



Playing in No Man's Land?

By Jean-Gabriel DUPUY



Author Jean-Gabriel Dupuy

First Steps

France, in the late 1980s. A friend asks me: "Do you have any plans this weekend?" "No, none in particular." "I signed up for a theater workshop, an initiation to the Comedia dell'arte. Would you be interested?" "Well, not really. I'm more the music type..." "Come on, just give it a try!"

Eventually, I just give in. So here I am, on a Saturday morning, "in the limelight," so to speak, struggling to improvise a scene imposed by the workshop director. She comes up to me and whispers: "Your presence is fine, but you're not going far enough. Be more daring, try to surprise yourself!"

To dare. To surprise oneself. This pair of keywords opened the gates to theater...and to myself. Because theater is, indeed, a stage where the tension between dreams and reality becomes "playable."

A few years later, stimulated by this eye-opening experience, I left France for Japan.

One-way Ticket

That is how I began my career as a teacher at Tokyo's Institut franco-japonais. Patrice Julien, then assistant director of the institute, told me later that the theatrical experience mentioned on my resume had prompted him to hire me. In the mid-1990s, he was very successful in organizing public "improvisation jousts" in French at the institute. Unfortunately, the ritual did not survive his departure, and for a while theater also disappeared from my life.

"Intrigue Theater"

In 2002, while at NHK, I come across a man named Mozaffar Shafeie, a news reader at the public radio/TV network's Persian section who had played at the National Theatre in London. Having just set up a company called 'Intrigue Theater,' composed mainly of English-speaking actors, he is about to present his own version of "The Miser" by Molière and offers me a part in the play. Of course, the script is an English translation, and I'm the only French in the lot. I soon become aware of the difficulty of playing in a foreign language and start struggling with some of the sequences.

One day, Mozaffar suggests that I play my scene in French. I comply immediately and the result seems convincing. "Excellent! From now on, you will say those lines in French, and Harpagon (played by a British actor) will reply in English." This formula turned out to be worth remembering, as in the end it succeeded in winning over the audience.



"Ame no Nioi" (*The Scent of Rain*)

"Liberthéâtre"

Mozaffar having gone back to London, theater exits my life for a while until I meet Philippe Mesmer, Tokyo correspondent for the French daily *Le Monde*. Together, we set up a company called "Liberthéâtre" that retains the spirit of Mozaffar's idea: each actor, whether Japanese, British or Korean, will play in his own language. We fine-tune the process with a supertitle system in Japanese to reach a wider audience. This formula allows us to play at the Agora theater, headed by the renowned Oriza Hirata and his company, "Seinendan" (Youth Troupe). At a pace of one play per year, we successively present "The Bald Soprano" (Eugène Ionesco), "Antigone" (Jean Anouilh) and "The Collection" (Harold Pinter).

Hideki Nagai, an actor from "Seinendan" who played in "The Collection," tells me about the "Tokyo Tanbarin" company directed by his partner, author and director Hiroko Takai.

"Tokyo Tanbarin"

I discovered Takai's work through "Kashoku," a play inspired by the writings of Osamu Dazai (1909-1948). I was immediately struck by the power of her direction, the skill of the actors and the originality of the scenography. An impression later confirmed with "Shizuka na Baku" (*Silent Explosion*) and "Ame no Nioi" (*The Scent of Rain*).

I share my admiration with Hideki, who of course conveys my impressions to Hiroko. As this exchange continues, the idea of a theatrical collaboration takes form. A workshop is organized in the summer of 2009, which leads to my first "immersion" in a Japanese company. The first improvisations are far from easy, as I stumble again on the language barrier, but Hiroko and her actors lend me a helping hand through their flexibility, benevolence and outstanding professionalism. My Japanese is shaky and they don't speak any French. Theater becomes a "third language," and this experience turns out again to be "playable," as if by magic.

Starting from Zero

Fall of 2009. Hiroko considers extending the workshop experience into an original play. She decides to custom-tailor a script for the actors who participated in the workshop, while bearing in mind that an exogenous presence – myself – complicates her task considerably. The title imposes itself well before the first act is put down on paper: "Zero Kara Hajimeru" (*Starting from Zero*).



