



Jersey Devil 2006

Jersey Devil (nohshite, Act Two main actor) in the English noh Pine Barrens.

This mask is based on various drawings online that exist of the Jersey Devil. Kitazawa created a mask that suggests a less refined animal-like character, such as one that might be found in kyogen, or one similar to the rather weird yakan mask of a fox which is used in some variant performances of the noh Sesshōsō. The costume uses the large red akagashira wig found in various noh and kyogen to portray strong, other-worldly or demonic characters. Thus, Kitazawa gave the mask a reddish quality which works well with both the wig and costume.



The December issue of *The Japan Society Review* concludes 2024 with a compelling selection of reviews that explore Japan's artistic, theatrical, and literary traditions, offering insight into both historical legacies and contemporary interpretations.

We begin with *Salon Culture in Japan: Making Art 1750-1900*, edited by Yano Akiko, which examines the dynamic artistic exchanges that flourished in early modern Japan. Through a close study of salons, ateliers, and intellectual gatherings, this volume sheds light on the networks that shaped Japanese visual and literary culture.

Noh and Kyogen Masks: Tradition and Modernity in the Art of Kitazawa Hideta by Jannette Cheong and Richard Emmert delves into the craftsmanship and evolving aesthetics of Noh and Kyogen masks, highlighting Kitazawa's work as a bridge between classical techniques and modern sensibilities.

Turning to literature, Tsujimura Mizuki's *Lost Souls Meet Under a Full Moon* offers an atmospheric narrative where the boundaries between the living and the dead blur. With a blend

of mystery and psychological depth, Tsujimura crafts a haunting exploration of memory, grief, and connection.

In the realm of theatre, *One Small Step*, written and directed by Kato Takuya, presents a near-future narrative where a married couple, Takashi and Narumi, work on a lunar colonization project. As they confront unexpected personal challenges, the play delves into themes of ambition, ethical dilemmas, and the complexities of human relationships in the context of space exploration.

Finally, we consider *U-BU-SU-NA*, a dance work choreographed by Kujirai Kentaro. Drawing from butoh influences and contemporary movement, Kujirai's piece embodies themes of origin, transformation, and corporeal expression, offering a striking visual and emotional experience.

As the year comes to an end, we would also like to extend our sincere gratitude to our dedicated volunteer reviewers, whose thoughtful contributions make this publication possible.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

Contents

- 1) *Salon Culture in Japan: Making Art 1750-1900* edited by Yano Akiko
- 2) *Noh and Kyogen Masks: Tradition and Modernity in the Art of Kitazawa Hideta* by Jannette Cheong and Richard Emmert
- 3) *Lost Souls Meet Under A Full Moon* by Tsujimura Mizuki
- 4) *One Small Step* written and directed by Kato Takuya
- 5) *U-BU-SU-NA* choreography by Kujirai Kentaro

Editor

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

Reviewers

Arichi Meri, Alice Baldock, Margaret Coldiron, Laurence Green and Michael Tsang.

Image from *Noh and Kyogen Masks* by Jannette Cheong and Richard Emmert

Salon Culture in Japan: Making Art 1750-1900

edited by Yano Akiko

British Museum Press (2024)
ISBN-13: 978-0714124964

Review by Arichi Meri



Salon Culture in Japan: Making Art 1750–1900 was published in summer 2024 to accompany the special display of a selection of works from the British Museum’s collection of *Japanese art, City life and salon culture in Kyoto and Osaka, 1770–1900* (April 2024–March 2025). The book and the display are the results of a three-year project supported by UK Research and Innovation through the Economic and Social Science Research Council and by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science through an international joint research programme. The focus of this project is the unique social environment in which collaborative art-making practice flourished in two cities, Osaka and Kyoto, during the second half of the Edo period (1603–1868) and most of the Meiji period (1868–1912). The title *Salon Culture in Japan* is intriguing, as the word “salon” in an art historical context is strongly associated with the Paris Salon, the official state exhibition of art in France from the 17th to the 19th centuries, and it has not been discussed previously in the context of Japanese art. So what is salon culture in Japan?

