

Welcome to the first issue of The Japan Society Review in 2020. We start our 15th year of publication with renewed energy and commitment to advance the knowledge and understanding of Japan. In this period of crisis and uncertainty due to COVID-19, we hope all our readers and their families and friends keep healthy and well and invite you to discover new aspects of Japanese culture from the safety of your home. If you are intrigued by these suggestions and would like to read the books, please contact your local bookshop to check their delivery/online options to support them during this difficult time.

In this issue we include six reviews which examine history books, literary works and theatre performances. In the first place, we look at the historical figure of the samurai in two publications which approach it from different perspectives. *Samurai: A Concise History* by Michael Wert offers an historical introduction to the samurai class and its influence on Japan, including its image in media and pop culture. Exploring the roles of the samurai in watershed events such as Japan's invasions of Korea at the close of the sixteenth century and the Satsuma Rebellion of 1877, this book provides a lively account of both famed and ordinary samurai who shaped Japanese history. *Yasuke: The True Story of the Legendary African Samurai* by Thomas Lockley and Geoffrey Girard is a fictional work based on the life story of

the first foreign-born samurai, and his astonishing journey from Northeast Africa to the heights of Japanese society.

Also approaching Japanese culture from a foreign point of view, *Japanese Tales of Lafcadio Hearn* offers a collection of twenty-eight stories inspired by Japanese folk tales and written by renowned Western expatriate Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904). Hearn's work spans a variety of genres, from fantastical ghost tales to love stories in which the beloved is not what she appears to be and provide insights into Japan's artistic and cultural heritage.

Matayoshi Naoki's first novel *Spark* explores the world of comedians in Japan focusing on the life and artistic struggles of two manzai performers. This book has been hugely successful in Japan since it was first published in 2016. It has won the Akutagawa Prize and was adapted for film, stage and TV - the hit series is available on Netflix UK.

This issue finishes with reviews of two stage performances. The first one is a combination of music, the comic intermissions of Noh theatre (*kyogen*), and *A Christmas Carol*. The second performance expresses the global concern over climate change through *butoh* dance. Both are ambitious and thought-provoking products of a fruitful period in artistic exchange between Japan and the UK.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

## Contents

- 1) *Samurai: A Concise History* by Michael Wert
- 2) *Yasuke. The True Story of the Legendary African Samurai* by Thomas Lockley and Geoffrey Girard
- 3) *Japanese Tales of Lafcadio Hearn* edited and introduced by Andrei Codrescu
- 4) *Spark* by Matayoshi Naoki
- 5) *Music Kyogen Scrooge*
- 6) *Tipping Point: Our World in Crisis*

### Editor

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

### Reviewers

Alice Baldock, Laurence Green, Trevor Skingle and Azmina Sohail.

Image: detail of the cover of *Spark* by Matayoshi Naoki published by Pushkin Press

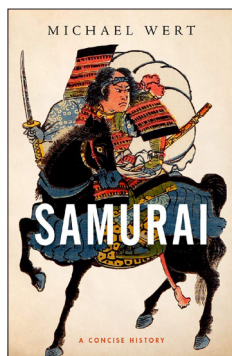
## Samurai: A Concise History

by Michael Wert

Oxford University Press (2019)

ISBN-13: 978-1912866496

Review by Trevor Skingle



From the Kabuki characters posing on stage in a *mie* pose through manga and anime to the historical sword fighting epics of Japanese cinema, the concept of the samurai has pretty much always provoked a variety of images in the mind. From the merciless assassin to the compassionate yet doomed hero, from the wandering masterless ronin to the philosophical *kensei* sword saint of legendary skill. In this very handy sized and concise book of just over one-hundred pages Professor Michael Wert, an associate professor at Marquette University, attempts to explain in easy to understand terms the origins and development of the samurai, that most archetypal of Japanese warriors.

The book is broken down into five chapters. The first 'Introduction: Becoming Those Who Served' covers the development of the notion of samurai (literally 'one who serves'). In the process Wert disdains the use of the term samurai to describe early Japanese fighters in favour of the English word warrior. Wert's explanations cover the ever changing dynamics and ambitions of militaristic groups and individuals, between their parochial provincial-based interests and the Court and Capital. The general range of multiple occupations that people were otherwise engaged in when not busy with military style functions is also discussed. Finally Wert examines the rise of the early military leaders Taira Masakado, Taira Kiyomori, and Minamoto Yoritomo; and the Gempei War (1180-1185) after which there emerged for the first time a centralised ruling warrior regime.

