

A Concise Report on My Work Experience at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre

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Introduction

A new perspective often causes a shock. One of such well-known cases is McArthur's Universal Corrective Map drawn by Stuart McArthur of Melbourne, Australia in 1979. It is the world's first "modern" upside-down map with the Southern hemisphere up. When he came to Japan as an exchange student, he was mocked by his exchange-student friends from the USA for coming from "the bottom of the world." This unpleasant experience made him realise that his homeland did not necessarily have to be either at the periphery or at the bottom in the world map. The thus born map successfully provoked a sensation not only among intellectuals but also for many ordinary pupils in geography class all over the world because of its "unfamiliar" appearance. (It has sold over 350,000 copies) It played a significant role in the sense that it employed the device of defamiliarisation to send an ideological message from "the bottom of the world" against the Eurocentric point of view and provide a deeper insight into the world order.

My work with the Royal Shakespeare Company was a similar but comforting shock. I was involved in one of the Complete Works Festival productions, *Titus Andronicus*, from 11th to 24th June, 2006. The RSC launched this ambitious project in April 2006 and will stage all the Shakespeare plays in one whole year by March 2007. One of the features of this project is to invite theatrical companies from overseas (South Africa, Germany, India, and Japan) to present their newly interpreted plays in collaboration with the RSC. During the above-mentioned two weeks, the RSC invited the Ninagawa Company from Japan. The Ninagawa Company has already established fame in Japan. It is said that each time the company performs in Japan more than 95 percent of the seats are sold. However, this tour was a challenge for even that highly acclaimed company away from their home country. English people could get some information about the reputation of the company before their arrival in England, thanks to the Internet and other media, but their performance would be evaluated by a non-Japanese audience virtually from scratch. In other words, this was a challenge not only for those who invited them but also for those who were invited.

I worked as a translator and a facilitator between the two companies, together with six other translators. This experience provided me with a totally different angle of looking at the play on the stage from that of the audience. I literally felt so on the first day of my work when I stood on the stage and looked around the audience seats from there. The perspective that my blessed position bestowed on me was, however, more than a reversed point of view. It has to be understood three-dimensionally. If the viewpoint from the actors on the stage can be compared with that of looking at a south-up map, then the drama critics' reviews will be regarded as an attempt to write from an omniscient point of view in an artificial satellite looking down on the earth. On the other hand, my perspective, also privileged, was that from the centre of the transparent globe looking up at its surface from inside. I describe my position in this way because I was both one of the members of staff who committed to the programme and a person who officially did not belong to neither of the two companies. It is also because I would like to show my sense of respect for their work; it was really worth looking up to.

This report is, therefore, a record of my work with the RSC and the Japanese company, written from a point of view that, as I would like to express it with much pride, only a limited number of people can obtain whom the wheel of fortune allowed to participate in this project from outside. The unique standpoint enabled me to observe the theatrical work both from inside and outside. I will explain what I have learned from this experience in the following six sections: 1) how the performance was held; 2) my work in detail; 3) human relationships; 4) several “funny” episodes; 5) a review comparison; 6) as a conclusion, how this experience will influence or has influenced my study.

Before I go into details of these sections, first I would like to thank all of the RSC and Ninagawa Company members and my colleague translators, especially Rachael Barber, Thelma Holt, and Deborah Shaw in alphabetical order. I am pleased to express my happiness to have had an opportunity to be befriended by many members of staff and actors of both of the two companies as well as with the Indian company members who performed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* during the overlapping period at the Swan Theatre. I can say that the two weeks at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre was the best time ever in my life.

1. How the production was staged

Titus Andronicus was performed as a collaborative presentation by Ninagawa Company (directed by Yukio Ninagawa) and the RSC. All the actors were Japanese and the play was performed in Japanese with the English surtitles (everyone concerned, even the person who input the surtitles, called them “subtitles,” by the way). The RSC and Ninagawa Company staff cooperated in the following points:

A) stage crew

- .get-in, fit-up, and get-out with the instruction of the Japanese Company

- .maintenance of the properties

- .cleaning the stage (mopping) for set-back

- .sharing work during the rehearsal and the actual performance (e.g. opening and closing the gates, moving in and out the properties)

B) wardrobe department

- .maintenance of the costumes (steaming and sewing if necessary)

- .dress changes during the performance time

C) sound department

- .sound check

- .sound control during the performance

D) lighting department

- .lighting check (change lights or bulbs if necessary)

- .controlling the spotlights during the performance

E) department chiefs (technical manager, stage manager, staff from the production company, etc.)

