

An Interview with Hideki Noda

Legend of Japanese theatre Hideki Noda has been in the UK recently rehearsing his latest production, *The Bee*, which opens on 21 June at London's Soho Theatre. The Japan Foundation had a rare opportunity to drop in on rehearsals in Bethnal Green to speak to Noda and find out, among other things, why he has chosen to work in the UK to create a new work in English in collaboration with British actors including the acclaimed Kathryn Hunter.

Japan Foundation (JF): Why did you (Noda-san) disband the Yume no Yūminsha theatre company that had become so acclaimed in the 1980s and go to the UK to study in 1992?

Noda: There is no one, simple reason. If you run a theatre company for a long time everything becomes stale. At that time, even when the performances of the company were a huge success, my inner 'sense of creativeness' was not satisfied. In 1986, towards the end of my time running the company, I was invited to the Edinburgh International Festival and came to realise how interesting it was to work



abroad. Believe me until that point I had no interest in performing overseas! But when I next had my production with all Japanese actors in Edinburgh and New York, I was concerned whether or not the local audience would at least feel the differences from their own theatre, even if they didn't totally understand my Japanese production. I wondered what the best thing to do about that was. It would have been good if all the members of the company had had an interest in performing overseas, but they all had to make a living and I couldn't risk taking them. That's why first of all I decided to take the plunge alone. I have always liked physical theatre, so I made some friends at workshops of that type during my time in the UK. Fourteen years have passed since then, but this time finally I have the confidence to work here. I was prepared for the fact a collaborative work would not be accomplished in one or two years, but it was more difficult and took more time than I had anticipated.

JF: I think that coming to the UK in 1992 was a major turning point in your career, but what were you actually doing here at that time?

Noda: Mostly, I was taking part in workshops. At first, I asked around about where to find good physical workshops and one of them was Complicite. After I joined a workshop there I was asked if I would come to the next workshop for their actual production and again I took part.

JF: Have you wanted to do collaboration since that time?

Noda: Well at the very least I've wanted to be involved in international collaboration in some way. Simon McBurney of Complicite asked me if I would appear in their play, not just workshops, but I couldn't get involved with a long project because I had to return to Japan after one year.

I don't know whether that would have been called 'collaboration' but there was the chance that I would have been working with them as an actor at that time. After I returned to Japan, when I wrote 'Red Demon' I created a work that included a non-Japanese actor. Maybe you could say that was the beginning of my international collaboration. I also did a version of it with Thai actors. Then when we did 'Red Demon' in Japan, I really wanted to do an 'opposite' version of it in the UK, so we had open workshops here. Nothing was easy, in particular it was really difficult to find a theatre and actors because I'm not well known to people here as a director nor is my work well known. Because I've had that one experience, this time has been comparatively easy. This collaboration with the Soho Theatre came about because they had kindly come to see some of my workshops.

JF: 'Red Demon' was written quite a while ago, so what was it that made you bring it to the UK two years ago?

Noda: Well I felt that it had an interesting subject. Because in any country, people's way of thinking is centred on their own country. 'Red Demon' is a work that looks at how people think about others that are different from them. The interesting thing about doing it then with Europeans was that for European people one kind of discrimination, unlike for example the discrimination we (Japanese) have against people of neighbouring countries, is a feeling of mutually discriminating against each other, so it is like equal discrimination – although it sounds contradictory, that's how I felt. When I was talking to the actors whom I created 'Red Demon' for here, I felt that their feeling towards foreigners was a little bit different from that of Japanese people. And that's why I thought it was interesting to make people reflect on the play.

JF: With 'The Bee' you have for the first time written a work in English. Was that because you had reflected upon your experience of producing 'Red Demon'?

Noda: That's right, but not just 'Red Demon'. In general I've had doubts about what is called 'translation' for a long time. It's not just a question of translating a Japanese play into English, but also when a work from the UK is translated into Japanese and performed in Japan, just how accurately has it been translated? I've gradually come to feel that this is a really big question. So this time rather than translating one of my works, I decided to create something through workshops right from the beginning. Of course the source material is a short story by Yasutaka Tsutsui written in Japanese so initially I needed to translate the Japanese content. Otherwise I wouldn't even be able to write a plan. You could say I started from translated words, but the script was, from the start, created during the workshops with a person who really can write in English. So although I can't say that there's absolutely no translation, I don't think that the words themselves have the feeling of having been translated. I am not saying no other way is right, but this time I decided to give this way a try.

JF: So with Colin (Teevan) you were creating a work that would sound natural to British people's ears?

Noda: Before Colin got involved I first explained my idea to the other actors in my poor English, without a script or anything. Then we talked about what should be added to or changed about Tsutsui's source material and how this would be reflected within the work. At that stage I took it to Colin and said 'We have a work with this structure, can't we make it into a script?'



JF: It sounds like a very interesting creative process!

Noda: If I could write the whole thing in English then there'd be no problem, but I can't do that.

JF: When, for example, you go and see a Ninagawa play, even when it's a collaboration using British actors, it makes you think 'That's Ninagawa's work'. There is a kind of brand recognition or a characteristic feeling, but with 'The Bee', which has been created through such a collaborative creative process, will there be any of the 'Noda flavour'?

Noda: You won't know that without going to watch it (laughed)! As I'm part of the production, I don't know.

JF: Recently there have been drama readings of English translations of Japanese scripts. When the reading has finished and everyone is talking about it, something that often comes up in conversation is whether or not the work has to be set in Japan? 'The Bee' has Japan as its setting and features Japanese people, is this essential to the work?