The introduction by Yano Akiko, the editor, clarifies the question immediately by pointing out the phenomenon of gatherings of like-minded practitioners of art, both professionals and amateurs, in urban centres, mainly in Osaka and Kyoto. The collaborative nature of art-making is revealed by examples of paintings which feature contributions by multiple artists. A hanging scroll *Turtles* is by ten Osaka artists, possibly organized by Mori Shuho (1738–1823) whose artistic lineage came to be known as the Mori School. Two other artists of the Mori lineage, his son and a nephew also added their turtles, but interestingly the other seven artists contributing were from unrelated stylistic traditions. Untangling their relationships or understanding the purpose of the collaboration can be challenging without any textual record, but this was certainly not an isolated case.

Examples of collaborative paintings from the British Museum’s collection included in the Japanese Gallery’s display and in this publication indicate the popularity of group practice often in friendly and spontaneous environments in Osaka and Kyoto. An amusing example of such a painting is the hanging scroll *Fireflies*. In 1881, two grandsons of Queen Victoria, Prince Albert Victor (1864–1892) and Prince George (future George V, 1865–1936) visited Japan and they were entertained by artists including Kubota Beisen (1852–1906) in Kyoto. Prince George was invited to make some ink marks

on the paper and Beisen added a few brushstrokes to each, thus turning them into fireflies. The impromptu nature of the occasion suggests that collaboration often occurred regardless of social rank, family connection or artistic school. Collaborative paintings on set themes could sometimes be created in more formal circumstances too, but many examples in the British Museum are attractive for their light-hearted approach.

Such collaboration was not confined to the genre of painting, and we find that printed materials such as Surimono, luxury prints privately commissioned by *kyōka* (Crazy verse) clubs, often involved many people. Commemorating or recording group activities was an essential element of Surimono commissions which combined images and poems by many club members. Members of *kyōka* clubs, haiku clubs and Chinese style poetry clubs all used their pseudonyms (pen-name or artist’s name) which made it easier for people from different social backgrounds including women or participants of official rank to contribute. The egalitarian nature of club activities in the strictly stratified Edo society is a particularly fascinating and noteworthy aspect of the salon culture.

The increase of commissions from clubs encouraged the rapid growth of the publishing industry in urban centres. The salon culture also contributed to the increase of printed manuals designed to assist enthusiastic amateurs to take up the hobby of painting. The stimulus from imported Chinese painting manuals such as *The Mustard Seed Garden*, and the popularity of Hokusai’s 10-volume publication of his painting manual *Manga* are well-known, but there were many other such instruction books to satisfy the public’s appetite for their hobbies.

After the informative introduction, the book has five chapters: ‘Cities and the performing arts’ by Andrew Gerstle, ‘Painting everyday life’ by Timothy Clark, ‘Capturing nature’ by Alfred Haft, ‘China in Japan’ by Rosina Buckland, and ‘Poems and images’ by Yano Akiko. Each chapter also includes studies by experts in each field from Japan and elsewhere.

The performing arts were integral to these collaborative activities. It is interesting to learn that the popularity of Kabuki theatre in Osaka and Kyoto encouraged the development of actor prints that were remarkably different from those produced in Edo. In Osaka, many of the actor prints were designed by passionate fans of the actors, while actor prints were produced by professional Ukiyo-e artists in Edo. The involvement of fans in the performing arts was also noticeable in the popularity of amateurs taking lessons in Joruri or Noh chanting as a hobby from professionals in the late Edo period. Moreover, in today’s Japan, the practice of enthusiastic amateurs taking lessons in Noh chanting or Noh dance as a cultural accomplishment has its origins in

the salon culture created by teacher-pupil relationships in Osaka and Kyoto. The popularity of other hobby activities such as tea ceremony or Ikebana flower arrangement today all depend on this teacher-pupil salon structure.

The next three chapters analyse the subject matter of paintings which reflect the move towards the much more secular society of the Edo period. Depiction of people's lives, animals and birds, flowers and plants, as well as scenes from the classic Chinese themes were painted in various styles. The artistic landscape of the Edo period was complex, but two new strands, that of the Maruyama-Shijo style and the literati tradition, were particularly significant. Artists of the Maruyama-Shijo school followed the painting style of Maruyama Okyo with its strong emphasis on drawing from observation of nature. This was in a sharp contrast to the rigid copying training of the established Kano school.

