

On Rashomon | Yabunonaka

George Ibrahim (Artistic Director)

I first read the play script of *Rashomon* in 1975. It was written by two American playwrights, Fay and Michael Kanin, based on the Japanese writer Akutagawa's short story. From that moment on, this play had remained in my mind, not allowing me to forget it. The piece deals with humane questions and deep philosophy. Rashomon gate is the entrance to truth, but the truth is not easy to access. The wrong and right, the true and false, the truth and lies are all comparative concepts – because the truth is somewhat more complicated than what some people imagine it to be. Definitions of true and false are determined by multiple elements that vary according to different doctrines, psyches, environments, and circumstances. As the Wigmaker says, people see what they want to see, and say what they want to hear.

Waiting for its turn, this script had sat in my office as one of the 'others', until my friends in Tokyo contacted and offered me to take part in the international theatre festival this year. I made a suggestion to produce and perform a new version of *Rashomon* – an idea that had sprung up in my mind in that moment. I also suggested the director be Japanese and the actors Palestinian, so that through the co-production process, and the meeting itself, we could discover the two countries' popular heritage, and shared knowledge that the two human cultures can find in each other – despite geographical distance. Humans are the same wherever found, their needs and sufferings are the same, and what distinguishes them from one another is merely the trials and experiences in their lives. I was very delighted to see my colleagues in Tokyo agree to this suggestion, and accept it with enthusiasm. And so we started our work.

I met the producer Chika, director Yukari, and dramaturge Kaku for the first time in Palestine, to exchange our views on the play. The meetings and discussions were very pleasing and fruitful, despite age differences between them – the young and energetic, and me – the aged? Truthfully, thoughts of the young director Yukari and dramaturge Kaku – also young, were extraordinary. At the end of the meeting, we decided to go back to Akutagawa's original text – leaving behind the play script written by the American couple. After my friends returned to Japan, we worked on preparing the text together through exchanging mails.

Our second meeting also took place in Palestine. We chose the team of actors and technicians, and set out on our journey of exploring and experimenting on the text. We

picked the music, technical settings, and the cast, to reach the final form of the play that we developed in our Tokyo rehearsals. I hope we have succeeded – in making this choice, introducing Palestinian culture, and discovering the outstanding Japanese culture through human interaction.

I would like to express my thanks to the Japanese staff who strived in this work – especially director Yukari, dramaturge Kaku and producer Chika. Special thanks to young Maho, for her great efforts in interpreting between Arabic and Japanese, enabling our mutual understanding.

Three-Way Conversation

Yukari Sakata (Direction) + **Haruka Kojin** and **Kenji Minamigawa** from **Mé** (Stage Design)

—Ms. Sakata is the director of this play, while the artist collective Mé is in charge of stage design. Is this the first time for you to work together?

Sakata: Yes. During the first meeting with artistic director George (Ibrahim), which took place in Palestine last February, he suggested that Japanese artists do the stage design. This idea probably came from the fact that the *Rashomon* performance in New York, 1959 was based on Akira Kurosawa's film. Stage design is crucial for the production concept, so I appreciate his consideration that enabled us to work on it in Japan – physically close enough to maintain in-depth discussions.

Minamigawa: I was thrilled with the offer. Akutagawa's stories *Rashomon* and *Yabunonaka* (*In a Grove*) are based on *Konjaku Monogatari* (*Anthology of Tales from the Past*)¹, meaning, they are “once upon a time” or “now long ago” stories—

Sakata: When you think about that phrase “now long ago” – which begins each tale in *Konjaku Monogatari*, it means “present is past” and “past is present”. We shared a sense of excitement at the thought of “transcending time.”

Minamigawa: Based on the classic *Konjaku Monogatari*, Akutagawa wrote the two stories, and then Kurosawa used them as the basis for his film, which in turn inspired some Americans to make it into a Broadway stage. That play script caught George's – a Palestinian man's – attention, which finally led to this project. Feelings and senses shared beyond time and place are things *Mé* has a strong interest in.

Sakata: Since the play is performed in Arabic by Palestinian actors, it would inevitably be seen as something linked to the recent state of affairs in the Middle East. But I'm thinking of taking this work to a more universal level, away from the specificities of Palestine or Japan.

—I heard that in August, during your second stay in Palestine, the city went into mourning. While bombings continued in Gaza Strip, in Ramallah, West Bank – where Ms. Sakata and the company stayed – a young Palestinian man was shot dead during clashes with Israeli troops. Having gone through such experiences, do you think the play can still maintain its universality?

