Othello in the Japanese Mugen Noh Style with
Elements of Korean Shamanism:
A Creative Subversion

HAMANA Emi

This paper attempts to identify what role intercultural productions can
play in a Shakespeare renaissance, both in Asia and beyond. I used the fol-
lowing two productions of Othello to examine this: Othello in Noh Style, a noh
libretto by Sukehiro Hirakawa and directed by Satoshi Miyagi, and a Japa-
nese Korean collaborative production directed by Lee Youn-taek. Othello in
Noh Style was performed for the first time in Japan in 2005 by the Ku Na’uka
Theater Company (hereafter referred to as Ku Na’uka) under the direction
of Miyagi. Ku Na’uka was founded in 1990, and by adopting elements from
Japanese traditional performing arts such as bunraku, also known as jöruri
(the puppet theater), kabuki, and noh, it invented a new theatrical style. The
company became renowned and acclaimed for its intercultural experiments,
collaborations, and original synthesis. Lee, a pioneer of contemporary Kore-
an theater, directed Othello in Noh Style, as a Japanese-Korean collaboration
in Seoul in 2008, and in “Festival/Tokyo: Performing Arts Festival Launch-
ing from Tokyo” in 2009: the production interpreted Shakespeare’s Othello by
incorporating elements from Japanese noh theater and Korean shamanism
with a contemporary experimental spirit.

There has been a long-standing desire among theatergoers and scholars
to understand Shakespeare’s plays anew, and to examine them from a fresh
perspective. Shakespeare’s plays and his culture can be reviewed afresh
through high-quality intercultural performances that combine his plays
with Asian theater, both traditional and contemporary. At the outset, how-
ever, it should be reminded that interculturalism has been a controversial
topic in theater studies since it presents theoretical and practical difficulties,
problems, and even dangers ranging from excessive desire for others to the
increasing complexity of contemporary cultural exchange, transformation, and hybridization. As is well known, interculturalism derives itself from Orientalism, which still overshadows its development:

Interculturalism is a means of imagining culture as a landscape which, when occupied, produces, transmits, and substitutes for a once authentic culture. Rather than a mutual meeting in a space between cultures, intercultural performance is most often a practice of the desire, imagination, and anxieties of the one cultural system which looks to the other culture for formalist or aesthetic templates for the renovation of itself. Intercultural theatre thus operates in the space between two or more cultures, but those cultures themselves rarely, if ever, meet, let alone interact.²

It is demanded that intercultural theater should break down the old dichotomies of self/other and West/East, and that the cultures involved should be more substantially interactive with each other. Japanese and Korean theater collaboration is then expected to contribute to re-orienting intercultural performances of Shakespeare.³

I. Theater is a Community: Othello in Japanese Mugen Noh Style

In 2005, Ku Na’uka performed Othello in Noh Style, an adaptation by Sukehiro Hirakawa of Shakespeare’s Othello in noh form.⁴ Lee Youn-taek, a leading Korean director, who had been familiar with Miyagi’s work for many years, was asked to direct Othello in Noh Style as “a Japanese Korean collaboration.” This Japanese-Korean collaboration of Othello was directed by Lee and performed as part of the 6th Asian Performing Arts Festival at Sejong Center in Seoul, October 6-8, 2008, and at the Tokyo Art Theater, February 27-March 1, 2009. This collaboration was seen as highly creative and transformative because of the synergy of the two experimental theater companies and their styles; the performance incorporated elements of Korean shamanistic ritual and dance (the Chohongut) and elements from Japanese noh to
create a new reading of Shakespeare’s *Othello*.

