

## TWO INTERCULTURAL PERFORMANCES: *DOUBLE NORA AND RESURRECTION DAY*

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A great number of scholarly papers on intercultural theatre have been written. At the same time, the concept of interculturalism has become vague and controversial. Some scholars have even severely criticized it because of its apparent features of Euro-centrism. Today, the term intercultural theatre looks rather threadbare.

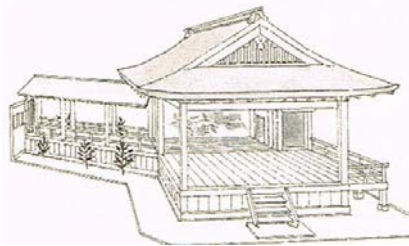
This does not mean, however, that intercultural theatre performance is disappearing from the world stage. On the contrary, it is quite commonly practiced especially in non-Western countries. And the research on interculturalism has come under the broad discipline of cultural studies in general. As Ric Knowles has mapped in his recent small introductory book, *Theatre & Interculturalism* (Knowles, 2010), new disciplines such as gender studies, racial studies, diasporic studies, etc. are regarded as closely related to interculturalism.

It is not my intention to go further to discuss the meaning of interculturalism in Ibsen. As the title of the present article indicates, I am going to talk about my own experiences of two Ibsen productions, which I directed in collaboration with *noh* theatre, one of the traditional types of theatre in Japan. They were *Double Nora*, based on *A Doll's House*, and *Resurrection Day*, based on *When We Dead Awaken*. In both productions *noh* actors and modern theatre actors appear together on the stage and act in their own characteristic acting styles.

*Double Nora* was first performed at Umewaka *Noh* Theatre in Tokyo in 2005. It was invited to the Ibsen Festival in Oslo in 2006, and went on tour in some European cities. *Resurrection Day* was performed in Indonesia in 2008, and again at the Ibsen Festival in Tokyo in 2010. *Double Nora* has been analyzed by theatre or Ibsen scholars, such as Kamaluddin Nilu (Nilu, 2008, 120-126), Erika Fischer-Lichte (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, 106-108) or Janelle Reinelt (Reinelt, 2008, 143-156.), who have shown sharp insights into the cross-cultural aspects of the performance. Their non-Japanese perspectives may have misled their interpretations in some points, but they revealed many important meanings which even I was not aware of. But what I am going to do here is not the usual performance analysis. It is, instead, to make up for the hitherto not much examined aspects of intercultural theatre performances, that is, the cross-cultural interaction between actors belonging to different theatrical traditions during the creative process. Scholars mostly pay attention to outside or formalistic aspects of the performance to be decoded semiotically. But the inside aspects, so-to-speak, of the performance are also important to be analyzed in order to understand how different theatrical cultures deal with the play in question.

Before going on to the main argument, I will illustrate a little about the performance of *Double Nora*. (I suppose most of you have not seen it, and may have difficulties in comprehending my points if you have no mental image of the performance.) The *noh* stage has a unique form of itself. The main stage is 6 meters by 6 meters with a pillar in each corner supporting a roof above. Even though the present *noh* stage is indoors, it keeps a roof above as a vestige of the time when all *noh* stages were outdoors. Extending on a diagonal from the back left corner is the

*hashigakari* (bridge), a corridor with hand rails. (See the illustration of *Noh Stage*.) This form of the stage, especially the main stage, is required for any *noh* performance. When a *noh* play is performed abroad, for example, a stage of the same size is built on the ordinary stage.



Noh Stage

- 1) The performance of *Double Nora* starts in the authentic *noh* pattern. This is the framework of the whole performance. First the musicians, a flutist, a small drum player and a large drum player, appear onto the stage through the bridge and take their seats at the rear stage. Almost at the same time the chorus come into the stage through a small door at the right rear and take their seats at the right facing the main stage. A tune of the flute marks the start of the performance.
- 2) The curtain at the end of the bridge is lifted up and Nora appears. Nora is played by two actors, a *noh* actor, *shite* (main actor), with a mask, and a modern actress. They represent two opposite characteristics of Nora, conventional and progressive. Both appear together. The *noh* Nora goes first and the modern Nora follows. When they reach the main stage, the modern Nora retreats to the rear and watches the *noh* Nora's movement, which is the first scene of the play. Helmer, who is played by a *noh* actor, *waki* (side actor), appears and converses with the *noh* Nora.
- 3) After the first scene between Nora and Helmer, the role of Nora is exchanged between the *noh* actor and the modern actress; the modern actress takes the *uchikake* (cover coat) of the *noh* actor off and puts it on herself. The *noh* Nora withdraws to the rear stage, and watches the scene of the modern theatre style between the modern Nora and Krogstad, who is played by a modern actor. (See the photo 1) The role of Mrs. Linde is omitted in this performance.
- 4) Thus, the scene of *noh* theatre style and that of the modern theatre style alternate. Dr. Rank is played by the same actor as Krogstad in different costume. The tarantella is danced by the modern actress.
- 5) In the final scene when the discussion between Helmer and Nora takes place, the *noh* Nora and the modern Nora are next to each other (See the photo 2) and exchange words alternately with Helmer. At the end both go together again through

the bridge and disappear. But this time the modern Nora goes in front and the *noh* Nora follows.

