

Contemporary Theater in Japan: Chelfitsch and the Instability in the Scene

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Abstract

The Japanese theater is known around the world for the traditional Kabuki and the classical Noh. However, the contemporary theatrical production in Japan has gained international recognition in the last decades, with the participation in festivals and cultural exchange. These contemporary artists were born in the 1970s and belong to a generation in search of new identity and aesthetic references. They have in common an attempt to understand the meaning of living in a complex and unstable society. The Chelfitsch group is one of the leading exponents of this new artistic environment. The director and playwright Toshiki Okada, winner of major awards, presents an audacious scenic conception through the use of a hyper-colloquial language and exaggerated gestures. The destabilizations in the scene seem to reflect the instability of a society in transition. This paper intends to present connections between performative dimensions of the aesthetic proposal of the Chelfitsch group and the cultural aspects under deep transformation in the Japanese society, where the ancient relations of sociability and power are in crisis.

Keywords: contemporary theater, performativity, body, Japan

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In times of over exposition, with the radicalism of transit between media universes and daily life in the 21th century, we see emerging an oversimplification and an excess of body images in all kinds of media. In opposition to the spectacularization of the ways of life, in theater the materialization of the body sometimes appears as a sign of experience of the presence in the world. The body represents information of an unchangeable reality, from which it is impossible to escape. Singular bodies, freed from aesthetic and standardizing procedures, generating a new relation with the real.

From this perspective, we choose as focus of analysis the work of the Chelfitsch group and the way it presents the body on scene. The group was created in 1997 by the dramatist and director Toshiki Okada, and named from a baby's mispronunciation, evoking Okada's vision about his generation. The Chelfitsch group has a strong international inclusion with countless presentations in festivals around the world. In Japan, Toshiki Okada has already received important prizes such as Kishida Drama Award in 2004, for his play *Five days in March*. The director is well known for his uncommon method, wherein the drama construction is based on over colloquial language, and the construction of body dramaturgy has a strong influence of dance.

The bodies of the Chelfitsch performers do not control their own image. We could say they are inadequate bodies. When talking about inadequacy we have as reference a pattern. Being a group of Japanese theatre it is necessary to briefly discuss the context and patterns we refer to. The theatre is not a relevant presence in the cultural production of the country. As pointed out by Uchino Tadashi (2008), theatre has never taken part of daily life for most of the Japanese people, more used to TV shows and Hollywood movies. For a long time, Japan has not had national theatre, not even public theatres, thus diminishing the importance of this artistic language in cultural education.

Uchino considers the 1990's a period of recognition and legitimacy of contemporary theatre practice, symbolized by the opening of the new National Theatre in Tokyo in 1997, although the author remarks that such legitimacy did not correspond to institutionalization. In view of the economic recession of that period, the plays shown in public theaters had to guarantee the ticket sales, what obviously favors mainstream performances with the presence of famous actors to attract more public. We identify two trends as the most representative over this period: The Quiet Theatre, an attempt to create an authentic realistic Japanese theatre, with a return to psychology and a colloquial use of language, and the social criticism theatre, more involved with political questions.

Nowadays, the contemporary theatre production in Tokyo, marginalized with respect to traditional structures, addresses issues of life in an over-informed city. The vestiges of the XXth century production are still present, although approached in a distinct way. Most of the artists producing contemporary theatre were born in the 1970's, and they are part of the social group known as "2000 class" or "writers of the Japanese lost generation", the people who joined the workforce after the economic bubble. The production of these artists shares the anxiety of attempting to understand the meaning of live in a city like Tokyo, complex and uncertain, from the economic, social and emotional point of view. The emptiness and the blurring of frontiers between subject and object, public and private, human and machine, life and death are expressed in different ways. The certainty of a stable subjective identity is collapsed in these

productions. On the scene, are evident the confusion and weakness of facing a new reality, in an alien Tokyo strange to old habits and patterns (IWAKI, 2011).

The American writer Mary Brinton (2008) conducted research on the Japanese “lost generation”, heir of a declining economy following the bubble of the previous decade, and the consequent institutional crisis. With economy fragility, young people seem to have difficulties with adult life, what would be reflected in the low of numbers of marriages and births. Many of them turn 30 years old still living with their parents and depending financially on them. The author analyses the way social context affects motivation and individual behavior, and vice versa.