Before looking at the Japanese-Korean collaboration, it will be crucial to discuss Ku Na’uka’s *Othello in Noh Style*, directed by Miyagi. Ku Na’uka has performed a variety of plays, both classical and contemporary, eastern and western. Miyagi usually uses an original device whereby one role is performed by two actors; one of the actors “narrates” and another “moves.” This method is very similar to a method used in bunraku. The first performance of Ku Na’uka’s *Othello in Noh Style* took place in November 2005 on a noh stage that had been purpose-built for the occasion, in the garden of the Tokyo National Museum.\(^5\)

In Shakespeare’s *Othello*, a Moor and a Venetian lady fall in love despite the differences in their race and age. However, their love is the trigger that prompts a tragedy of jealousy and revenge. At the request of Miyagi, Sukehiro Hirakawa adapted this beautiful and cruel tragedy into a *mugen* [dream] noh script. In his rewriting of the famous play, the ghost of Desdemona, who is killed by Othello, lives on in the memory of her husband. *Othello in Noh Style* departs radically from the original tragedy, which follows Othello’s descent into violent jealousy; instead, the noh interpretation attempts to represent a world of *yūgen*—the noh “concept of profound and refined beauty that Zeami adapted from *waka* [Japanese traditional poetry] aesthetics and made into a theatrical ideal.”\(^6\) In Hirakawa’s interpretation, Desdemona, whom Othello suspects of adultery and eventually strangles, feels closest to her husband at the moment when he kills her. *Othello in Noh Style* is a story of the paradox of love and hatred between man and woman. The moment when Desdemona is murdered by her husband remains the most vital moment in her life; the moment that allows her ghost to continue to exist. Some might regard the pathos in this narrative thread as overwhelming, but this is precisely the central theme of this production. This rereading of *Othello* attempts to show that hope can emerge even within the broken marriage of Othello and Desdemona. Desdemona’s passionate hope reemerges despite everything, and this prompts an emotionally moving reaction among the audience.

Miyagi believes that those involved in theater must deal both with western drama—classical and modern—and Japanese classical drama. He is also
very concerned with “the pan-East-Asian” identity in all its manifestations, an identity that he regards as ever in flux. From performing in India, Korea, China, and Tibet, Miyagi has become aware of the perennial interaction that has been occurring between Asian cultures, and the exchange that informs the various senses of beauty throughout the region. For this reason, he now finds it meaningless to differentiate between an original theater work and a so-called “copy” in Asia, despite the fact that there seem to be significant differences between the types of regional theater. Miyagi prioritizes cultural commensurability in all his work, especially what he sees as a pan-East-Asian commonality and a common Asian cultural connection, and pursues an intercultural or transcultural performance. In the current critical and theoretical climate, however, this notion of a common cross-cultural theatrical form might be criticized for homogenizing the diverse cultural and theatrical forms and traditions by assimilating them all into a single “pan-East-Asian” framework.

While a plethora of Shakespeare productions, theater histories, and forms have been produced throughout the world, the research that has been conducted on them has been extremely disjointed and fragmented; this lack of a unified overview of the global interpretations of Shakespeare reflects, in part, their dazzling complexity and dynamism. Confronted with the ever-increasing linguistic, cultural, and interpretative diversity of Shakespearean productions, most Shakespeare scholars in this age of cultural pluralism, relativism, and post-colonialism avow that diversity, and yet no holistic paradigm of intercultural Shakespeare productions has yet been established. If we bear in mind the cultural value differences that exist among diverse cultures, then it is clear that Miyagi’s general view may well be significant in attempting to outline this holistic paradigm of great significance.

A _mugen_ noh is a popular genre of noh performances. It traditionally features deities, the spirits of plants and animals, and the ghosts of humans; usually, a traveler or wanderer (_waki_, the secondary role) visits a famous place, and in the _waki_’s dream, a deity or spirit (_shite_, the main role) appears and tells the _waki_ a local tale or a story about the _shite_’s own life. In Ku Na’uka’s _Othello in Noh Style_, a wandering priest (_waki_) visits Venice; in
his dream, the spirit of Desdemona (shite) appears, she tells her life story, and she finally passes quietly into Nirvana. The moment at which the spirit vanishes, beautifully and gracefully, the other characters, musicians, and the audience are all profoundly moved.