- .stage check in general

- .briefing and meeting

The Ninagawa Company had already given the same performance many times in Japan in 2004 and again in 2006 before they came to UK with few changes of cast members from the previous performances. Therefore, the Ninagawa Company had the know-how. However, they were not familiar with the theatre itself and life in UK. In addition, they could not afford to bring all the staff to Stratford due to budget issues (still, some Japanese staff members came to Stratford at their own expense as they wanted to see the theatre work at this world-famous theatre). Most work was done on the initiative of the Ninagawa Company because of their previous experience in Japan. The RSC staff substituted for the lacking staff, explained their work style, and frequently (meaning almost every night) went to Dirty Duck together with Japanese company members after work for socialising.

This does not mean that the RSC simply offered a stage for performance and a handful of members of staff for help. All the RSC main theatre staff were involved in this project and with their expertise about their workplace helped the visiting company deal with any unfamiliar situations. In fact, the success of *Titus Andronicus* lies in the good cooperation between the two companies. As Deborah Shaw, Director of the Complete Works Festival, described at the first briefing with the Japanese translators, “we are a big family of fifty-eight people.” The success was also mutually beneficial because, for the Ninagawa Company, they could not have presented the same quality of the performance as they had done in Japan if it had not been for the help of the RSC and, for the RSC, *Titus Andronicus* performed by the Japanese company opened up a new possibilities (I will explain this later in this report).

2. My work in detail

My main work at Stratford was translation. I translated all kinds of conversations imaginable and unexpected between the RSC and Ninagawa Company. They ranged from casual chats in a cosy atmosphere to negotiations at important briefings. The translators were in great demand because most of the Japanese staff and actors could speak little English, not to mention the RSC staff members who could speak little Japanese. I also had a chance to interpret a speech by Deborah Shaw at a lunch party and one by Michael Boyd at the Press Night party. These were wonderful opportunities, but, to be honest, also made me very nervous because I had to do it in front of a large audience and I knew that it must be as flawless as possible (later people at the parties gave me belated reassuring words that it would have made no difference even if I had made many mistakes, for few people there understood both of the two languages and could have noticed translation errors). In most cases, however, I interpreted one-to-one conversations in the workplace or at the pub after work. One thing I realised is that Japanese theatre jargon was more difficult to translate than English expressions and I had to ask the meanings.

Through this work I learned how precedent knowledge helps translation work. I had had no previous work experience at any theatre. This often made it difficult to understand the content of their conversations. All in all, however, both of the two companies were patient enough to put up with the quality of my work. In fact, two weeks were enough time to get used to the work and I myself saw a dramatic improvement. On the other hand, I understood the two speeches at the parties fairly easily, owing to my knowledge of RSC history and the of the Complete Works. I did a little research on these topics before I went to Stratford. This helped me understand the speeches well because the main themes of these speeches were about the

relationships between the RSC and Japan and the stage performance, as was relatively easily expected.

Aside from the work as a translator, I also helped the Japanese company staff and actors with their stay at Stratford. For example, I helped them book taxis, searched information on the Internet about public transport to London for their day off, and told them how to express things in English. I even volunteered to go to a member of the audience during the intermission on the first day of performance and asked an elderly couple from Australia how they liked the performance, because actors were very anxious to know the reaction from the audience. Some members of the RSC staff were also keen to learn Japanese words and phrases and I became their instant Japanese teacher as well.

The first week until Friday of Ninagawa Company's stay at Stratford was spent in rehearsal. During this time I had much work to do, because everybody was confused about the content of their work and the work procedure. I worked from 9.00 am to 22.00 pm then. Once the show started and everybody understood the flow of work, I began to have less and less work (they are professional and it took them little time to overcome differences and grasp the work procedure). During the second week I worked from 16.00 pm to 23.00 pm. My work then was to be on call on the stage while the stage crew cleaned the stage to prepare for the performance from 19.30 pm and checked the condition of the tools and costumes at the stage wings and the backdock. During the actual performance time, I was at the stage right and was on duty for any situation where a translator would be needed. I had only sporadic work then and mostly I was chatting with staff and actors.

I should say that the chatting was an equally precious experience. Through these talks I made friends with the staff and actors and learnt many "in-affairs." For example, a Japanese actor let me know his impression about the audience at Stratford. He said that audience in the UK tend to come to see a play because they genuinely want to see the play, whereas 60 per cent of the theatre audience in Japan is composed of fans of particular actors and they come to a theatre in order to see the actors in mind. Such knowledge and information like this that I accumulated during my work at the theatre gave me a new perspective in the way I saw plays, which I will talk about in more detail later.

