



## Hamlet: Ninagawa Company

by Kevin Quarmby. Written on 2015-05-21. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: Hamlet (2015, Ninagawa Company, UK).



THE BARBICAN AUDITORIUM FILLS WITH SMOKE. THROUGH THE GLOOM, TWO STYLIZED diminutive shrine figures stand guard to stage left, their eyeless gaze searching off into the distance. Behind, we see the chipped and broken windows of a two-story tenement. A Japanese courtyard within what seems an abandoned industrial complex. Centre stage, a screen projects its Japanese and English message, that “This is a poor quarter of Japan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which is when *Hamlet* was first introduced to Japan. Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we Japanese begin our play *Hamlet*.” All is silent. Ominous. Neglected. Decaying.

Onto the expansive stage troop Yukio Ninagawa’s *Hamlet* cast. Arranging themselves in a straight line facing the audience, they bow with dignity. Red, grey, purple costumes look sumptuously stylish, materially evoking a Japano-Edwardianness that might grace any Paris

catwalk. Hamlet, of course, is in black, his *hakama* embracing his legs like a wailing mourner. Ninagawa's *Hamlet* begins.

Immediately we are thrown into darkness, a somber light offering glimpses of Bernardo and Marcellus as they scurry around, brandishing unwieldy halberds. Constrained by glinting armor, and decidedly Northern European medieval sallets that reflect the East-West cross-cultural theme, the guards are frightened by the Ghost of Hamlet's Father, who appears through an upper-level sliding glazed panel stage left. With a nod to Kabuki magic stage entrances, multiple actors allow the Ghost to appear near-simultaneously in three places at once. The Ghost, also in full armor, is less a fearful apparition, more a sorrowful expression of dumb loss and gloom.

The bleak opening scene suddenly erupts into glorious smoky-red and gold colors as Elsinore's royal court is flooded with light. Three impressive crystal candelabra descend from above as the space fills with dignitaries in various stages of physical decay, all eager to support their newly-crowned king, even if they themselves need the support of canes for their bent backs. An elderly Claudius and Gertrude embrace with the salacious glee of teenagers, as a youthful, longhaired Hamlet, played by Tatsuya Fujiwara, clutches despondently at a downstage-left black flat.

Claudius references the sorrowful joy of the occasion, interspersing his Japanese with the unexpected English phrase, "rainy season," as we meet the other principal characters. Doubling as the Ghost, Mikijiro Hira plays Claudius with the malevolence of a stock villain tortured by guilt. This is a dangerous Claudius, aware of his vulnerability and willing to maintain power through whatever means necessary.

Laertes, a young and westernized courtier (Shinnosuke Mitsushima) looks set to take on the world. His father Polonius is less decrepit than the rest of the court and seems positively paternal in his mirth and good humor. When, later, Taka Takao's Polonius describes Hamlet's believed spiral into madness, he does so with an insensitivity and childish relish that betrays his true character. He might be a loving father to his own children, but he is also tactless and inconsiderate about his queen's feelings when describing the faults in her son.

Gertrude understandably receives the news of Hamlet's mental unrest with anguished concern. Ran Ohtori's Gertrude is both maternal and sexual. Although her marital relationship offers some evidence of sensuality, the moment when her son forcefully mounts her and engages in viciously mocking simulated sex, thrusting her legs apart and grinding his crutch into hers, marks a bitter turning point for the character. Gertrude becomes defiant, lost in her own grief and remorse. When she drinks the poison during the final swordplay, Ohtori's Gertrude does so

with an arrogant disregard for Claudius's command that suggests some prescient foretelling of her own doom.

Ophelia resides within this court fulfilling the dual function of dutiful eastern daughter and oppressed young woman. Hikari Mitsushima gives an astonishing performance as Ophelia, whose innocence seems never in doubt, and whose decline into madness is touchingly realistic. When composed, Mitsushima's Ophelia is corseted and constrained by societal convention. When maddened by loss, Ophelia becomes the helpless wandering child, immersed in song and wonder at the movement of her own hands and fingers.