Miyagi highlights the contrast between the European theatre with focus on human conflict and a noh play. Indeed, as he makes clear, in a mugen noh play, there is no strong opposition between one individual and another. This may be a result of the fact that in the modern age, a play, after all, shows a world that exists only in the dramatist’s mind. However, before the modern age, the notion of individuality was severely restricted. For instance, in traditional Asian performance, dramatists used the device of the character of a villager or plebeian whose voice represented the entire community. The notion of individuality develops later in the modern age, and begins to dominate the artistic world. Miyagi believes that we can, nevertheless, identify some similarity between modern plays and mugen noh plays. The protagonists of mugen noh plays are often extremely lonely individuals; this is also often the case in many modern plays. Despite this similarity, noh performances are very ritualistic performances in which the whole community of performers and spectators participates in order to console the spirit. Furthermore, a noh performance is also a ritual to celebrate the community. In Miyagi’s view, noh has a function that modern theater does not have; it is a drama performed to “relieve human loneliness.” It presents the dynamic journey from an extreme of loneliness to another extreme of relief.7

How then does Shakespeare’s tragedy, Othello, which centers on conflict between individuals or individualistic characters, work when it is transferred into the mugen noh style, which is not based on such an opposition? The tragedy of two individuals, Othello and Desdemona, is eventually enveloped by a shared ritual, which is performed by the whole community on the stage and in the auditorium to console the spirits. Ku Na’uka’s Othello in Noh Style is no longer a western tragedy, but instead, it is transformed into a communal tragedy. Miyagi suggests that when Shakespeare’s Othello is performed in a noh style, the darkness or hopelessness in the original is alleviated in some way. In the original play, it has long been recognized that
it is extremely difficult to identify a sense of catharsis. *Othello in Noh Style* is the Japanese director’s attempt to address this hopelessness by casting the tale in *mugen* noh style, fusing western and eastern culture, and eventually providing a communal resolution of modern loneliness.8

This cultural fusion allows Shakespeare’s play to be reinterpreted anew; it allows the audience into the dimension of Desdemona’s mind. Inspired by noh style, Miyagi subverts Shakespeare’s tragedy in a creative way, transforming it into a soul-consoling artistic work. Furthermore, Miyagi’s re-interpretation or betrayal of the concept of western tragedy as well as the nature of noh, if any, is, in fact, a creative one that produces a highly original intercultural performance of a Shakespeare play with rich implications and spiritual depth.

II. The World is a Ritual: *Othello* in Japanese *Mugen* Noh Style with Elements of Korean Shamanism


In 2008, *Othello in Noh Style* was performed, under Lee’s direction, with the collaboration of the leading members of Miyagi’s company and two members of Lee’s theater company, Street Theater Troupe. This production breathed new life into Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Miyagi proposed the idea of “*Othello* in *mugen* noh style” while he was exploring “the strength of Japanese theater.” By using Korean shamanistic dance (the *Chohongut*) as a style with which to interpret *Othello*, Lee directed the play in an innovative way that aimed at “the great enterprise of drafting guidelines for Shakespeare productions in Asia.”9

Although there are a number of studies on Korean shamanism,10 this paper quotes a passage from the program of the production by way of a short introduction for our purpose:

In Korea, shamanism has been deeply rooted as a folk religion since ancient times. It is closely related to a celestial ritual in which a com-
munity collectively praises heaven as a form of prayer for good harvest, rain, etc.

Korean shamanism is characterized by the fact that it attempts to solve human problems through the spiritualistic medium or *mudang* (shaman). This feature can be found in a variety of forms of *gut* (shamanistic festival) that are still celebrated all over Korea.

*Gut* represents the ritual during which a shaman presents the soul and spirit with offerings as well as songs and dances, praying for the happiness of the human world. The forms of *gut* vary slightly from region to region, and the rhythms of shamanistic music differ according to their purposes.

In *Othello in Noh Style*, the songs and dances employed in *gut* were performed, while the Korean songs were translated into Japanese. (English translation mine.)

Although Korean shamanism has in all probability existed for longer than noh, which itself originated in ancient Japanese shamanism, there are some notable similarities between them in terms of their collectivistic culture and values. However, there is also a significant difference between them, which will be discussed later in this paper.

