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Cahiers Elisabethains

DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.1177/01847678221137543d>

Published: 01/11/2022

Peer reviewed version

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):
Matsuyama, K., & Olive, S. (2022). Tomio to Yuriko (based on Romeo and Juliet), directed by Suemitsu Kenichi, Kinokinuya Theatre, Tokyo, 6 May 2022, mid-stalls, centre. *Cahiers Elisabethains*, 109(1), 126–130. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01847678221137543d>

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Tomio to Yuriko (based on *Romeo and Juliet*), directed by Suemitsu Kenichi, Kinokinuya Theatre, Tokyo, 6 May 2022, mid-stalls, centre.

Reviewed by: Kyoko Matsuyama, *Komazawa Women's University, Tokyo, Japan*, and Sarah Olive, *Bangor University, Wales, and Kobe College, Japan*

This innovative production offered the perfect solution to the problem of Shakespearean tragedies being unpopularly seen as ‘bad end plays’ in Japan, whereby young people seek out the ending of a play or movie, before deciding whether or (quite often) not to consume the whole text (www.gendai.ismedia.jp/articles/-/93852). Evidence of this phenomenon can be seen in the tagging of ‘bad ending’ stories using a hashtag in front of the transliterated loanword ‘baddoendo’ (#バッドエンド) on online user-generated creative writing, social reading, and fanfiction platforms, like *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* (小説家になろう) and Pixiv. The director, Suemitsu Kenichi, had created a Japanese script that deftly navigated audiences’ pre-existing knowledge of and aversion to Shakespeare’s closing this story with the double suicide of two young people – one barely into, the other perhaps just out of their teens; their bereft but implicated families; the confession of a trusted adult’s creepy complicity; and the hyperbolically promised, unfeasible-sounding, Band-Aid of a statue of Juliet cast in pure gold for Veronese citizens to admire.

After a prologue in the style of a stand-up comedy duo, the opening scene shows Romeo (Hamanaka Bunichi) writing a diary – on bright red note-paper. It is in flashback, since his and Juliet’s family are looking on and commenting as he commits his thoughts to paper. The premise is that they have discovered the diary after the death of the two protagonists, and we see the key events in the pair’s relationship through Romeo’s words, from its tragic ending to their love-at-first-sight meeting. Crucially, the action of the plot is reversed – so we end at the point where the couple are perhaps at their happiest. However, in this production, there is no sign that Verona will ever be at peace any time soon: the families bicker at every opportunity during the play, even threatening each other with clubs, baseball bats, knives, and crowbars.

Other twists that the adaptation introduced were that when Romeo and Juliet (Sakurai Hinako) kissed, they were not alone but cheered on by Romeo’s friends chanting for, and daring, them to do it. This meant that their brief kiss was quickly interrupted by the continuing hubbub – perhaps to fit with cultural conventions avoiding intimate displays of affection in public, even on the stage. The only other time the two characters romped together, around their marriage, they were on a bed, covered by a large sheet, emerging fully dressed and only slightly dishevelled, in contrast to many Anglocultural and European films and stage productions. Additionally, this production did not play Friar Laurence (Ogata Susumu) as a priest, perhaps because of its setting within Japanese society (where the longer-established Buddhism and Shinto jostle with the Christianity introduced later by missionaries), or perhaps because the play’s setting had been updated to modern times: few families, in any country, now retain a personal priest in their service. Instead, he was a barman, mixing up cocktails in a basement bar and pouring wine for sleazy politicians, like Paris (Okui Shuji), who made a strong but repugnant impression in a boastful entrance dressed in ridiculously flashy clothes. This added to the portrayal of the families as slightly seedy, gangster types.

The use of bold colour and lighting design was striking throughout (stage art by Tanaka Toshie; lighting by Kato Naoko). When Juliet spoke of her fear about swallowing the potion that would allow her to feign death and escape her family, she was dramatically lit in a cone of bottle-green light. Seeing Juliet as though she were trapped in the vial threw an emphasis on her increasingly vulnerable position from this point onwards in the play, having locked herself into a plan with little scope or means to back out, despite her doubts. The production’s prominent use of red conveys sensuality in Japan, as it does in multiple cultures, but also has a

more local connotation of sunset or twilight, and metonymically represents the end of an era. Perhaps here red marks the end of these two lovers' lives and trails the promise of a close to their families' factionalism. The use of red throughout, a colour also associated with *matsuri* (festivals), aligned well with this adaptation's setting around a summer carnival rather than a Capulet ball. Other props that added to the festival feel included *bonbori* (paper lanterns) and candy floss. Fireworks, which featured on the publicity materials for the production, were conjured by a combination of sound effects, coloured flashing lights, and parasols.

Yet the colour symbolism of red was double-edged, since as well as festive joy, it marked the play's saturation in young blood. Many of the characters wore red costumes and when characters were stabbed, instead of fake blood, several deep red parasols would pop open around them, arguably more of a spectacle – and more clearly visible, even to those sitting at the back of the theatre – than stage blood (Costume by Hata Kumiko). It recalls a long tradition in Japanese theatre's staging of modern drama (*shingeki*), using Western works and/or theatre styles, of stylising the depiction of blood on stage. Ninagawa Yuki's use of skeins of thick, red thread in his *Titus Andronicus* is a famous past example. Both the parasols here and that yarn allow a feeling of detachment from the reality of such an occurrence and give a more dream-like quality. This heavily stylised bloodshed that could be undone with at the snap of the parasol fastening, contributed to keeping the overall mood mainly light and production pacey: it was literally two hours' traffic.