Other notable characters include the near-identical twins, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Hiroyuki Mamiya and Eiichi Seike), who seem perpetually to struggle with their battered suitcases, so confirming their transience in this troubled land. Indeed, with a twenty-five strong cast, the stage is often filled with fascinating characters, the whole manifesting as a master class for ensemble acting.

Most importantly, of course, is Fujiwara's Hamlet. This Hamlet crouches on the stage, aggressively clutching at his shoulder as he spits his venomous disregard for his uncle. This Hamlet dismisses Ophelia with the tortured regret of a lover, one instant stroking her soft features as she kneels before him, the next striking her with a sideways blow that sends her prostrate at his feet. This Hamlet most definitely blames his mother as he abuses her emotionally and physically. Such dynamism in the prince nonetheless seems ill suited to the self-doubt with which Hamlet seems plagued.

Fujiwara's delivery adds to the dynamic aggression of his Hamlet. When alone in Claudius's prayer room, and confronted by the loin-clothed king (who has enacted his own ice-bucket challenge and scourged himself with a rope), Hamlet expresses his "Now might I do it pat" speech in a hushed, rasping mutter. The Japanese language is well suited to such emotive stage whispering. Fujiwara seems to hold his dialogue in his mouth like a bitter fruit, nasally spitting it at the audience like staccato grape seeds. The effect, aurally, is mesmerizing.

Ninagawa's *Hamlet* is, therefore, undoubtedly accomplished, especially through the truly great performances of its actors. Unfortunately, it also left this reviewer sadly underwhelmed in its East-West conservatism. There was little or no need for the side-of-stage surtitles as this *Hamlet* followed its narrative path with a predictability that seemed counter to its international heritage. This was not so much a Japanese production as a Western production performed in Japanese, with stylized oriental-inspired costuming.

There are moments of theatrical inspiration, of course. When the players perform the Mousetrap, a tumble cloth drops to the ground to reveal a stunning visual tableau. As the press

handout explains, the scene represents a Hinamatsuri, a family festival when Hina-Ningyo dolls are displayed in their glorious classical costumes, mounted on a seven-tiered red-carpeted platform. Ninagawa recreates this image with his actors and the impact, after so little visual display, is breathtaking.

After the play and Claudius's violent reaction, the scene collapses into slow motion chaos. With mime artistry skill, actors roll down the steps or collide onstage, their reactions comically captured with filmic clarity. This reviewer well remembers the effect of seeing Ninagawa's *Midsummer Night's Dream* in the 1990s, where the same slow motion scene capture was used for the Rude Mechanicals, when panicked by Bottom in his ass's head. For a first time viewer, this image is wondrous. In a play with so little visual and physical originality, though, it also seems somewhat incongruous.

Ninagawa's *Hamlet* resides, therefore, in a strange dimension, at once very Japanese and yet oddly European as well. At Ophelia's burial, the presence of an actor in full Christian priest attire undoubtedly complemented the musical accompaniment of recorded Japanese music juxtaposed with medieval plainsong. The presence of these cross-cultural referents did little, though, to elevate the play above an accomplished rendition of a European standard, as performed by Japanese actors with an oriental dusting of confectioner's sugar.

The most notable feature, however, was the youthfulness of Fortinbras, played by Kenshi Uchida. When the stage is strewn with bodies and Hamlet lies dead in Horatio's arms, the blue flags of Fortinbras's Danish army are thrust from tenement windows, to flutter over the kneeling old courtiers wracked with grief. A lone figure emerges through a backstage upper glass door. Fortinbras, naked from the waist up, stands sideways on, his skeletally immature torso defiantly twisted as he gazes disdainfully and nonchalantly at the carnage below. Uttered in the same stage whisper as Hamlet, Fortinbras's "I have some rights of memory in this kingdom" chillingly foretells a regime change that will sweep away the old and herald the new. Uchida's youthful appearance and dangerous delivery suggest that even Hamlet would, in all earnest, have been too old to assume responsibility. Forced by murderous intrigue into the arms of its occupying neighbor, Norway now belongs to Denmark. Perhaps this celebration of youthful power is what the 2015 octogenarian Ninagawa intends ultimately to achieve.