At the heart of Lee’s interpretation of *Othello* was a *haiku*, a traditional Japanese poem that was written by Soseki Natsume in response to Shakespeare’s original play: “*siragiku ni sibasi tamerau hasami kana* (a pair of scissors hesitates for a short time at a white chrysanthemum).” The poem was quoted in *Othello in Noh Style*. Lee also added elements of Korean shamanism to his interpretation, and used a recognizable form of dialogues with a spirit, adopting the Korean ritualistic drama of *gut*. In his fused version, Lee uses noh to represent the world of the dead and deities; it is a dream or imaginary world. The traditional Korean shamanism then allows “a shaman to conduct dialogues with the dead, those with spirits.” 11 By combing noh style with *gut* in his production, Lee hopes that the idealistic elements of both the Japanese and Korean cultures can form a fused ideal world in *Othello*.

However, Lee was aware of the potential perils of this method. Any pro-
duction that combined Shakespeare’s original play with both Japanese noh style and Korean shamanism could easily become a sheer spectacle. Despite this danger, he regarded the project as worthwhile and rewarding. He believed that this fusion of styles was valid since “western theater originates in the Dionysian festival”; this is also the case for Japanese and Korean theater, both of which originate in ritualistic festivals. Lee concludes his interview as follows:

After all, the world is one. I believe that all people have the same feeling about rituals. Whether Shakespearean drama, Japanese tradition, gut or shamanism, they all originate at the same source, and therefore, there must be a way for them to communicate with each other. The task of finding this way will be difficult, but I think it will be fun.

Festival/Tokyo is held not only to showcase conventional and popular works, but rather to expose people to works with which they may be unfamiliar, works that demonstrate new artistic expressions and values. The members of the executive committee of the festival are keen to ensure that the festival remains avant-garde and provocative, and challenges the artistic mainstream. Against this wider framework of the festival, it is clear that Lee’s firm belief in international cultural exchange reflects the values of the festival well, and offers a significant challenge to the contemporary theater scene. More important, his belief and practice contribute to re-orienting the intercultural performance of Shakespeare plays.

II.2. Othello in Noh Style, Directed by Lee

The stage is set in the medium-sized theater hall of the Tokyo Art Theater: four large white cloths and a cloth made up of straps torn and twisted, which seems to symbolize conflicts in life, are hanging from the ceiling of the stage. A small rectangular stage has been built in the center of the main stage, and two path-like stages lead down from both wings; around these stages is set a large drum, a marimba, and a koto.

The play consists of five acts: maeba (the former act), Interlude I, nochi-
ba-zenhan (the former part of the latter act), Interlude II, and nochiba-kōhan (the latter part of the latter act). In the maeba, a female wandering priest—a miko, shaman, or waki—enters from the path from the right wing (stage right), saying in Korean, “I have come all the way to this island of Himiko from far away, across the sea.” (Japanese subtitles and the titles of scenes are projected on the screens that are displayed on both sides of the stage. The wandering priest delivers most of her speeches in Japanese). The play progresses with the wandering priest attempting to explore the strange and unfamiliar island on which she has found herself. At stage left, the spirit of Desdemona stands in white traditional Korean dress, with a large handkerchief embroidered with a strawberry in her hand. At the rear, Othello stands in Japanese armor, and with a helmet with two large horns on his head. The spirit of Desdemona, which is wandering this world, begins to tell the story of Othello and herself, while, at the same time, trying to find her resting place.

While the shaman and the spirit are speaking, the Venetian scene of Act I in Shakespeare’s original play is enacted as Interlude I. Frightened to hear that “his daughter will marry General Othello, a southern man,” Brabantio, the father of Desdemona, appeals to the Duke of Venice for advice. This is followed by a scene in which Othello and Desdemona fall in love and marry without obtaining Brabantio’s permission. Although the audience is led to believe that Othello is supposed to be an uncouth individual, he begins to gently describe his life of adventures while Desdemona listens earnestly: his delivery defies the audience’s preconceptions of Othello’s barbarism.

In the nochiba-zenhan, the shaman and the spirit of Desdemona, who cannot die and achieve peace of mind, talk to each other, revealing the love, suffering, regret, and han (a Korean word for feelings of pain and grief). The scene is short but powerful, and functions as a climax.

In Interlude II, Shakespeare’s original play is presented again with a bathing scene. Iago is depicted both as a fool and a villain, or rather Vice, personified. He is red-haired, almost naked, clad only in a white loincloth. Othello is also wearing only a white loincloth, with tattooed patterns of carp on his back and on the back of his right shin. Iago uses this opportunity to
persuade Othello that Desdemona has been unfaithful. He uses strong rhetoric to drive Othello mad and cultivate his passionate jealousy. Iago shows Othello the handkerchief embroidered with a strawberry as ocular proof of the adultery that Iago tells Othello has happened between Desdemona and Cassio.