The ideal of "literati" originally manifested itself in the Yuan dynasty in China when government officials under the rule of the Mongols relinquished their official positions and escaped to the countryside to pursue an artistic life. This idea was transformed in Japan among people of a totally different social background in the Edo period. The study of classical Chinese literature and philosophy was the driving force for the Japanese literati. However, since travel abroad was prohibited by the shogunate during the Edo period, China remained as an "idea" for Japanese artists who had to be content to paint imaginary landscapes using Chinese brush-strokes. The interest in China also encouraged the popularity of Sencha ceremony as a salon activity.

The last chapter of the book 'Poetry and images' reiterates the long tradition of the close relationship between words and images in Japan. The records of poetry gatherings at the imperial court during the Heian period (794-1185) were the source of multiple anthologies of poems. These poetry gatherings, or *renga* linked verse parties, can be described as "salon activity", but participation was exclusive to elite members of society. However, the salon culture of the Edo period was open to all. This dynamic and fluid relationship between painters, poets, and calligraphers was a distinct condition of the salon culture in Osaka and Kyoto, offering to us a new angle to the study of the art of the Edo period.

The book is beautifully illustrated with rare images from the British Museum's extensive collection, with detailed sections of scrolls and pages from printed books which have not been easily accessible up till now. These works of art have been digitized and their texts transcribed into a large online database which will be maintained by the Art Research Centre at Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto. Future research into Japanese paintings and printed books will greatly benefit from this project.

Previous studies in Japanese art often focused on individual artists or well-known schools, but the role ordinary citizens played in art-making has not been discussed in a coherent way. In this book the essays by experts in each field offer fresh and valuable insights into the collaborative nature of art-making in the 18th and 19th centuries in Osaka and Kyoto. The book will serve as an important reference source for historians of Japanese art, as well as an enjoyable read for anyone interested in Japanese visual culture. §

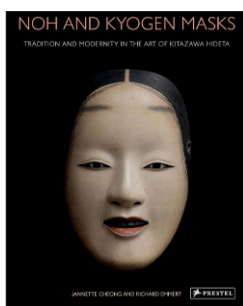
Noh and Kyogen Masks: Tradition and Modernity in the Art of Kitazawa Hideta

by Jannette Cheong and Richard Emmert

Prestel (2024)

ISBN-13: 978-3791377537

Review by Margaret Coldiron



Noh and Kyogen Masks: Tradition and Modernity in the Art of Kitazawa Hideta provides a rare treat—not only spectacular photographs of beautifully crafted works of Japanese art, but also revelatory elucidation of this revered ancient theatre form presented in a straightforward and accessible style.

The first thing that must be said about this book is that it is a beautiful object, truly exquisite in design and layout that makes excellent use of colour, space and typography.

Simple calligraphic kanji ideograms of the mask names work as both decoration and informative labels. The photographs are large, clear, and detailed; pages are not crowded with information, but rather allow plenty of clear space for contemplation of each mask. Thus, the book is rather Noh-like in design and execution, demonstrating its own special quality of *yugen*, provided by co-author Jannette Cheong's skills as designer, poet and Noh connoisseur.

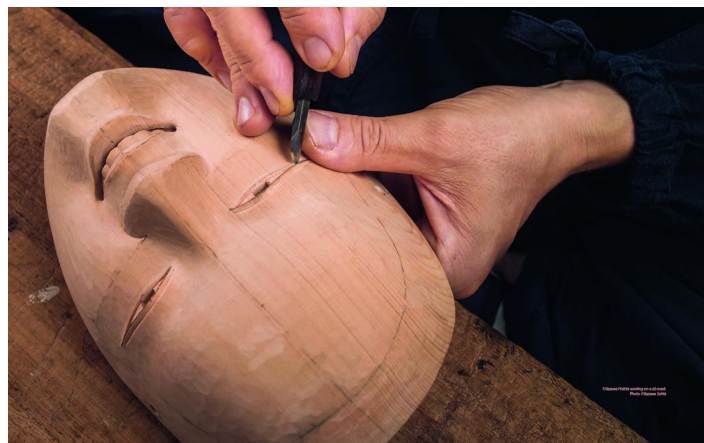
Another element that makes the book special is the detailed information provided about each mask, including elements of carving and painting as well as insights into how the mask is used in performance. In this it benefits from co-author Rick Emmert's decades-long immersion in Noh performance as both a scholar and a practitioner. So, this isn't just a gorgeous coffee-table book with nice pictures, but rather it is a comprehensive study of both classical and contemporary Noh and Kyogen masks. Even more importantly, these are all masks crafted by a living artist

who creates these works in active collaboration with the performers who wear them.

