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## *Mourning Becomes Electra*

Directed By Kenichi Shinomoto

Theater X, Tokyo

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Reviewed by Kojiro Kobatake

Translated by Yuji Omori

To fully understand a play, it is generally of great use to have some background knowledge about its cultural milieu. It would be more challenging to understand it when your cultural background is different. However, it is not impossible to make a full understanding and successful production of a foreign play. For instances, in June, 2016, W. B. Yeats' *At Hawk's Well*, inspired by Japanese Noh theatre, was staged at Umeda Arts Theatre in Osaka (starring leading Noh actor Gensho [later Minoru] Umewaka, directed by Rokuro Umewaka and Mansai Nomura, and scripted by Tadashi Muraoka); *La Piccola Compagnia di Commedia de Roma* adapted Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* into a successful Japanese Kyogen production in September, 2005 at Osaka Noh Theatre Hall, while director Yukio Ninagawa employed Kabuki make-up and attire for his production of the comedy in 2007 at Osaka Shochiku Theatre, adding important milestones in Shakespearean production history in Japan after Royal Shakespeare Company's production of the comedy at Nissay Theatre in Tokyo in 1972.

Another great transcultural theatrical endeavor was made by director Kenichi Shinomoto: *Mourning Becomes Electra*, staged at Theater X in Tokyo in October, 2018, was among the most impressive productions of the year (starring Manzo Owari as Ezra Mannon and Kayoko Yokoo as Christin Mannon). Apart from the question whether the atmosphere of New England was created, the production cleverly condensed the long tragedy into four hours with two 10-minute intermissions by employing several techniques of Japanese traditional theaters. In a typical two-part dream Noh play, an old woman in the first part reappears into a traveling priest's dream in the second part, reciting her past story. Similarly, in the opening, Lavinia (Masumi Matsukawa) appeared with a thick book under her arm as an old woman, and slowly proceeded from upstage through thrust stage to the right, where she stayed seated till the end, when

she exited holding the book in order to keep their dark secrets to herself. Indeed, the book was the one written by Orin (Sasami Fujita), and the whole stage was designed as Lavinia's retrospections. Like the narrator in a Johruri performance, Lavinia not only spoke her parts but also read some stage directions necessary to help the audience understand the story to the accompaniment of an acoustic bass player (Shunsuke Mizuno), who was seated at stage right in symmetry to the position of the narrator.

The use of masks was another feature of this production. The young Lavinia (Maya Jinnbo and Megumi Aoki) wore a white full-face mask while male Mannons, including Adam Brant (Daizaburo Arakawa) and those in portrayals, wore smaller black masks around their eyes to emphasize their facial resemblance as the playwright describes as "a realistic mask-like look." Since the masked young Lavinia did not say a word on stage, it was a great idea that two actresses who played the young Lavinia in turn also played some other roles among townspeople wearing no mask in some scenes.

The thrust stage at center was where most actions took place. The exterior of the Mannon mansion was represented at upstage center with an entrance between two round pillars. A drop curtain was hung at the entrance, where, in some scenes, actors remained motionless with their backs to the audience until the curtain was closed, creating picturesque Kabuki-like exits. Upon the thrust stage, several abstract, geometrically figured objects are deftly positioned to set different scenes. For example, the three-step stairs at upstage center were parted right and left, placing a board between them. By adjusting the height of the board, it represented a bed in one scene and a desk in another. The windows of the mansion at upstage center, when turned the other way around, became the Mannons' portraits in the parlor and the study. Two pillars were placed offstage in outdoor scenes while they were placed on stage in indoor scenes. Thus, in an instant, the outdoor scenes were switched into the indoor scenes and vice versa. The number of portraits changed, depending on whether characters are in the parlor or in the study. Given that the premier of this play in New York in 1931 was six hours long with several fifteen-minute-long intermissions to change scenes, which reportedly caused deep sighs among the audience, this cleverly shortened production successfully maintained the audience's attention.

Actors playing minor roles were also worth mentioning: Umeji Sasaki's Seth sung the sailor's song tinged with sadness in a resonant voice; director Shinomoto briefly appeared as a drunken sailor, creating a maritime scene that functioned as an effective comic-relief in dark tragedy. Chorus-like townsmen were also comically played by female actors and vice versa. As storylines in most traditional Japanese plays, in which

murders rarely occur, are not as dark as this drama inspired by Greek tragedy, these occasional comic moments should have worked well for the Japanese audience.

Unfortunately, however, there was no applause at the end of each act. It was partly because the audience did not immediately understand when each act ended with no curtain fall in between. Less than two hundred seats in the small theatre were almost sold out for three performances given in two consecutive days, which shows that it deserves a repeat performance.

This production was based on the Japanese translation of the play, which Yasuo Suga, my late father-in-law and a scholar of English and American literature, published in 1972. Motowo Kobatake, my late real father and a scholar on theatre studies, saw the first production of the play in New York and reviewed it in his book in 1992. Certainly, this production must have entertained and satisfied them. Would that it gave a piece of joy to the soul of Eugene O'Neill as well!

Kojiro Kobatake, a graduate of the University of Tokyo, worked for Marubeni Cooperation and taught at several universities, including Kobe University. An enthusiastic theatregoer, he has seen more than four hundred stages so far regardless of genres.