In the *nochiba-kōhan*, Desdemona lies in bed in a white nightgown with a white chrysanthemum in her hand. The bed is quietly carried toward the front of the stage by actors. Between center stage and the edge of the stage, Korean dances are performed. Behind center stage, Othello enters dressed in armor and helmet, and the lower part of his face is covered with a black mask. He says, “It is the cause...,” and plucks the flower from Desdemona’s hand. The poem, “*siragiku ni sibasi tamerau hasami kana* (A pair of scissors hesitates for a short time at a white chrysanthemum),” is highlighted in subtitles. The shaman then enters, and a dance that is clearly related to the *Chohongut* is performed, and it reaches the climax of the symbolic representation of Othello’s murder of Desdemona at the penultimate moment. Stage lighting effects are used to depict the surface of the water across the peninsula and the southern island.

Later, holding her hand, the shaman leads Desdemona through center stage to the rear, and they sing a duet together. The spirit of Desdemona is no longer suffering pain and grief: she is now at peace, she is accepting her death, and this prompts a strong sense of catharsis among the audience. After this scene, the actors perform the lively songs and dance of *gut*, and a drummer beats his instrument energetically; this leads up to the finale, in which most of the songs or cries are in Korean. Following the finale, all the Japanese and Korean actors descend barefoot into the auditorium, and the entire theater space is transformed into a festival one.

**II.3. The Features of the Japanese-Korean Collaboration**

**II.3.1. Great Geographical and Historical Change**

While he was directing *Othello in Noh Style* for the new collaborative Japanese-Korean production, Lee noticed the common threads that ran through both Korean shamanistic ritual (the *Chohongut*) and a *mugen* noh style, and
tried to fuse these traditions together through classic English drama. Scenes from Shakespeare’s original play are performed in the two interludes, but the location for the main events of the Japanese-Korean collaboration are transferred from Venice to the peninsula and from Cyprus to the southern island, while the style shifts between the mugen noh and the Chohongut. In the mugen noh version, the shite (the ghost of Desdemona) appears in the wandering priest’s dream as the waki, who is representative of the audience; the wandering priest retraces the shite’s history, and eventually, he is able to relieve her soul. In the Chohongut version, the shaman enters into a dialogue with the ghost of Desdemona, and in her role as a medium, the shaman relieves Desdemona’s soul from suffering. This may well be a more dramatic depiction of events than the mugen noh version, since it emphasizes the dialogue between the shaman and Desdemona. In addition, this scene is also powerful because of its abundant use of music; indeed, the production verges on a full-fledged musical.

The Japanese-Korean version of Othello is set two thousand years ago, and is located on an island in ancient Asia, where a sad and cruel story of love between a woman of the peninsula and a man of the Southern sea is developed. Desdemona is “a person from overseas” (i.e., from the Korean Peninsula), and Othello is “a dark southerner” and “a man of the sea” (i.e., a man of Okinawa); East Asia becomes the location of the action, instead of the Mediterranean Sea in Shakespeare’s original.

In this Japanese-Korean version, Othello’s skin is painted slightly darker; however, the class difference between Othello and Iago is stressed more than their racial differences. As the main events of the play are displaced to East Asia, the class difference is foregrounded, as this is a key social division in East Asia; Iago is prompted to struggle against Othello for the sake of his pride. Miyagi’s mugen noh version is simpler and more elegant. In contrast, the Japanese-Korean collaboration superimposes the ancient history of East Asia onto the story of Early Modern Europe; in this version, the tale is more multilayered and complex, and these changes can be considered to have expanded the play to an epic scale by increasing the cultural complexity and dynamism as well as widening the focus.
In his new interpretation of *Othello*, Lee refers to *Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, a classic book on Japanese culture, written by Luce Benedict and first published in 1946, as well as Soseki Nastume’s *haiku* on *Othello*. Lee refers implicitly to Soseki’s essay, “My Individualism,” which was originally a lecture given in 1914; he compares “Japanese lonely individualism” with Korean collectivism, and explores the notion of combining these two cultural tendencies. He uses the metaphor of a Korean dish, which allows the Japanese elements and Korean elements to exist both independently and together. He makes it clear that his favorite Japanese word is “asobi” (play, game); Lee believes that “theater is play” and he directs *Othello in Noh Style* boldly in his own way; he does not aim to emulate western text-based realism, but instead employs an Asian style, focusing on visuality, physicality, and musicality.