The preface by British actor Simon Callow and the forward by Hamish Todd (Head of East Asian collections at the British Library) set the stage for the work that follows. Historical paintings of Noh masks and performance from the British Library collections provide some historical context for this ancient-yet-contemporary theatre form, and an introduction by the authors explains how and why the book was developed.

The arrangement of materials is very clear; the book begins by introducing Kitazawa Hideta and his artistic milieu. His father, a master traditional woodcarver, creates works for temples, shrines and traditional festival floats; his brother is a professional photographer who provided most of the photographs used in the book; Kitazawa's wife is a textile artist. Kitazawa himself apprenticed for many years with master carver Ito Michihiko and has won prizes for his work. In 2004 he was introduced to the work of Richard Emmert's Theatre Nohgaku and began creating new Noh and Noh-informed masks for their productions. He has given workshops, exhibitions and had commissions from museums and universities in Europe, North America and Australia. In 2023 he was awarded the title of Traditional Master Craftsman (*Dento Kogeshi*) by the governor of Tokyo.

After this contextualising introductory material, we come to the heart of the book—Kitazawa's masks. It begins with a chapter of classical, traditional Noh masks with examples from all mask types (Okina, female, male, gods and demons). Each example includes a detailed explanation of the mask, how it is used, and any special features of carving or painting. Traditional Noh masks are based on the *honmen*, designated model masks of the ancient masters, and must adhere strictly to those designs. However, Kitazawa's skill in the execution of these designs is evident in these vivid photographs, and the accompanying descriptions reveal the subtleties of the carver's art. For example, it is often difficult to distinguish between the various types of young woman masks because they are so very similar (exemplified here in the Ko-omote, Manbi and Magojiro masks), however the high-resolution photographs and descriptions note individual elements in each type and explain how these small variations make each mask suitable for the performance of different characters. The photographs are so clear that minute elements of carving and painting are visible: individual painted strands of hair, for example, as well as whiskers, wrinkles and beard stubble. Throughout the masks are shown not just as objects, but also in action, in performances of Noh plays, with a synopsis and commentary on each play and mask. This vital



contextualisation demonstrates how the masks, costumes, wigs and headdresses work together to create a complete, vibrant living being on the stage. The book features not only some of the best-known mask types, but also some that are rarely seen such as Shaka (the benign face of the Buddha, painted in gold) and Oakujo, the angry old man.

The next section looks at 'Classical-based Noh Masks' created for the two English Noh plays written by Jannette Cheong: *Pagoda* (2009) and *Between the Stones* (2020). While based on the classical models, these masks have very slight variations that make them particular to the plays for which they were created, for example a "warmer" quality for the Zo-onna style mask used for Meilin, the spirit of the mother in *Pagoda* and the slightly altered details of hair to create a more Chinese appearance in the Waka-onna mask used for the daughter spirit in the same play.

Kyogen masks, which make up the next section, adhere less strictly to ancient models than Noh. This allows for greater creativity for the mask maker, as exemplified in Kitazawa's Oji (grandfather) mask, based on a contemporary photograph. The authors point out that 'there is a considerable challenge in making masks that portray humorous faces and can also convey a high level of dignity, elegance and prestige' (p. 128), and that the masks represent not only humans but also deities, demons and animals. Kitazawa brings a special expertise to his Kyogen mask making because he is an active amateur Kyogen performer (who studied under Nomura Manzo IX) and photographs of his performances illustrate how the masks in use come alive.