Noda: Mmm, I reckon it could be imagined in other places than Japan. But I think that in the case of 'The Bee' if it weren't in a setting of Japanese people it wouldn't have even got started. However I'm not demanding that the actors perform 'like Japanese' because realism is really important in the UK. The actors want to be like Japanese but, for example, even though they want to say things like 'hai' and 'dōmo', eventually we cut everything like that. Also, there's the fact that I'm appearing in it. If I wasn't featuring in it then maybe I could have set it in the UK. But I will also be performing and because my body is that of a Japanese, you may come to see at some point that this performance would not be possible without some kind of Japanese-like body movement. I don't know how strange it will seem to you, but from that point of view I feel that it was right to have it set in Japan.

JF: Are there any things about collaboration that you have thought were difficult this second time around?

Noda: Not really...except money perhaps! As always it has cost me a lot! But I appreciate that the Japan Foundation has supported me. The truth is I've thought wouldn't I be able to get a little more help? Financial, not moral support! Even though I don't think it would be a great expense, I'm disappointed when the people here say 'We don't have the money so we can't arrange that'. Of course I know we can't go into the red here.

JF: Aside from having to put up your own funds, do you still intend to continue with collaborations in the UK?

Noda: Of course, I'm encouraged by the actors and other people here. It's interesting to me that through these experiences I've clearly seen that there are differences here (compared to Japan).

JF: For example what kind of thing?

Noda: Mmm, for example over here I think there's too much discussion. I mean that sometimes after lots of discussion nothing comes of it in the end; there's no conclusion or it doesn't lead to anything. I don't believe drama is discussion so instead of talking about it until we reach a conclusion, once several options have emerged, we should get on give them a try. Because when you try them out it's easy to see whether or not they work. On the other hand, even though at first I thought 'Why are we talking about that?' when we discussed it I realised 'Aah, that's another way of grasping it.' That's something I could never have felt if I'd just stayed in Japan. So when I go back to Japan maybe I'm going to try and do the same thing there. Because Japan hates discussion and there's a view that those who think too much are boring in the Japan theatre. Also I'd like to say to the actors here that maybe you should skip the discussion a little and just go ahead and do it. Some guys hate run-throughs but isn't it better to keep on rehearsing rather than just thinking about the performance? Here there are actors who think 'with their heads' so they hardly move beyond their initial mental plan. It's all discussion. But theatre is ultimately about physical expression isn't it? There is a moment where through the physical you make a discovery. Of course the actors here also know that there is such a moment, but if you ask me, it isn't the priority of actors here to find it. It goes without saying that not everyone in Japan thinks the same way that I do, but anyway at the very least that's how I do things in Japan.

Although there are those in Japan who enjoy discussion, when I see that in spite of all this discussion the final result isn't a good play I wonder what the point was. Here in the UK theatre is 'theatre of the mind', so there are many inexplicable pauses in the plays, I think. The plays with those pauses are sometimes the ones that are highly praised but often I can't really understand those moments, but funnily enough it seems like the people here are saying it is an act of genius but isn't that just an act of suicide for the theatre? It's fine if you're reading a book by yourself. Before we were talking about drama readings, but strangely I think it's better not to take the UK style of drama reading to Japan. Japanese theatre would become boring again. I mean you should do things like that in your own room or rehearsal space, but not in front of people. If it's just reading, isn't it easy? There are no 'throes of creation'. Because it is just 'telling', it doesn't lead to any process of expression. Physical expression is not at all involved in it there.

JF: You do everything from writing the script to directing and appearing in the production and that's almost unheard of in this country...

Noda: Well, it's no more than I was doing in Japan. I also appeared in the performances there. Of course my English is not good enough so Kathryn and the others have really helped me and we've gone forward with everyone in discussion. I'm used to working like that in Japan so even over here it doesn't feel strange. Maybe that shows after all I am a 'discussion' type of person!

JF: What's the highlight of 'The Bee'?

Noda: Naturally all four of the actors are really good, myself included (laughed)!

JF: Do you have any advice to give those who want to work in international collaboration in the future?

Noda: Maybe about money, that's all I can think about (laughed)! Get some, as much as you can!

JF: Lastly please tell us what you expect to come from this second collaboration.

Noda: Mmm, I'm not expecting too much really. I want people to come and see it but that's a desire, not an expectation (laughed)! That's what worries me. Well I don't expect that the audience will be huge right from the start. I just hope that at some point they come. Because if you don't see it you won't know what it is and you wouldn't feel anything from my play, so please come and enjoy it!

(Interview by Junko Takekawa, translated by Simon Williams)

About Hideki Noda

Noda has been a crucial part of Japanese theatre for over thirty years, having set up the renowned Yume no Yūminsha theatre company in 1976. In 1983 he was awarded the prestigious Kishida Scriptwriting Prize for his work 'Nokemono Kitarite', which he later performed at the 1987 Edinburgh Festival. Following on from huge domestic success and other overseas performances in New York, he returned to Edinburgh in 1990 with a performance of 'Half God'. In late 1992 Noda decided to disband Yume no Yūminsha and came to the UK on a scholarship from Japan's Agency for Cultural Affairs for one year. He subsequently founded a new production company, Noda Map, and has continued to have great success in Japan and to work on international collaborations like 'Red Demon' in the UK and Thailand and now 'The Bee'.

© The Japan Foundation, London, 2006