Whether Lee’s understanding of the difference in mentality between Japanese and Koreans is valid is a matter of debate. At any rate, under his direction, based on his understanding of this difference, the play vividly represents the “lonely individualism” of Othello in Shakespeare’s original play; this individualism also extends to the passion of Desdemona, who is transformed into a spirit wandering the world because of the extent of her pain and grief. Desdemona is also represented as a woman of the Korean Peninsula; it is likely that she is supposed to originate from Cheju Island. The role is performed by Mikari, a brilliant Japanese actress, and these Japanese and Korean theatrical representations intersect, crossing national, local, and cultural boundaries and resulting in dazzlingly effective hybridization.

The Korean director uses the play to highlight the historical commonalities and differences between the two nations. He suggests that except for a short period of colonial rule by Imperial Japan in the early twentieth century, Korea as a nation developed more quickly because of its geographical proximity to mainland China, while Japan, as a small island country, was marginalized or provincialized because of its relative isolation. This performance is thus a good example of how intercultural exchange and collaboration can bring about an epistemic impact; an impact that is particularly influential on the Japanese audience.
II.3.2. Festivity of the Ending

The ending of Lee’s Othello differs both from Shakespeare’s original play and from Miyagi’s mugen noh version in that it involves a Korean theatrical parade with musicians coming onto the stage immediately before the ending of the play. Indeed, Othello and Desdemona appear hand in hand, walking alongside other characters! In addition, the tragic and violent ending of Shakespeare’s tragedy is modified in both versions. In the mugen noh version, the gruesome ending is displaced by a quiet and peaceful ending; in the Chohongut version, it is transformed into a festive comedy. Both Asian versions transform the darkness of the original ending to a lighter finale. The lively finale of Lee’s version is unimaginable in both Shakespeare’s tragedy and the noh play. In the noh version, all of the actors, musicians, and singers exit in silence: they leave the stage empty in an attempt to allow the audience to empty and purify their own minds. Although one Korean reviewer did make it clear that he appreciated this ending and that he saw some members of the Korean audience sharing in his appreciation, the present writer’s research from Japanese audience members’ blogs indicated that some of the audience members were embarrassed by the festive ending.16

When he discusses the difference between the mugen noh version and the Chohongut version, Lee suggests that ideally, no tragedy should exist in Korea since pain and grief is released by spirits and living people communally in Korean culture. At the end of Othello in Noh Style, the audience feels a sense of catharsis or purification; at the ending of Lee’s Othello, the audience is distracted from the horrible tragedy and is soon engrossed in the sense of play that infuses the next scene, which focuses on the shamanistic and festive atmosphere of songs and dances.

Miyagi felt that a Japanese audience would not feel purified by watching Shakespeare’s Othello in its original form, and he asked Hirakawa to adapt it into a noh version. As has previously been made clear, the noh version transformed the western tragedy to a hybrid play, with both western and eastern elements.

Lee’s version shows that he is more radically liberated than Miyagi from
the western idea of catharsis. Lee combined elements of noh and gut. For Lee, the priority in creating intercultural performance is to encourage exchange and negotiations among Asian theaters; with this in mind, it seems likely that he is attempting to betray the concept of western tragedy. Lee’s Othello does significantly transform Shakespeare’s tragedy, but nonetheless, the transformation is a theatrical pleasure for most local audiences. The Korean director committed a creative subversion of Miyagi’s expectations; he boldly created a play that went beyond Miyagi’s expectations. Shakespeare’s tragedy is transplanted into another culture in ancient East Asia, and the tragedy becomes transformed through noh and the Chohongut into an alternative theatrical experience in which the audience finds a sense of relief and joy.