The creative artistry of Kitazawa can be most clearly seen in the contemporary Noh masks he has designed specifically for English-language Noh and Noh-influenced plays. These masks are extraordinary, possessing all the careful complexity and beauty of traditional Noh masks, but each is totally unique and inventive. Working without the benefit of *honmen*, Kitazawa consults with the creative team (playwright, performer and director) with reference to whatever images they suggest (photographs, paintings or statuary) and then creates drawings of the proposed

mask. If these are approved, he will go on to make a clay model which can be altered until the design meets the requirements of the character and the production. The carving process is the same as for traditional masks, using established methods and materials to create a mask that is lightweight and fitted to the face of the performer who will wear it. The painting techniques are also the same as for traditional masks, providing subtlety, detail, expressiveness and a striking realism. The characters they represent range from mythical demons of American folklore (the “Jersey Devil”) to historical figures, including Frida Kahlo and Elvis Presley. (Yes, that’s right, Elvis. The Elvis Presley mask appears in the English-language Noh, *Blue Moon Over Memphis*.)

The following section, on ‘Miscellaneous Masks’, features masks commissioned for Noh-influenced productions for the San Francisco-based Theatre of Yugen and for residencies at various American universities. These extraordinary masks were made for actors and dancers performing in styles influenced by, but quite different from, conventional Noh and Kyogen. They include half-masks made for performances of Benjamin Britten’s *Curlew River* (a chamber opera based on the Noh play *Sumidagawa*) and masks based on figures from Iroquois and Hawai’ian mythology.

At the end of the book are informative sections about the materials and methods of Noh maskmaking and Kitazawa’s work on restoration and repair of old Noh masks, with useful illustrations and descriptions of the work. A brief chapter on ‘Understanding Nohgaku’ provides a short history of Noh and an examination of the current state of the art. Noh was virtually unknown outside of Japan before the turn of the twentieth century, but its international

appeal has grown. Now, new Noh are being developed, not only in English but also French, Spanish and Polish, and it is no longer an exclusively male art, since an increasing number of female performers are taking the stage in all the Noh schools. There is also a collection of reflections from museum curators commenting on Kitazawa’s work and its place in their collections alongside much older objects. Finally, there is a splendidly thorough glossary/index along with an illustrated index of all the masks.

Books on Noh masks in English are rare. *Secrets of Noh Masks* by the late Udaka Michishige, an actor, teacher and mask maker from the Kongo school is very beautiful, and Steven E. Marvin’s magisterial two-volume *Heaven Has a Face and so does Hell: The Art of the Noh Mask* is comprehensive and scholarly, but very expensive. This book, on *Tradition and Modernity in the Art of Kitazawa Hideta*, is an important addition to this rather exclusive club. Moreover, it marks a significant advance in that it firmly asserts Noh and Noh maskmaking as living and developing arts, both within Japan and internationally. Uniquely, it foregrounds the perspective of practitioners—both performers and carvers—which means that the masks it presents may be seen not just as objects to be admired, but as dynamic and active entities creating life on the stage.

The book will certainly be of interest to scholars and collectors, but its emphasis on the practical business of making and using the mask makes it useful for students of theatre, performance and mask making. Since it is beautifully produced, accessible, and affordable it will undoubtedly appeal, not just to specialists, but also to a much wider public audience. §

Lost Souls Meet Under A Full Moon

by Tsujimura Mizuki
translated by Tejima Yuki

Doubleda (2025)
ISBN-13: 978-0857529657

Review by Laurence Green



You meet a mysterious teenager. A curious kind of middleman. “The Go-Between”. You have heard the strangest rumours - they say he can offer you a remarkable opportunity: the chance to meet someone, a loved one perhaps, who has passed away. But there is a catch - this is a one-time only deal, and your hours with them are limited. Once you’ve met with them, neither you, or anyone else, can ever request a meeting with them again.

Such is the premise of the interconnected short stories offered up in *Lost Souls Meet Under A Full Moon*, the latest

book from Tsujimura Mizuki (originally released in Japan in 2010 and translated here by Tejima Yuki) following on from the remarkable success of *Lonely Castle in the Mirror* (which was adapted into a feature-length anime film in 2022). As with that book, we are in high concept, fantastical premise territory and there is something fascinating about how often this kind of quasi-transactional, systemised, rule-bound approach to death crops up in Japan. Indeed, *Lost Souls Meet Under A Full Moon* is hardly the first to attempt this kind of thing - the *Before The Coffee Gets Cold* series, which utilises a similar gimmick to allow customers to go back in time (invariably conversing with a deceased person in the process) has been wildly popular, and more broadly speaking, Japanese culture - from literature to movies to anime and manga - are littered with these kinds of *shinigami* type figures who offer up deals of some sort or other to do with death and/or time travel. There are almost so many iterations on the theme now that they surely rival

the number of Japanese books now in translation about mysterious shops/cafes/libraries/cats, or for good measure, all of these mixed together.