6) Helmer says his last line, and disappears. Then, the musicians and the chorus go off the stage. No curtain call.



*Double Nora*, photo 1



*Double Nora*, photo 2

*Noh* theatre was established as an artistic theatre form in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and has been regularly performed until today in a highly distinctive style. Many *noh* performers, both actors and musicians, are trained for a long time to acquire the ability to present fixed forms and patterns of acting in exact ways before they are permitted to perform as professional *noh* actors and musicians. Therefore, those *noh* actors and musicians in my production did not need a long rehearsal. They got together once or twice to decide which forms and patterns they would move or chant to. Of course the actors had to memorize their lines, but it was amazing how easily they got their lines into their heads. The music for *Double Nora* is also comprised of various patterns of notes taken from classical *noh* plays, which all the professional *noh* performers, both actors and musicians, are quite familiar with. So, the musicians were together only once before the opening night, and were able to play with actors as a perfect ensemble onstage.

Modern actors, on the other hand, wanted to analyze the background and psychology of the characters they were playing. Then, they had to find the right ways to express them. Therefore, they needed a long rehearsal period. Despite that, *noh* actors appeared much more stable and confident in themselves on the stage than modern actors. *Noh* actors express their characters simply and precisely. The well-trained acting forms and patterns of *noh* acting are more expressive and moving than the inner psychological representation of modern acting. The outside determines the

inside. This is, of course, in opposition to Ibsen's realism, which analyzes deep meaning and feeling inside the character's mind and underneath the relationship between the characters. Ibsen required a new acting method for this kind of expression late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But a collaboration with *noh* theatre suggests a different way of expression for Ibsen's play. It is even more effective, and, indeed, in accord with today's theatre aesthetic. The so-called Regie-theater, in contemporary German or Norwegian theatre, for instance, clearly denies the old, inner psychological acting, which used to prevail among traditional Ibsen performances.

One of the unique aspects of *noh* theatre is the chorus. It usually consists of six or eight actors. In my production it was limited to three or four due to financial reasons. The chorus is called *jiutai* in Japanese, and it literally means 'the chanting of the earth'. So, the chorus is, in essence, the ground on which the whole drama relies. It explains or supports the background, psychology or movements of the main character, *shite*. Sometimes, the chorus chants the main character's lines on behalf of him or her. In my production the chorus' chanting was often employed in order to repeat the important lines in the play. For example, when Krogstad accuses Nora of forgery and Nora makes an excuse for her act, he says, "The law takes no account of motives." Nora replies, "Then they must be very bad laws" (The Oxford Ibsen, 1961, 229), and the chorus repeats these lines again and again in low voices. I interpreted these lines as suggesting the central theme of the play, that is, the opposite values of men's laws and women's laws, which Ibsen distinguished in his preliminary note for *A Doll's House*. The chorus' patterned and deep chanting in low tones renders the inner meaning more effectively than modern actors' psychologically realistic acting does.

Nevertheless, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* would not possibly be presented on the stage entirely as a traditional *noh* play. The modern acting style is necessary in some parts. The tarantella dance, for example, would not be able to be danced in the *noh* style as meaningfully and effectively as in a modern style. Also, it would be very difficult for a *noh* actor to show a sudden inner transformation of Nora in the final scene of the play. Nora, all of a sudden, changes from a gay and talkative woman to a serious and reticent woman. The *noh* Nora perhaps should change the mask at this moment. But that is not allowed in the *noh* convention. The *shite*'s change of the mask in a usual *noh* play does not work in accordance with such a moment of decision as Nora's.

In *Double Nora*, the modern Nora shows her definite decision by taking the leading position on the stage. She walks in front, being followed by the *noh* Nora, when they disappear at the end: the reversal of the way they made their entrance onto the stage at the beginning of the play. But, you may wonder why both Noras disappear together? Some critics have taken this ending as a sort of expectation of reconciliation or simply as a compromise. In truth, this way of disappearance of the two Noras is the only possible ending, if we want to keep the *noh* convention as the framework of the performance. At the end of the traditional *noh* performance the main actor, *shite*, has to disappear through the bridge at the end, while the supporting actor, *waki*, remains on the stage. However, following the *noh* convention, I realized that this ending would actually reveal a meaning Ibsen might have hidden in the last scene of *A Doll's House*.