III. Conclusion

The Japanese-Korean collaborative production of Othello in Japanese mugen noh style infused with elements of Korean shamanism was acclaimed, despite the fact that it presented some local audiences with some discomfort. It is considered a good example of the move from text to performance in this age of post-drama and performative turn, partly because the text of noh libretto is itself a text/performance text, and also because the Korean director used body and music as a crucial part of the performance. More importantly, this play shed new light on the mind of murdered Desdemona; it suggested a new reading of the play itself. In his famous Asian intercultural performance of Desdemona (2000), the Singaporean director Ong Ken Seng radically subverts the heroine’s tragic story by deconstructing the play and reinterpreting it from a feminist perspective. The Japanese-Korean collaboration (2009) approaches Shakespeare’s play differently. In Lee’s play, Desdemona is far from a feminist character and indeed, she is a ghost; nonetheless, her character still maintains an overwhelming sense of being and depth under Lee’s skillful direction.

Shakespeare’s great tragedies, such as Othello, do contain fundamental problems of human existence such as evil, death, and suffering. Unlike
other familiar tragic productions that end with the catastrophic death of the
main characters on the stage, this intercultural production of *Othello* goes
further. Rather than limiting itself to only representing death and suffer-
ing, the Japanese-Korean adaptation of *Othello* also explores notions of relief.
Inspired, on the one hand, by the *mugen* noh tendency to see the world from
the perspective of the dead and, on the other hand, the Korean shamanism
that connects this world with the other world, the intercultural performance
extends the notions of grief and suffering to include explorations of release.
This suggests that this new reading of *Othello* can be regarded as a creative
subversion.

There might remain a question whether the Japanese-Korean collabo-
ration of *Othello* materializes mutual encounter and interaction among the
three cultures involved — British, Japanese, and Korean. In this collabora-
tion, however, Japanese theater and Korean theater in particular powerfully
interact each other. Shakespeare functions as a cultural catalyst to refashion
intercultural production. Translating Shakespeare’s *Othello* into East Asia,
appropriating and subverting Orientalism for its own purpose, the Japan-
ese-Korean collaboration of *Othello* succeeds in recreating Shakespeare’s
play for contemporary local audiences. It thus presents us with a possibility
of refashioning the intercultural performance of Shakespeare from Asia.

**Notes**

1. This is an extensively revised version of my paper, “*Othello* in the Japanese *Mugen* Noh Style with Elements of Korean Shamanism: The World is a Festival,”
the fourth conference of the NTU Shakespeare Forum, *Shakespeare in Culture*,
November 26-28, 2009, National Taiwan University, Conference Proceedings,
121-33.

2. KennedyVol.1, 630. See also Yong, “Shakespeare and the Fiction of the Inter-
cultural.”

3. See Eglinton.

4. Ku Na’uka has suspended its activities since Miyagi took office as the artistic
director of Shizuoka Arts Center in 2007, as the successor to Tadashi Suzuki.
Information on *Othello*, as directed by Lee and performed in Tokyo, is based
mainly on an online press release from Festival/Tokyo and a paper program of
the performance.

5. The text of *Othello in Noh Style* is contained in *Arthur Waley, the Translator of Tales*
of Genji, by Hirakawa, 419-433.
6. Brazell 549. See also Thornhill III 36-64.
7. Miyagi.
9. The online program of Othello, as directed by Lee, “Festival/Tokyo 09 Spring.”
The English translation is my own.
10. See Yong-joon Hyun; Richard W. L. Guisso and Chai-shin Yu; Dr. Shōyō Tsubouchi Memorial Theater Museum.
14. A public workshop was held by the leading members of the executive committee
of Festival/Tokyo at Waseda University, on January 25, 2010 and discussed the
relationship between the public and theater/arts.
16. The Chosen Ibllo, March 2, 2009, A23. Regarding Japanese reviews on blogs, see,
for example, Junnosuke Tada, a theater commentator, “Lee Youn-taek and Japa
(accessed on September19, 2009); Yoshihiko Kuribayashi, a professor, “Festi
17. See Yong, “Ong Ken Seng’s Desdemona, Ugliness, and the Intercultural Perfor
mative.”

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