As with so many works in this sub-genre, there is a bathos laden melodrama that is hard to palate at times. A schmaltzy sentimentalism that will either have you in floods of tears or shaking your head in disillusionment. But if you can get past the core premise (meeting and conversing with a dead person of your choice) then the deeper psychological by-products of the setup start to ring true - if you only had one chance to talk to a lost loved one, what would you say? And more importantly, what would they say to you?

In one of the more effective tales here - an average salary man meets a troubled girl struggling to make ends meet, they end up dating and everything looks set to indicate a happily ever after. Then, suddenly, without warning, she disappears - he is unable to discover what has happened to her, and waits seven years (the amount of time before a missing person can be declared presumed dead in Japan), hoping for an answer. That is, until he consults the Go-Between - and closure, of a sort, is provided. Coming halfway through the book, it is clear from the off where this particular vignette is going, but part of its charm is that the couple's budding romance offers a pleasant tonal diversion from the inevitably morbid conclusion.

As we move through a succession of the Go-Between's clients, the minutiae of Japanese everyday life is well observed, in particular the mind-numbing drudgery of the typical office worker's day-to-day, and it is this, held up in contrast to death, that you get a sense of what perhaps these kinds of novels are trying to say, and why they are so popular - a clarion call that seems to shout: 'snap out of it, you only get one shot at life, so don't waste a second of it'. They are palliative care in literary form - a strange kind of

meaning-making in a seemingly purposeless, meaningless world; a *memento mori* for the modern age.

The clockwork like repetition of the short story-esque formula, which clearly attempts to offer a kind of comfort in its ceaseless familiarity (we see the same events play out from both the clients, and then the Go-Between's, point of view), works both in and against the novel's favour. This is a book designed to be dipped into for short five-minute segments on the morning commute, the unerring reminders about the "rules" of the Go-Between ensuring you will never forget the core premise. One of the joys of *Lonely Castle In The Mirror* was that it kept you gripped with its slow release of information, gradually building an engrossing and convincing fantasy world and a cast of distinct characters. But here each tale feels like a TV sitcom - hitting the same familiar beats week in week out. Charming in small doses, but a little wearying if gulped down in a single sitting. There is also a question mark about the no-doubt marketing motivated decision to change the book's title from the original Japanese *Tsunagu* (literally, the Go-Between, or "to connect"), to the poetically wrought *Lost Souls Meet Under A Full Moon* - a choice surely made to bring it in line with the flavour and cadence of *Lonely Castle In The Mirror*, complete with matching, prettily illustrated cover art.

Ultimately, for those who rankle at the novel's overly sentimentalised treatment of death, be warned that this book - as with so many others in what seems to be a burgeoning category - wears every inch of its tearjerker status on its sleeve. It will either leave you a sobbing wreck, or exhaust you in its attempt at it. And for those that simply can't get enough of this kind of stuff, you're in luck; a translation of the sequel - *How To Hold Someone In Your Heart* - is already scheduled for release in July 2025. [S](#)

One Small Step

written and directed by Kato Takuya

Cast: Susan Momoko Hingley, Mark Takeshi Ota, Jay Faisca

Producer: Umeda Arts Theater

Charing Cross Theatre
(27 September-9 October 2024)

Review by Michael Tsang

Umeda Arts Theater teamed up with Charing Cross Theatre to bring two Japanese plays to London in September 2024. The first of the two, *One Small Step*, written and directed by Kato Takuya, is a sci-fi work set in near-future Japan exploring the ethics and gender politics of human colonisation in space. The play only has two main characters, Narumi and



Takashi, both scientists participating in an experimental project to send human subjects to moon to live. When Narumi finds out that she is pregnant, the question is no

longer whether to give birth to it, but also where, when, for whom.