Brinton identifies the current young generation, between 20 and 30 years old, lost in the transition between the school universe and the work universe, the passage to adulthood. Where security and identity were once found, there is now a lack of balance, since the social patterns, wherein adults could settle, are completely unbalanced. This generation was not prepared to the new social bases, for instance the new patterns of employment and unemployment, unsteady jobs, part-time jobs, precarious working conditions, and economic marginalization of those not having an elitist education. This has generated a sensation of failure and social isolation of those who have not achieved what society expected from them. On the other side, the author points out that the crisis do not solely bring negative aspects, as it also opens the possibility for unprecedented flexibility in Japan.

This social scenery full of uncertainties is present in the Chelfitse group plays. The environment: convenience stores and internet cafés. The characters: adults in precarious working conditions and people completely isolated from political debate. Young people unable to make, and do not willing to make, the same decisions their parents made. Symbols and signs of a society in transition, in a deep identity crisis. As an example, the characters from *Enjoy* (2006) are part-time workers at a manga-café in Tokyo – extremely well educated people but badly employed. Salary-men and homeless people, who also stop by in the café, unveil a lack of belief in society that impacts the other characters of the play, as if they could also be in this situation in the future. The encounter and misencounter between couples reveal emotional immaturity. For these characters there are no major goals to be pursued through their lives, lived without expectations.

In Okada’s first play of great success, *Five days in March* (2004), a couple spends five days in a motel in Shibuya while protests are held against the sending of Japanese troops to Iraq. The director enacts social problems in Japan and western societies, a turmoil from which emerge broken identities in a global world. The public and private instances seem not to touch each other, as if private life was alienated from social events. In *Super Premium Soft Double Vanilla Rich* (2014), a convenience store is shown as a temple of consumption, a microcosm portraying the diverse conflicts of Japanese society: a Korean employee causes problems to his manager, for being so much exemplary; a girl leaves the market because she cannot live without a product; an employee does not feel prepared for his job; a man enters the konbini to criticize the consumerism but surrenders to the place for physiological reasons; the supervisor embodies the oppression with the voice amplified by a microphone.

Besides the subjects discussed in the text, the way these subjects are presented in Chelfitsch's work through the lack of articulation between language and body, also deserves special attention. The bodies of Chelfitsch performers are fundamental to create an atmosphere that, to some extent, reflects the instability of the Japanese society in recent years. Going beyond the conventions of naturalistic drama, the dance on scene amplifies daily life movement. A dance not connected to the dialogues among the characters. Characters that make remarks more than they take actions, with extremely colloquial speeches. It is the kind of reality distortion that arises when objects are looked upon through magnifiers – the object ceases to be itself because of closeness. It is as if language was overflowed in the way of a movement. As if one actor was a lot of them, a movement that multiplies, reminding Tokyo inhabitants and their obsessive movements.

The choreography construction of Chelfitsch flirts with the lack of articulation of children's bodies - the childhood as a period of life when the rules and the language are suspended. The gestures communicate without any previous meanings, the significations are built and collapsed all the time. There is, in consequence, a communication much more concerned about affecting senses than generating any sense.

Tadachi Uchino, researcher of Japanese theatre and dance, defined Chelfitsch's work as a kind of synthesis between the Quiet theatre of Hirata Oriza¹ and the contemporary dance genre that he names Kodomo Shintai, or child body (Uchino, 2008a). The connection between Oriza Toshiki Okada arises from the colloquial use of language in the dramaturgy. Nevertheless, director Hirata Oriza is not concerned with actors movements. His intention is to get as close as possible to realism on scene, rejecting all vocal or gestural formalism, betting on no acting to create a natural effect. Hirata Oriza influence, does not reflect on the way to conceive the acting, but dealing with the actor's consciousness. Nevertheless, the effects on scene are completely different in the work of these two directors. On an interview made in Rio de Janeiro in October 2014, Toshiki Okada declared that the main difference between his and Oriza's theater/plays was the focus on the bodies of the actors.