3. Human relationships

One of the most important things that I obtained at Stratford was human ties. It is no doubt that this has become my greatest fortune. After two weeks of working together, I was surprised to realise how many people I had become acquainted with in such a short period of time. Perhaps there is nothing surprising about this. We spent intense time together at the same workplace for the same goal. I also hit a pub with actors and staff together. I invited several members of staff to my accommodation and we had lunch together. I truly wish that the Ninagawa Company had stayed longer so that I could have worked with this team longer. I do not think that we all will keep in touch in the future, but I have already received several e-mails and letters from the friends I made at the theatre. This is reassuring enough to know that I am still connected with them.

4. Episodes

Although I cannot introduce all the experiences I had at Stratford here, I would like to talk about

several funny episodes. It was a frequent occurrence that you saw Antony from the production of *Antony and Cleopatra* watching a World Cup football match on TV in full armour in the Green Room. We also had two consecutive accidents. One day we had a gas alarm only thirty minutes before the performance started and all the people, whether they were staff, actors, or audience, had to evacuate from the theatre building. It was windy and cold outside. Twenty minutes passed after the evacuation and still there was no sign of being able to re-enter the building. My accommodation was right across the street from the theatre. Worried that they might catch a cold, a few actors and members of staff (from both the RSC and the Japanese company) came to my house to take shelter from the cold. I welcomed them and served tea to them. We stayed there only for fifteen minutes or so, but we had an enjoyable time together chatting and making jokes (even in this situation I did not forget my duty and interpreted their conversation). For example, one of us suggested jokingly that we should wear gas masks and perform, and then another said, “What about the Goth masks we are using?” Another said, “What about the audience?” Another said, “Imagine a situation in which the whole audience wears a Goth mask!” One of them even let out his anxiety that he wondered if he could regain his concentration under this heart-warming atmosphere.

I heard a bell ringing in the middle of the same night. I first thought that my alarm clock was going off. With dozy eyes I stopped it, but the bell was still ringing. Then I realised that it was the door bell ringing. I had no idea who would visit me at half past two at night. I went downstairs, opened the door, and saw more than thirty people in front of the door. They asked me to let them in. Imagine that having unexpected guests of that large a group of people at night! The thing was that the hotel where all the members of Ninagawa Company stayed had a fire alarm. Again they had to evacuate. As I mentioned above, it was two-thirty at night and was even colder than at the previous evacuation. Fortunately or not, the hotel was located only one block away from my accommodation. Therefore, they had decided to come to my place for shelter. My house was packed with almost all the Company members. This time they stayed at my house for five minutes until the fire alarm stopped soon. Of course, it was one of the unforgettable experiences at Stratford.

5. The reviews

Two days after Press Night, copies of the drama reviews were posted on the staff bulletin board in the theatre. I saw Japanese actors reading them and they looked curious about what comments English critics wrote about them. However, all of them claim that, although they are delighted to read favourable reviews, they “do not give a damn” even if they have critical reviews because they trust the director and when he says, “Good,” then it must be good.

These reviews mainly discussed the symbolic presentation of Ninagawa’s theatrical performance. They focussed on the big statue of a wolf with two babies under it at the centre of the stage (see the picture on the right side taken from the homepage of Saitama Arts Theatre of which Yukio Ninagawa is the Artistic Director). This statue stands aloof and is actually not involved in the flow of the drama at all. It just stands there and the actors on the stage act as if they take no heed of it.



It is a legendary wolf, which is said to have brought up the founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus. In fact, the stage set has an original in Italy (where you can buy a miniature at a souvenir shop). The story of Romulus and Remus includes a sequence of bloody brotherly murders over the throne, and, as *Titus Andronicus* opens with a scene where two brothers argue over the throne of the Roman emperor and later the play develops into a bloody web of revenge, the statue of the wolf and the two babies seems to show the unchanging history of bloodiness of the Roman empire since its foundation. The reviews also focussed on Ninagawa's use of red thread instead of red liquid to represent blood. They argued that his symbolism enhanced the performance to a highly artistic level.

Later after I returned to Warwick, my mother sent me a copy of a review of Ninagawa's performance at Stratford in a Japanese newspaper. It does mention the symbolism, but the main argument is about the universality of the performance. The review praises the success of the performance and remarks that Ninagawa's presentation was accepted at the home of Shakespeare because it successfully described the human universality. It says that there is no single Japanese element found in the performance. Interestingly enough, English reviews formed a sharp contrast to this Japanese comment. They indicated that the success also lay in the tactful but adventurous appropriation of Shakespeare's drama to Japanese culture by referring to the samurai warrior-like costumes (the RSC staff called the lotus leaves "prawn crackers", but this is a different story) and stated that Ninagawa adopted English culture and presented it in a new style.