Many countries have been addressing issues of gender disparity and inequality, so the subject matter itself is nothing new. A day after this reviewer watched the play, the Japanese national TV station NHK ran a feature on how Japanese women were still hugely disadvantaged in the workplace compared to other G7 countries, especially after childbirth. On one level, this play reminds us that this problem is still stubbornly present in Japan, and it is high time Japan's cultural scene addressed this issue persistently.

In this vein, the couple is more believable if one considers them Japanese, albeit unconventional in some ways. The husband appears respectful towards his wife, but makes rash and selfish decisions without consulting his significant other. Beyond the façade of suppressed calmness, he makes two emotional outbursts that reminds one of the potency of male violence. The wife is a clear-headed career woman, well-versed in prejudices faced by women and especially career women in Japan and elsewhere. Susan Momoko Hingley in particular offers a stellar performance and plays the wife character almost with an affective sensibility, as if the play struck a chord with her personally.

But in an incredulous scene where the two start raising their voices at each other leading to the husband's uncharacteristic bellow, it is she who first apologises immediately. The man might have been saying logical things and the woman might have been hysteric, but had this happened to a highly educated, well-mannered couple in the West, I suspect the man might be the one making the first move to apologise for the shouting. It is moments like these that remind us that the problem of gender, in Japan and beyond, goes further than equity in statistics and is essentially a problem of assumptions and attitudes.

Despite this, the play works because the speculative setting approaches the issue from a special angle that not even the most progressive nation on this planet has been able to solve. In other words, the play does not only operate

on a transnational, multicultural logic (which would spotlight Japan's gender disparity), but enhances the dilemma to a planetary level, foreground the ethical dilemma of being the first to raise a child on resourceless moon.

Milla Clarke's set design is particularly notable. The minimalist stage is appropriately near-future since, although it looks almost pristinely white, the props are all high technology, from the vacuum robot and printer to laptops and the frosted glass on a toilet cubicle. The main stage is actually a revolving stage that turns as the play progresses, echoing circular orbits, and is enclosed by a white barrier on which characters can sit. The stage floor, painted in white, has a slightly grained texture, perhaps alluding to a moon-like surface. The most brilliant use of technology, however, is the two hanging screens above the set, projecting the live feed of two video cameras that often deliberately zoom in only on Narumi. Not only does this divert audience attention, but we are essentially gazing at the female character all the time, and even at some of her body parts sometimes, complicit in adding wordless pressure onto her.

Japanese theatre has received rising attention in London in recent years, with both high-profile productions such as *Spirited Away* and more avant garde shows such as this one. Interestingly, the themes explored in this play draw parallel with this situation, as noted by the programme notes: 'what would happen if these Japanese creators staged their works on the Moon? In other words, if the UK is the Moon and the audience its inhabitants, how would they feel seeing a work from Earth – or in this case, Japan?' This experimental exchange of theatre is like the conquest of the moon, where projects such as this one by Umeda Arts Theater attempt to increase visibility and awareness of Japanese works by bringing them to the vibrant London theatre scene. *One Small Step* was followed by *Tattooer*, a play by Kaneshima Takuya and inspired by the eponymous short story by Tanizaki Jun'ichiro which ran between 14-26 October 2024. Here is hoping these are the first of many to come. [S](#)

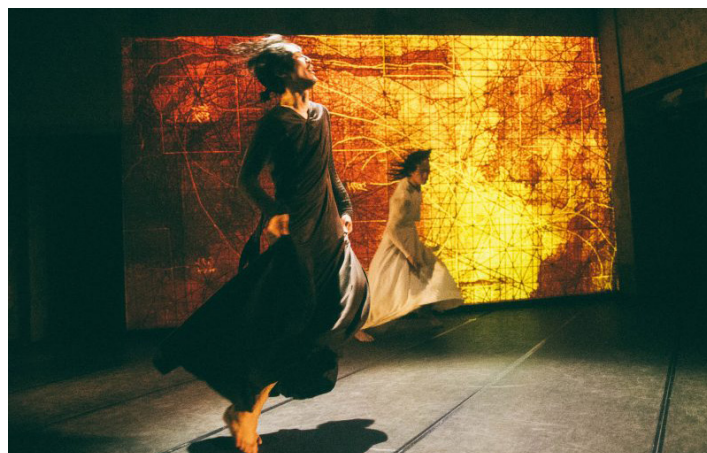
U-BU-SU-NA

choreography by Kujirai Kentaro
Dancers: Kujirai Kentaro, Sadakata Makoto, Noguchi Izumi, Kanamori Hirohisa