It has been often pointed out that Nora shows both traditional and progressive characteristics from the beginning of the play onwards. As stated above, these two opposite characteristics are made visible by deploying a *noh* Nora played by a *noh* actor and modern Nora by a modern actress. The tradition is inherited from the past and embellished a great deal. The progressive looks to the future, which is totally unknown in the dark. The *noh* Nora, therefore, is gorgeously dressed, and the modern Nora is costumed totally in black. In the final scene, the modern Nora takes off both the *noh* Nora's outer costume and her own shawl. However, the truth is that there would be no future without the past, no past without the future. The past and the future intersect at the present. So, in *Double Nora* both the past and the future, the *noh* Nora and the modern Nora, the white and the black, go together off stage through the bridge at the end. The modern Nora leads the *noh* Nora, the future directs the past.

Of course, this meaning is neither outwardly stated nor inwardly suggested in *A Doll's House*. But Ibsen's characters are often split between the past and the future, and often caught up with the past and unable to grasp the future. After Nora, this situation becomes more and more difficult and desperate. The desperation culminates in *Hedda Gabler*. She shoots herself. Nora is perhaps the only character whose future Ibsen was rather optimistic about. He lets Nora utter an ideal picture of the future, *det vidunderligste*, even though she does not believe in it. It is "a real marriage of the couple's lives together" (The Oxford Ibsen, 1961, 286), "*at samliv mellom oss to kunne bli et ekteskap.*" We may infer Ibsen's hope or expectation here.

This situation reflects the relationship between the traditional theatre, *noh*, and the modern drama, *shingeki*, in Japan. No one believes that *noh* theatre stands together with *shingeki*, and *shingeki* has become more and more separated from traditional *noh* theatre in modern times. However, my production clearly suggested that the simplicity of *noh* theatre would be the basis for any art form, for art is in essence abstract, not actual, ideal, not real. *Noh* theatre is theatrically more powerful and beautiful than modern theatre. Nevertheless, it is the modern theatre that leads the actual theatre world today. In my production of *Double Nora* I suggested that both *noh* and modern actors adhere to their own acting styles. This is a unique experiment of my Ibsen-*noh* productions. It was not so easy to make the simplicity (of *noh*) and the complexity (of the modern theatre) compatible. But this is, I think, exactly the theme of Ibsen's last play, *When We Dead Awaken*. So, I chose this play for my second collaboration of Ibsen and *noh*.

Realism was an avant-garde art form late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But it gradually faded away at the turn of the century, and non-realistic works of art began to prevail in the European artistic scene. Ibsen was keenly aware of it. Thus, *When We Dead Awaken* was written as a sort of meta-art. Ibsen called this play a dramatic epilogue, but also regarded it as a possible start of a new dramaturgy. Maya and Irene symbolize the new and the old view of art. Ibsen, the author, who stands outside the play, is decidedly on the side of Maya, the newly emerging non-realistic art form, while Rubek, an artist inside the play, cannot entirely forget Irene, the traditional form which is deeply rooted in his artistic career. As an artist, Rubek suspects that art works in the new style, although people that are enthusiastic about them, are in fact phony pseudo-art. But Ibsen makes Maya a free and wild spirit, which is

undoubtedly the basis for a new avant-garde art.

The struggle of the new and the old has been one of the central issues in contemporary Japanese art. In theatre in particular, the twisted conflict between the traditional and the current avant-garde style in *When We Dead Awaken* overlaps with the conflict between traditional theatre forms and new Western types of theatre which had been imported into Japan in modern times. My second Ibsen-*noh* production, *Resurrection Day*, reflects this conflict. But the situation is a little more complex, for we have two distinctly different types of traditional theatre, *noh* and *kabuki*. While *kabuki* attempted to westernize itself, that is, to be more realistic, though unsuccessfully, *noh* remained least interested in Westernization. *Noh* still is completely unrealistic and seemingly incompatible with modern realistic theatre in terms of performing style. I tried to overcome this incompatibility in *Resurrection Day*.