It is impossible to think of Okada's work without considering the tension he creates between text acting and body acting. He stated that his method was born from a perception, as spectator, that theatre could never be really truthful as movies at the cinema, mainly because actors did not look natural, even when naturalness was the proposal of the acting. It was as if actors made a great effort to look natural, making the effort more evident than naturalness, so he decided to seek for an artifice radicalization.

When Uchino Tadashi, refers to children's bodies in contemporary dance, there is a possibility of a very powerful understanding which is the identification of children with the potential to subvert the order, deconstruct the norm, without doing it explicitly as a political criticism, but innocently visible. Uchino warns that playing

¹ As way of explanation, the term Quiet Theater doesn't restrict just to Hirata Oriza, but to other playwrights such as: Iwamatsu Ryoo and Miyazawa Akio, who produced works in clear opposition to histrionic and popular theatre done in 1980's, which seemed to reflect the Japanese economic energy that did not fit anyone in the 1990's.

with the deterioration proposed by this disjointed dance – identified in Chelfitsch and many groups of contemporary dance – can indeed encourage the experimentation with the form, opening up possibilities to think about freedom and future. In opposition, it can also be confused with a lack of criticism and self-reflection on what is danced (Uchino, 2008 b).

The estrangement of Chelfitsch poetical scene, caused by the disjunction between what we see and what we listen, shifts all the matter around it. In the disagreement between word and gesture there is no possible naturalness or organicity. The verisimilitude would like to join the dissociated elements, but Okada, tears the representation apart in such a way it never adheres to reality. What is real on Chelfitsch scene concerns the materiality of the body as well as the text, revealed as objects of perception.

In the book *Lo Real en La Escena Contémporanea* (2012) José António Sanchez points out that body centrality in theatre, its real eruption on scene, the aggressive rhythm and choreographic construction are manifestations of hyper-realist theatre, that appear as a sign of conflict between realities and models of life understanding. The search for the material or psychological truth, a paradigm of realist theatre of the early 20th Century, gave way to a bodily truth, guiding the trajectory of many contemporary directors. Sanchez takes embodiment and acceleration of the theatrical scene as coherent procedures with the acceleration of social experience that has its correlate in the acceleration of perception, consequence of the new generators of images mechanisms.

The corporeal hyper-realism, the choreographic naturalism or dirty realism which make uses of video to show whatever innocent naturalism hid are some of the ways of the realist theatre that persist in the engagement to represent visible reality as we see it now. (SANCHEZ, 2012:97)

In the case of Chelfitsch this corporeal hyper-realism that appears in different ways in the contemporary drama creation (for instance, the nudity of extremely fragile or vulnerable bodies) is not committed with the representation of the “visible reality as we see it now”. The game proposed by Okada has/shows/displays a ludic disorder that can be viewed as arising from the excess of the reality outside the scene. Humor and irony are decisive elements for the sensation of estrangement that creates a distance between audience and characters, as well as characters and performers not expressing any emotional engagement.

In the present context of radical spectacularization of society, such distance would be important to let criticism arise. Nevertheless, it is not a direct shock since the ambiguity seems to be a strong feature not only in Toshiki Okada’s writings, but also in his staging, where even the lighting seems to contribute with certain cognitive confusion. In times of pure exhibition and excess of visibility, in opposition to a certain trend of homogenization of the bodies on TV screens, movies, games and mangas, Chelfitsch presents disruptive representations of the hegemonic body images.

The director Okada seems to bet on this disruption as he rejects traditional ways of unifying body and word and he seems to succeed in capturing the relation between daily language and disordered corporeal logic. As a playwright he produces texts in a

most peculiar style that employs a super-colloquial Japanese language, including slangs. He often uses an extremely colloquial speech to build characters, who change subjects without any formality, as we do when we talking to close friends². It is not anymore the flow of inner thought, typical of the intimate narratives of the late 19th Century and early 20th century. In 21th century Japan, with extreme technological development, the dialoguing no longer acknowledges well finished formats, what could be a symptom of a media saturation that also changes the ways of perception. Okada also sees the language as a device that should be freed from restrictions. There is no drama action and we watch several characters that just witness life as it happens. However, the immobility and the passivity are not emphasized in the choreographic construction of bodies. There is an excess of movement, repetition of gestures, lengthening of time, any means of dislocating reality, or what can be captured from it. There is a variation in the use of language. There are bodies disconnected from words.