"Shizuka na Baku" (Silent Explosion)



"Zero Kara Hajimeru" (Starting from Zero)

The title is inspired by an existing French-language manual, but it also refers to the very nature of experience. Here we are, without a starting point, with no real destination to speak of, and with our passion for theater as only luggage. "Writing Degree Zero" for Hiroko, and – as far as I am concerned – "Japanese Drama Degree Zero."

The first rehearsals take me back to the usual language difficulties. I get the same treatment as my Japanese colleagues, which implies that I must read the text as it evolves with each session, understand the director's instructions and utter my lines as naturally as possible. Every time I face a period of self-doubt or discouragement, the actors and actresses of Tanbarin succeed in lifting me back on my feet.

This company is always permeated with an atmosphere of joyful creativity, where seriousness never undermines our good spirits and joy. The joy of playing, of striving to fulfill the author's intent. Hiroko excels at orchestrating the potential of her actors. She knows exactly when to impose herself and when to take a back seat. Through a well-balanced combination of authority and benevolence, smiles and solemnity, she manages to set out the conditions for a kind of collective writing, even though the initial score is her own.

Some may say that Japanese people are dull, or incapable of freeing themselves from a system of restrictive codes and formalities. A conductor once told me that European musicians could jump, between two concerts, from mediocrity to the sublime. On the other hand, he believes that Japanese musicians – although outstanding in terms of technique and regularity – are rarely capable of reaching a state of grace, because they worry too much about perfection.

My experience within the Tanbarin company leads me to refute this preconception – or at least its accuracy as a general statement. Indeed, I had the privilege of discovering a world that combines a French sense of *légèreté* with Japanese rigor.

One must also understand that the status of show-business contractors, as it prevails in France, does not exist in Japan. France's social security system provides actors with a complementary income between working periods. This status consists in alternating contracts with periods of inactivity covered by unemployment insurance.

There is no such system in Japan, which means most actors have to take up an *arbeito* – "odd job" in Japanese – to cover their expenses between plays. But all this hardship and insecurity are not enough to undermine their main motivation: a passion for theater. In this respect, the energy they display on the stage is worthy of praise and admiration.

The play *"Zero Kara Hajimeru"* was developed on a shoestring. It

was co-financed by different sponsors (Institut franco-japonais de Tokyo, restaurant "French Dining," "Atelier Haco," Association des Familles franco-japonaises du Japon – AFFJJ, and "Académie Tokyo-Paris"), and with the help of a small production agency, "Enfants." The sound, lighting, accounting and ticket booth were all manned by Tanbarin actors who were not part of the cast.

And thus a theatrical project was carried out thanks to the goodwill of all participants. The simple idea of a cultural exchange between a Japanese company and a French actor led, in the end, to a first production whose originality succeeded in reaching out to the audience at the "Atelier Shunpusha" theater in Kotakemukaihara (Itabashi Ward, Tokyo).

The play focuses on an unscrupulous French-language teacher – interpreted, as it was, by myself – who misappropriates his students' money by having them subscribe to an unlikely study-abroad holiday. The teacher's despicable plan is carried out with the help of a Japanese female student who turns out to be at least as corrupt. During the play, she seduces and marries one of her classmates before taking flight with his money. The overall tone is rather that of a comedy, with songs by Serge Gainsbourg punctuating the interludes. The sets are changed in plain sight, in a choreographic style that is typical of Hiroko.

The Score

Despite the criminal collusion between a French impostor and a not-so-respectable Japanese woman, reality was much kinder than fiction. In the end, the play was a very positive collaboration, with Hiroko accepting to adapt the schedule of her professional actors to the more irregular rhythm of a foreign amateur.

Moreover, this adventure led to a real language exchange, since most of my lines were written in Japanese. The Tanbarin actors, for their part, had to speak in French while learning the alphabet, the numbers, the days of the week and all the other words usually found in a beginner's manual.

But our encounter was not just limited to a linguistic dimension. It also evolved along more subtle aspects of human interaction, in an artistic and cultural "no man's land" that is too often left untouched. If a similar opportunity ever arises, I won't hesitate a second. **JS**

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