Sakata: I was shocked of course. But...during the workshops in Palestine, we took time for each actor to give a long self-introduction, one every morning. They literally expressed everything about their lives – their hometowns, families, how they grew up under the

¹ A Japanese collection of over one thousand tales written during the late Heian period (794-1185). Each tale starts with the phrase “now long ago”, which is pronounced *ima wa mukashi* in Japanese, or *konjaku* in Chinese-style reading.

post-1967 Israeli occupation, and how they became actors. Naturally, we heard so many different stories – not only those of martyrs, and I felt that we must avoid telling the shocking ones exclusively.

Minamigawa: There's also a scene at the beginning of the play where the actors introduce themselves. I've only seen it in the run through rehearsal, but it left a big impression on me. Although it isn't directly tied to the main plot of the story, when their characters and personalities are conveyed, somehow the Palestinian actors, whose language we don't understand, feel close to us.

Kojin: And each and every one of them is such a character!

Minamigawa: They're like *Dragon Ball* characters, right?

A Sense of Discovering the World

—This is the first time for you (*Mé*) to work on stage design. What were Ms. Sakata's requests?

Kojin: Actually, she requested us next to nothing. We worked as we discussed the plan together.

Sakata: My request was to have artists work on the stage design. I had a feeling that in a multi-layered production like this one, discoveries that emerge from conflicting values, as well as products of common interests, would have broad implications.

Kojin: We braced ourselves when we were told that this project was going to deal with the Palestinian question. But things looked different after talking with Ms. Sakata. *Rashomon* is a story on a specific gate, whereas *Yabunonaka* is about a more abstract interpretation of the world. Ms. Sakata and Mr. Nagashima, the dramaturge, actually visited the ruins of Rashomon gate in Kyoto, and took the same mountain trail that the protagonists did.

Sakata: In *Yabunonaka*, the warrior and his wife encounter the bandit *Tajomaru* on a road in the mountains. This road actually exists today, as the Old Tokaido Road. So Mr. Nagashima and I went for research, each of us on our own.

—Sounds like a research following the steps of the protagonists. Did you encounter *Tajomaru* on your trail, like the couple did?

Sakata: Well, it turned out that I had taken a different trail. I kept going ahead into the grove and got lost...

Kojin: Listening to that story, it felt as if the play was getting covered by clouds of questions and mysteries. Questions like, "Were the couple and *Tajomaru* really crossing the same mountain?"

Minamigawa: When I heard Ms. Sakata say "The grove is a place that is nowhere," I

realized that this abstract sense is what this play aims for – with the incomprehensible being the highest-order concept, the theme is how humans comprehend or accept it.

Sakata: Then you proposed the design plan of colorful beads draping down like curtains. I received the image visual of this plan during my second stay in Palestine, and all of us, including the actors were excited – we thought it was brilliant. But then when I returned to Japan and saw the actual sample, it had become a different thing—

Minamigawa: The beads had grown to the size of a ping-pong ball. You must've been surprised!

Sakata: For a moment I thought, “*What?*” but afterwards, I understood your intention. The balls are concrete and abstract at the same time. Like planets or cells, groups of them consist the world. In other words, it occurred to me for the first time that this was what we had been seeking for – the “place that is nowhere.”

Minamigawa: I think this play is talking about different ways of focusing. So regarding stage design, it'll be interesting if it looked different from different positions in the audience. For example, someone in the first row sees a ball, but another person in the back row sees particles.

—Mé's exhibition *Unreliable Reality - The Where of This World* which took place in the Shiseido Gallery, also showed that the audiences' experience can differ between individuals, or rather, that the juxtaposition of countless experiences is what the reality is.

Kojin: The stage design for this play was based on our art work named *R.G.B.D.* I got the inspiration for this piece when I was gazing at the ceiling in the middle of the night, not being able to sleep. It seemed as though the ceiling was making creepy noises and wriggling around, and eventually I started to see it as chunks of colored particles – red, green and blue. It was then that I had this imagination spread in mind – that maybe everything visible to our eyes are groups of particles of light, and the universe consists of differences in the light's fixation ratio. So what Ms. Sakata felt was very familiar to me.

Sakata: I can also relate to many of the senses that Ms. Kojin feels. When I started music at an early age, at first I didn't know how to score, so I would shut myself up in a silent room and strain my ears to search for sounds. When I hear a familiar sound that's the right note, and by connecting these notes I composed a piece. Now I'm doing the same in theatre. In theatre, you speak the words of somebody else, not yourself. I think our job is to search for the voices of the dead, which are no longer heard but still voiced somewhere. It's similar to the medium that appears in the play – I think it's very close to what I feel towards this world.

From the Many Monologues

—I heard you are now working on run-through rehearsals in Japan. How do you feel about the progress?