The Coronet Theatre
(14-16 November 2024)

Review by Alice Baldock

Snowstorms, isolation, and the icy bite of winter permeate the world of *U-BU-SU-NA*, a very old word meaning 'the mystical divine power that protects the land and those who



live there', and the title of this piece presented by butoh dancer and choreographer Kujirai Kentaro. Butoh is an avant-garde dance form, co-created by a group of dancers in 1950s Japan. At the centre of the dance is the notion of transformation; the ability and potential of any *body* to become any *thing*. The Coronet Theatre has a long record of programming performances of Japanese culture, staging the 'Electric Japan' festival in 2022; this piece is a welcome addition to that legacy.

In *U-BU-SU-NA*, the audience is taken through countless transforming worlds in the space of an hour (an hour that passes in a flash): at one point dancers seem to be battling against wind and snow, in another perhaps sitting in a cozy room on a winter's night, yet another still a comic and humorous world in which one dancer is rolled across the room by another wielding a broom. These varied and mutating worlds give an insight into some of Kujirai's stated visions for this piece: to interrogate the tension between contemporary, urban Japan, and his heritage.

This includes focusing on Tohoku, birth his birthplace and in some ways one of the key places informing the development of butoh: one of the landmark works of the first decades of butoh is *Kamaitachi*, a photobook of scenes from Akita, Tohoku, around the theme of a yokai, or monster, that would cut the ankles of people working in the fields. In the 1980s, dancers created the Tohoku Kabuki Project, choreographed by dancer Hijikata Tatsumi. Parts of Tohoku spend a good portion of each year snowed under, something which is reflected on by two dancers, Hijikata Tatsumi and Motofuji Akiko. In 1985, Hijikata wrote an essay called *Wind Daruma* about Tohoku:

"[...] in all of the Tohoku district, there's something called a "wind daruma." I'd better explain this a bit. Sometimes when it gusts up north, the snow swirls around and the wind is just incredible. Then a Tohoku person can get wrapped in the wind that blows from the footpath between the rice paddies to my front door and, garbed in the wind, become a wind daruma standing at the entrance." (Hijikata Tatsumi, *Wind Daruma*. Translation in *The Drama Review* vol. 44, no. 1 (Spring 2000))

Motofuji Akiko, meanwhile, dedicated a section of her memoir to the Tohoku town Akita's snowy climate, and argues for its importance to butoh as Hijikata's birthplace, saying that because otherwise snow would enter people's mouths, they would shorten words, and that movements based off those shortened words has the qualities of a lightning flash, black earth, puffs of snow, and so on (Motofuji Akiko, *Hijikata Tatsumi to tomo ni*, 1990). These qualities came through in the dancers of *U-BU-SU-NA*, as



well as their costumes created by KMRii and C.R.O.W design lab. Each piece of clothing seems to be covered in powdery snow, which moves alongside the dancers own movements, oscillating between rapid and serene. At one moment all dancers seem to be moving toward something, battling through imagined wind and snow that is almost tangible in the strength of their movements.

The most striking part of this arresting performance is how high the movement quality of every dancer is – each has an exacting command of their motion, their pace, and their use of space. A particularly standout performance was given by Noguchi Izumi, whose movements were in many places more subtle than her co-dancers, yet filled to the brim with details. Her movements were supple and fluid; in one exit she seems to undulate towards the back of the room without even taking a human step.

The music, a collaboration with sound artist and composer Fujita, and Nakasato Kota, takes audiences on a rollercoaster between clipped, urban, metallic screams and the serenity of birdsong and music that captures the essence of starlight (alongside the lighting design by Yoshida Kazuya). Dancers moved sometimes in harmony with this soundtrack and other times at a discord, highlighting an unease and tension between the nature and culture that Kujirai Kentaro wishes to draw attention to.

Overall, *U-BU-SU-NA* is a fantastic piece of dance and performance: costume, lighting, sound, and most importantly movement coalesce into a brief, but lingering, insight into worlds of tension, humour, and tranquillity. §