The costumes indicated a somewhat different status between the Montagues and the Capulets. The Montagues wore slightly more modern dress, a little more informal than their rivals, the overall suggestion being that they had come into their wealth recently and were not quite wearing it well. The Capulets wore more traditional Japanese attire. Tybalt (Itakura Chihiro) showed off his bad-boy, *yakuza* (gangster) credentials with sleeve-style tattoos, and his shirt unbuttoned down to his belt. Makeup (by Takei Yuko) was very natural-looking, with the exception that Lord Capulet and some other members of his family had pale, painted faces with thick black makeup around their eyes. This stylisation suggests that these characters are 'dead' (if only morally or spiritually) since, in the flashbacks their families see of the now-deceased lovers, they look more natural and alive than the living relatives that they have left behind and who belatedly witness their love. Music (Yoshimoto Shinya) was chosen to suggest and enhance the mood of different scenes: it was upbeat and traditional for the public festivities, sometimes soft jazz, or slow, piano and cello music for romantic moments that the couple shared.

The acting was highly physical throughout. For example, during their fight scene, the actors playing Romeo and Tybalt moved their bodies and props in a way that created the effect of them racing each other around the city, even though in reality they were on a small and shallow stage. Rapidly spinning parasols held low-down in a row, by other cast members, gave the impression of the fast-moving wheels of a car or bus, which the two recklessly dodged in their bloody-mindedness. Juliet conveyed the aura of a young privileged daughter very well. When she wanted to get her own way with her mother, nurse, or Laurence, she would convincingly threaten to bite off her tongue – a traditional means of suicide among warriors captured by their enemies in Japan. Generally played rather cutely, she suddenly looked like a burly, big-chinned warrior from a *musha-e* (pictures of warriors from Japan's Edo period) when she struck this pose. Her action also suggests *shiko*, a movement often seen in Sumo wrestling. Sumo wrestlers do their *shiko* as a warm-up exercise right before they start fighting. She would stand with her legs wide and her hands resting on her knees to brace herself. Thus posed, she looked strong and resolute: no-one could doubt her determination, so these characters quickly yielded to and placated her.

The acting of the two leads in the double-death scene was heart-breaking. Romeo arriving to find Juliet apparently dead, he peremptorily poisoned himself. Juliet immediately

woke up, overjoyed that their plan seemed to have worked. She mistook Romeo's death throes, as he stumbled around the stage in agony, for a practical joke and laughed at him, until he ceased moving. That she read his movements as a prank conveyed the sense of this as an immature, teenage relationship – where the characters are as used to teasing and fooling each other, as they are to making love. As Juliet stabbed herself, in her quest to be united with him in death, actors wearing *kitsune* (fox spirit) masks entered the stage.

We were surprised from the start of the performance by how much the audience were laughing, seemingly very spontaneously. We are not used to quite so much free-flowing, belly laughter in Shakespeare's tragedies (as opposed to the nervous titters of horrid laughter), but it indicated the audiences' relaxed enjoyment of the production, following its re-ordered plot, as well as subscribing to the adaptation's sometimes tongue-in-cheek approach. This included opening the show with two of the male actors standing at microphone, a bit like a comedy duo at a stand-up event. They jocularly instructed the audience on how to enjoy the show and stay safe due to the pandemic. The audience was made up of a broad demographic, including people of all ages and genders. The fact that they warmly applauded the performance suggests that many people who like theatre would enjoy this production: not just scholars or students of Shakespeare. The play's adaptation into a recognisable, if not completely contemporary, Japanese setting means that audiences are not likely to be confused or feel estranged by the play's now-archaic, European setting. Its use of an everyday, Osakan dialect, is also likely to make it more approachable for a wider section of the Japanese public than Shakespeare's English or the historic Japanese now rarely heard outside Noh theatre. According to Suemitsu, working with the dialect of Osaka allows the play to move at a fast pace, because the dialect has more beat, is more up-tempo, than the Tokyo dialect (programme notes). Kondo Shouri (who plays Bentarou, or Benvolio) has claimed in an interview that if the script was spoken in Hyoujyngo (standard Japanese) it would take an extra 15 minutes to finish (www.25jigen.jp/interview/71072).

Although Shakespeare tends not to be taught at high school in Japan, and university English literature programmes do not universally mandate Shakespeare (he is not infrequently optional), familiarity with aspects of the story is widespread. More students at Kobe College chose various editions of *Romeo and Juliet* than Shakespeare's other works combined in a recent book hunt that I observed at their library, for instance. For newcomers to the play, this apparently light-hearted production engages them in a darkly compelling voyeurism, episodically filling in the backstory to a death scene, a familiar structure from fictional and true crime, detection-based, popular culture. For the jaded viewer, this adaptation's energetic delivery and bold visual statements offer fresh enjoyment of a play that sometimes feels 'done to death'. In a conversation reproduced in the programme between Suemitsu, Sakurai and Hamanaka, Suemitsu boldly says that he wants to do Shakespeare in a performance style that is closer to its Renaissance origins on London's Southbank, more vulgar (in its older sense of popular), coarse or wild. At the same time, he wants the experience of watching it to be more like an entertainment movie. He questions the way Japanese practitioners and audiences tend to treat Shakespeare as something very sophisticated or belonging to high culture. Suemitsu says that, of course, he cannot deny the value and influence of a *great* director like Ninagawa but, to him, Shakespeare's greatness lies not in a sense of loftiness.

Author biographies (about 60 words each)

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