Sakata: We're entering a critical phase. At this stage we've only placed the scenes in order. From here on I'm expecting the play to see many changes.

—Do you often alter the order of scenes which has been fixed before?

Sakata: As for me, it's necessary. You can say theatre and music are both arts of timeline. How to build up momentum and create a flow, where to bring the climax...I put in a lot of emphasis on this kind of time flow.

Kojin: In fine art, a piece is considered a work of art only in its completed state, so in many cases it can't adapt flexibly to the audiences' response or changes in the situation. On this project, however, for the first time we're trying to make art work built on direction. We discuss ideas like "let's insert this kind of scene here," or "let's not show that (intentionally)." This is truly exciting, and we're trying out many different things. I hope this doesn't sound insulting, but it feels like doing a fun experiment.

Minamigawa: We're working on another participatory art project called *Day with a Man's Face Floating in the Sky* in Utsunomiya. As for this project, we were actually very much influenced by Ms. Sakata's method of direction. Before, we had been prioritizing space, but we felt we should have more dialogue with each participant and fully engage with them.

Sakata: The plan that George had proposed to us in the first place had more essences of a drama. However, well, this is partly my preference – I like the time during which we listen quietly to the voiceless voice...to listen to monologues of each individual human being. To make funny or comical conversations is one way, but I wanted to face each individual properly and listen to their stories. I wanted to make that the core of this play. It's what I learned from my stay in Palestine, and also from the co-production process with the *Mé* team.

—I feel that Ms. Sakata's and Mé's worlds have a link – they guarantee multiplicity and yet the experience itself reaches personal spaces – like Mé's exhibition in Shiseido. While the feature of theatre is in that people gather in one place and share an experience, I am anticipating this play to be a step beyond that. I'm looking forward to the performance.

(Interview and text by Taisuke Shimanuki)

CAST

Adeeb Safadi

Born and raised in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, Adeeb is a muscular actor who also teaches acrobatics, stage combat and fencing at the Drama Academy of Al-Kasaba Theatre. Among the members he plays the role of a big brother, pulling the team together with his warm personality. When his plan for 2014 – making his first plane trip – was about to fall through, he was offered a role in this project. This visit to Tokyo realized his resolution.

Atta Nasser

Atta is an amiable man from occupied Jerusalem, who has a wide circle of acquaintances. After being a member of Al-Harah Theatre since 2009, he started his career as a freelance actor in 2014. A small but strong fighter, Atta is also a three-time karate champion in Palestine. Superior physical abilities and sharp instincts support his dynamic performance. Although he plays around most of the time, he is a skilled actor.

Husam Al-Azza

Born and raised in Beit Jibrin refugee camp – occupied Bethlehem, Husam is a passionate man committed to his cause. An active actor and director, he is the main figure of the “One-Shekel Theatre Project” for children in refugee camps. His acting, performed instantaneously after deep contemplation, bears the sharpness of a sword-blade (*husam*). Husam has great respect for Akutagawa, describing him as “genius.”

Yasmin Qadmany

Yasmin is from the occupied Syrian Golan Heights. Her mysterious attractiveness stands out among the men on the team. After studying architecture at university in Damascus, she experienced various jobs, moving from place to place. Yasmin now enjoys the new discoveries in the theatre. This is her first project as a professional actress – she is very excited about her first appearance on stage happening in Tokyo.

Shams Assi

Shams is from occupied Nablus. Not being allowed to play outside in their teens, Shams and her sister started extreme make-believe plays in their garden – including soldiers shooting, kidnapping and raping – which eventually developed into magnificent dramas played by puppets. As a member of the Moving Cinema project, she visited many cities such as Hebron, as well as other villages and refugee camps throughout the West Bank. True to her name *Shams* (Sun in Arabic), she is a sunshiny, open-minded and loving woman.

Henry Andrawes

Henry is originally from occupied Tarshiha, now based in Haifa. A passionate husband, he is one of the founders of the quartet “Khashabi Ensemble,” which explores alternative theatrical expressions in Palestine. As an individual, he has appeared in many theatre and film productions both in Palestine and abroad. The first role in his career was “Pigeon” in *The Lazy Pigeon*, which he performed in 6th grade. “I’ve married 25 men” says his wife, describing how drastically he changes when preparing for a role.

Muayad A.Samad

Muayad is a playful, unique, and a healing type of actor from occupied Surda – a town near Ramallah. It seems that George calls him by the nickname “Buddha.” During discussions, he never fails to surprise the team with bizarre ideas that make giant leaps from the ongoing process. Muayad is the fastest learner of Japanese among the Palestinian members, occasionally uttering words of wisdom. He is currently on a diet.

Picture by Atta Nasser drawn during the rehearsals in Palestine