In *Double Nora* the two styles stand side by side, and don't intersect. That is to say, the *noh* Nora, a *shite*, does not take part in any dialogue with the modern Nora, a modern actress. Modern Nora talks with the *waki* actor, Helmer, but the *waki*'s way of speaking and moving is more prosaic than the *shite*'s; this is the convention of *noh* acting. In *Resurrection Day* I experimented with direct communication between the *shite*, Rubek, and the modern actress, Maya. Thus, I made the modern theatre to challenge, and at the same time, adopt and break the framework of the traditional *noh* theatre. It was possible because the performance took place at one of the modern theatres in Tokyo. A same sized stage as the *noh* stage was built on the ordinary stage. Therefore, Maya, a modern actress, observes and violates the convention of *noh* freely coming in and out of the proper acting area of *noh*. She even flirts with the chorus, who are supposed to be entirely outside of what is going on, onstage.

The violation of the *noh* convention by Maya is equivalent to what Rubek says he did to the original sculptural statue, "Resurrection Day," after Irene had left him, though exactly what he did is ambiguous in Ibsen's play. Whether Rubek's act affected the statue as a work of art, positively or negatively, is not clear, either. But one thing is certain; Rubek made the sculpture more complex and multi-meaningful. He originally wished to express the pureness and innocence of Irene, highly regarding simplicity of an artistic work. It is also certain that Rubek's amending the statue was in accord with the new wave of art at the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe. He was tempted to follow the new artistic trend, but he also feels that at the bottom of his heart, a box of simple, pure and conventional art form is hidden. He no longer has the key to open it. This is also the situation of *noh* theatre in modern times in Japan. It is strictly boxed as a pure and simple traditional theatre form, and no one dares to open and develop it into a modern artistic and theatrical form.

Simplicity or nothingness is what Zeami, the originator of the art form of *noh*, advocated as the final goal of *noh* in his treatises. It may be true, as some critics argue, that today's *noh* is too abstract, wrongly influenced by Zeami's treatises, which were discovered only at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century after a long lapse of time. Yet it is a pity that the modern theatre has lost the simplicity. So, I tried a cross-over of two theatre styles in *Resurrection Day*, and found that the only way to overcome the incompatibility would be the modern actress' adjusting her declamation style to that of the *shite* actor of *noh*. It was hard and not fully successful, I must admit. In

*When We Dead Awaken* Rubek and Irene are, at the end, swept away from the top of the mountain in an avalanche, and Maya is safely down in the company with Ulfheim. Maya's song of freedom triumphantly echoes from below. In my production of *Resurrection Day* Maya, the actress, reappears onstage after the avalanche, and sings and dances her joy of freedom. Both parties do not meet any longer. Ibsen had once extolled the idea of 'freedom with responsibility'. But complete freedom does not tolerate any responsibility. Responsibility inevitably brings up some sort of restriction. How a free avant-garde art would go in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Ibsen did not foresee. How the experiment of *Resurrection Day* will go in the future of Japanese theatre I don't know. In any case, I am not so optimistic about the future of theatre.

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### Biographical note

Mitsuya Mori was born in Japan. At present, Professor Emeritus at Seijo University in Tokyo. The former President of the Japanese Society for Theatre Research. A member of Norwegian Academy of Science.

His published books include *Scandinavian Theatre* (1981), *Ibsen's Realism* (1984), *Comparative Theatre of the East and the West* (ed. 1994), *Ibsen's fin de siècle* (1995), *The Poetics of Theatre* (2007), and *Changing Aspects of Theatre Studies* (ed. 2007).

He has translated eleven of Ibsen's modern plays and directed them with professional theatre companies. His production of *Double Nora*, a modern *noh* play based on *A Doll's House*, was invited to the International Ibsen Festival in Oslo in 2006.

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### Summary

I have so far directed two plays of Ibsen as the intercultural performance, that is, the collaboration of the modern theatre with *noh*, a traditional Japanese theatre, which was established as an artistic theatre form in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The first production was *Double Nora*, based on *A Doll's House*, which premiered at a *noh* theatre in Tokyo in 2005, and the second was *Resurrection Day*, based on *When We Dead Awaken*, performed at the Ibsen Festival in Tokyo in 2010. In both productions, professional *noh* and modern theatre actors appeared together in their own acting styles.

At the Ibsen Conference in Tromsø in June 2012, brief scenes of the two productions were shown. But here in the present article the performances are partly described, and the interactive relationship between different acting styles of *noh* and modern theatre is examined. A new and difficult experiment of *Resurrection Day* was to try a conversation between the main *noh* actor and the modern actress. The experiment was possible because the performance took place not on a *noh* stage in a unique form but on an ordinary stage in a modern theatre. Thus, some problems involved in the intercultural performance of Ibsen are investigated.

**Keywords**

*Double Nora, Resurrection Day, noh style, modern theatre style*