My understanding is that the Ninagawa Company used very Japanese costumes, for example, that of the clown. However, more importantly, the difference of attitude between the English reviewers and the Japanese reviewer seems to show their different wishes about how they want to accept a thing from a different culture or be accepted by a different culture. The English reviewers pay attention to the Japanese elements of the properties not only because exotic elements tend to draw more attention than familiar ones, but also, I argue, because they wish to welcome the return of their culture that has been well adapted to the culture of the far-east country. The Japanese reviewer, on the other hand, wishes to believe that the level of performance by the Japanese company is up to standard of the authentic staff, critics, and audience in England.

On the other hand, the very people who were involved in the theatrical performance understood their own *Titus Andronicus* somewhat differently from these reviewers. For one thing, the RSC staff admired the performance because it was a great performance. They did not understand Japanese of course, but they knew what a good performance is like and their expert eyes told them that the tone of voice and the gestures of the actors were of very high level. The RSC staff also praised the performance because it is very "theatrical." One member of the staff told me that the English contemporary theatrical companies tend to pursue realism and are stuck in cul-de-sac, whereas this performance presented itself as purely artistic theatrical fiction.

In fact, this is closely related to Ninagawa's unique way of making most of space and time inside the theatre. He decorated the foyer with flags and costumes before the show started so that audience were dragged away from mundane life and surrounded by a world of fantasy as soon as they entered the theatre. For him even the foyer is part of the stage. His use of time is also intriguing. For thirty minutes before the

show started, actors did whatever they liked to do on the stage. Some walked around and chatted with each other, others performed callisthenics. According to what I heard from one of the actors (as far as I know no critics mention this seemingly esoteric presentation in their reviews and I would like to say that this is one of the advantages of being involved in this programme as a translator), this thirty minutes is a time intended to represent the fact that even actors have their own daily lives; this thirty minutes is then contrasted with their performance time and the principle is that the performance creates space and time which deviates from the ordinariness of life, namely the artistic world. In short, Ninagawa intentionally emphasises the aesthetic aspect of the performance by drawing a clear border between normality and abnormality of life. Why does he have to do this? I would say that the answer is that today a large number of people come to see plays and consume them as entertainment just like they do with TV and games. Ninagawa understands theatrical performance as high culture and that is why he thinks it his task to preserve it by presenting the play as something away from the daily consumption, something of a higher dimension. On this very point the RSC staff and the Japanese company found a thing that is worth cooperating together.

If this way of presentation can be regarded as what the RSC has learnt from the Japanese company, the Japanese company had things to learn from the RSC, too. In other words, this project was mutually beneficial for both of them. As stated already, a Japanese actor said to me, sixty percent of the audience come to see a play in Japan because they want to see particular stars. He was moved to hear a bigger applause at the curtain calls, for he heard it as genuine admiration towards the performance and thought that most English people, if not all of them, knew how to appreciate a play. He said that the raising of the quality of audience would be the next step for Japanese theatrical performance.

Conclusion

Having had much opportunity to make conversation with the staff and actors of both companies – this itself is an invaluable experience. The knowledge I acquired through the conversations helped me understand the play more deeply, while my perspective seeing the performance from stage right every day enabled me to know what is going on behind the stage in each scene and understand the play comprehensively. However, I am pleased to say that this is not the only thing I have learned from the work experience. I have learned at least two more lessons that I would like to indicate here.

First, I learned what professionalism is. This was a precious experience for me as a student who has no full-time work experience. I saw with my own eyes the confidence and expertise of first-rate staff and actors and knew how quickly they understand and get accustomed to new things with the help of their already familiar knowledge and experiences. I also admire their attitude toward work. Although some of them are too shy to admit their ability, all of them are capable and they know how to handle an emergency and recover from it.

Second, it was a good language lesson, though I must admit that it was a very practical one and sometimes made me feel like walking on a thin, tight rope, especially when I had to translate the speeches in front of large audience at the parties. On the whole, however, I learnt how to listen to people carefully and translate them in an instant. Interestingly enough, I also learnt to socialise. Language is connected with

communication. Since I saw more than fifty people inside the theatre and at the pub every day, I greeted, chatted and talked with them every five minutes (this is not an exaggeration!). Thus I acquired a skill to bring up topics of conversation and extend them further.

I would like to finish this report by saying that the cooperation of the two companies was very successful. I am also pleased to say that I was able to contribute to the success and witness a new page in the history of the RSC.

Many thanks to everyone that I met during my stay at Stratford!