complex intersection of personal experience and thought with theatrical practice and theory, offering a vision of theatre as the potential to "threaten reality" (167) and a renewed consciousness of the intimate relationship between theatre and catastrophe following the 2011 disasters (169-170). "Sounding Like a Typical Post-Corona Theory of Theatre," also by Okada, brings these visions up to date and contends with the challenges COVID-19 has brought to theatre, challenging the special possibilities of "place" as many performances moved online. Iwaki Kyōko's interview is very welcome, both for its freshness and Iwaki's insights on subjects such as the transformations of *Five Days in March* across separate versions. The play translations also deserve mention. The texts provided are: *Hot Pepper*, *Air Conditioner*, and *the Farewell Speech*, *The Sonic Life of a Giant Tortoise*, and *Ground and Floor*. Aya Ogawa, Okada's primary English translator, translates all three with her characteristic

skill in conveying the nuance of the original Japanese and contending with the challenges of highly colloquial texts that run on, loop back on themselves, trail off, or self-interrupt. Ogawa's experience as a playwright and translator makes her translation as appropriate for speaking aloud as for reading. It is handy to have some of Okada's works gathered in this volume so that unfamiliar readers may have some frame of reference for the preceding essays.

Plays addressed in detail in the book include *Five Days in March*, *Enjoy*, the *Hot Pepper* trilogy, *The Sonic Life of a Giant Tortoise*, *Current Location*, *Ground and Floor*, *God Bless Baseball*, *Time's Journey Through a Room*, *NŌ THEATER*, *NO SEX*, and the *Eraser* series.

The book positions Okada as an international artist as much as, or more than, a Japanese artist. This is supported by his many tours and the many translations and multi-lingual versions of his work (catalogued usefully in the appendix), as well as by his own mode of self-positioning, and the demands of international drama festivals, shown convincingly by Yokobori Masahiko's Chapter 10, "Who Knows We Want to Be an *International Artist?* Producing Okada Toshiki's Theatre and the International Scene." Viewing Okada in this way implicitly demands attention from the international theatre community that may not always consciously centre Asian artists and drama originally written in languages other than English. Satomi's monologues in *Ground and Floor* suggest that linguistic and cultural marginalisation is a matter of concern for Okada as a playwright who works primarily in the Japanese language, so not only is it impactful that this volume frequently emphasises questions of translation and globalism with regard to Okada's work, it is also important that this volume insists upon the visibility of Okada's works to the Anglophone world and beyond. Some helpful theoretical concepts are introduced in this volume, as well. Explorations of precarity, rupture, temporality, poesy, the intercultural as well as the global span across multiple chapters, bringing cohesion to the work and coherence to the understanding of Okada's oeuvre. Certainly, the book is successful in positioning Okada as a crucial and complex figure in Japanese and global drama, whose writings and stagings continue to demand attention and make important impacts in Japan, Germany, the US, Canada, Australia, and many more places.

Few book-length studies have been devoted to Japanese playwrights, especially contemporary playwrights. It is the hope of this reviewer that this volume will

encourage the in-depth study of others as well, whether they are positioned as local or global artists. As Okada's case exemplifies through the thoughtful examinations presented in the book, theatre-makers in Japan are doing prolific work closely engaged with society and current events, making discoveries and revelations poised to resonate internationally, even when the local is not precisely interchangeable with the global. This book shows how precious such an author-focused volume can still be, gathering multiple aspects of criticism, commentary, and translation to make a critical playwright's work as legible as possible to a wide audience who may not yet be intimately familiar with him, while at the same time providing space for deeper theoretical engagement best served by thinking across a body of works.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Justine WIESINGER is an Assistant professor of Japanese at Bates, and earned her PhD in East Asian Languages and Literatures by Yale University in 2018. She is a Fulbright scholar, and her areas of expertise include disaster, performance, horror, contemporary Japanese theatre, and modern Japanese culture. Wiesinger's dissertation examines intersections between disaster and performance in the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 as well as the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident of 2011. Her book project, *Performing Disaster*, focuses on the theatre and film that emerged from the latter events, and analyses the particular capabilities of performance to build claims to collective trauma in the aftermath of disaster.