The speech changes, the body changes, although in an inarticulate way. The speech and the movement appear more and more distant from each other - the director has already declared in different interviews that the movements of the actors are not born from spoken words, but from mental images. I dare saying mental images of a confused generation. He explains that movements do not have to come from language or from speech. The language can merely contribute to build an image, although this image moves the body thus making choreographies possible.

The idea of the speeches, both corporal and linguistic, being born from images, connects to reflection developed by different authors when they analyze contemporary Japanese arts, produced by artists in contact with flattened images from TV, movies, computers, mobile phones. It is worthwhile mentioning the Superflat manifesto (2000) by the visual artist Takashi Murakami, wherein he talks about the flattening and linearity that impacted the perception mechanisms of a screen generation. The Superflat manifesto refers to a tendency towards bi-dimensional sensitivity in Japan, drawing a line from the pioneers of Japanese painting in the XVII, XVIII and XIX centuries up to production of games, animes and mangas, already part of a worldwide culture. This super flattening is like a feeling of reality, almost a physical sensation, a vision of the world that connects past, present and future. In consequence, the surface would appear as the creation axis of the visual poetics of the last decades in that country.

Taking into account culture globalization and perception changes related to media machines, it is reasonable to consider this phenomenon not exclusively Japanese, even though the new ways of subjectivity that the Otaku culture has created in that society should be taken into account. Joel Black, an American author, suggests that new technologies really altered perception of reality throughout XX century, making films references in our lives, even our emotional lives. If there is, on one hand, a virtual exacerbation, there is also, on the other hand, an increasing desire for the real, an idea that it takes exposition to be real. Nevertheless, over exposition of facts and events on screens, either cinema, television or computers, can also generate invisibility.

² In a lecture at SP Theatre School in October 2014 in São Paulo, Toshiki Okada stated that his writing style was influenced by a college work when he had to transcribe conversations that he listened on the street.

For in this neoaesthetic age, when experience is mediated to an unprecedented degree of technology and the mass media, it's all too easy for people to become an-aesthetized, cut off from a sense of the real. And the more desensitized people become, the more sensational are the effects needed to shock them out (...) a substitutive world of virtual of prostreality. (BLACK, 2002:28)

The bodies in Chelfitsch productions seem to want to become three-dimensional all the time, they want to escape from screen flattening, however not to fit into any other already established structure, not even into formal language, thus generating a corporal hyperreality. This is not a body excluded from speech, but a break up with the language itself, not a metaphoric but a metonymic body – a part that shows up as the whole.

From a simple ordinary gesture, amplified and repeated exhaustively, arises a displacement that generates a sensation of nonsense. There is no possibility of illusion of reality. The estrangement is continuous. Everything misfits. The anti-choreography of Chelfitsch highlights a dance vocabulary embarrassed in the body. Perhaps a sign of disarticulation times in Japan, where communication is interrupted, where bonds are not created anymore.

The hurricane of stimuli we live subjected to enriches our perception experiences inasmuch as it leads to sensorial dizziness and cognitive dullness. In times of high technological development of imagery, the material presence of the body is its materiality is launched as an excessive element, in opposition to concluded and perfect readymade media images.

As a kind of resistance to the anaesthetizing referred to by Joel Black, Chelfitsch performers do not make use of the shock aesthetic, procedure used by many contemporary creators, but of a performance dimension that produces new representations of the body, as they bet on a physicality close to dancing, although without any choreographic formalism.

In conclusion, I hope to have made clear the connections between performative dimensions of the aesthetic proposal of the Chelfitsch group and the cultural aspects under deep changes in the Japanese society, where the ancient relations of sociability and power are in crisis. Theater is not immune to such crisis. The Chelfitsch group aims to make it evident. Its performer's bodies break representation conventions, fail – on purpose – to build sense, create a vocabulary that overcomes organized statements. Gestures subvert the order of speech, operating an unnamable corporal logic. The generated effects break any trace of likelihood and generate estrangement. Okada bet on the fictionalization of body performers, creating a sensation of permanent artificiality. Dealing with a reality of economy crisis, tsunamis and atomic disasters, the fiction seems to be the only exit.

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