The second chapter 'Early Warrior Authority' covers what for some, given the seeming pre-eminence of men in Japanese history, might be the surprisingly pivotal role of women in the succession and transference of power and property between and within court centred and local provincial factions. The chapter also explores the establishment of the first Shogunate at Kamakura in 1185 and the development of its bureaucratic structures and expertise under the subsequent Hojo regency regime (1199-1333). It also analyses the tightening of affiliations with and within the nobility by warrior factions, and the progressive step from the military's previously subservient role to

the Court to one of joint rule. The author then poses some interesting conjectures about the Mongol incursions which interrupted these developments. This, he asserts, enhanced Hojo jurisdiction whilst counterintuitively marking the beginning of the end of the Kamakura military rule, yet leaving behind an early warrior legacy for subsequent regimes.

Chapter three 'War and Culture', the longest and most in depth chapter in the book, initially deals with the rise of the Muromachi Shogunate under the Ashikaga. It sheds light on the behind-the-scenes manipulation of warrior cliques by the Court and the ascendancy of regional governors and warlords to the detriment of and away from Kyoto-based Court rule. Contrary to generally held misperceptions about the primacy of individual declaiming sword wielding samurai in battle, Wert then goes on to enlighten the reader by discussing the actual methods of combat and types of armour and weapons used, including firearms, along with the later development and typical architecture of castles. Then, almost in contrast to earlier assertions in this chapter about the individual behaviour of samurai on the battlefield, the author looks at the acceptability of informal, respect based, samurai codes of ritualistic conduct and combat used during conflicts. Because of the chapter's title and that it starts with the example of Oda Nobunaga's interest in and practice of Noh, the reader might be mistaken for making an early assumption that this chapter is about the civil cultural side of warrior's way of life. The reader is fairly quickly disabused of this notion when it becomes apparent that the chapter, almost in its entirety, mainly covers their conduct in combat. It might perhaps have been more apt for the chapter to have been titled 'The Culture of War' even though warrior incursions into the civil artistic life of the nobility are briefly touched upon at the end of the chapter. The chapter concludes with the end of Ashikaga dominance, the first major and extremely violent urban conflagration in Kyoto during the Onin War (1467-1477), and the reassertion of the power of provincial warlords. This is followed in the final part by the coverage of the first glimmerings of national consolidation by the first two of the triumvirate of national unification, Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi.

The further consolidation and codification of the authority, familial infrastructure and behaviour of warrior elites under the Tokugawa dominated Edo era (1603-1868) is covered in chapter four 'Warriors in an Age of Peace'. Wert asserts that the stability of power relationships between the Tokugawa

administrative military authority and other primary and subsidiary domains, in particular outside *tozama* daimyo and vassal *fudai* lords, were not as rigorous as is generally thought. The chapter also explains the further attempts at the consolidation and classification of non-warrior groups beginning with Hideyoshi's sword hunt to deprive the general population, for the foreseeable future, of swords. Though swords (and firearms) were afterwards, supposedly, the exclusive reserve of the warrior class, the author also affirms that this was subject to a variety of interpretations dependant on the local situation and status of the non-warrior commoner; what the author refers to as the 'Commoner-Samurai Grey Zone'.

The final chapter 'Inventing the Samurai' discusses the beginnings of what might be accepted as the notion of idealised samurai, their categorisation as a social group and the further cross fertilisation of their culture with that of commoners. Alongside this, the author emphasizes, it came the increasing importance of samurai genealogy, the publication of etiquette manuals and warrior rosters. From a brief explanation of the ideal samurai as portrayed in Kabuki emerges a description of the Ako Incident (also known as the 47 Ronin) a historical event in the 18th-century which became pivotal in samurai history. The discussion attempts to demonstrate the important influence of the incident and associated Confucianist and later Neo-Confucianist philosophy on perceptions of samurai culture both then and in a post samurai world. It also links the incident to the

book of idealist samurai conduct *Hagakure (Hidden amongst the Leaves)* by Yamamoto Tsunetomo). Yet, contradictorily, Wert asserts that all of this high idealism led to the satirical parodying and denigration of the model of the idealised samurai, ironically by samurai commentators themselves. The chapter is rounded off with discussions about the fertilisation of commoner culture by samurai tales, and the transference of allegiance by the samurai from the Shogunate to the Court as a result of incursions by Western powers which, ironically, led to the Meiji restoration of Imperial rule and the subsequent demise of the samurai. The final section deals with post restoration legacy of the samurai with some interesting hypotheses which, as in earlier sections, run counter to the generally accepted received wisdom about samurai that tends to permeate popular culture.

Overall this is a curious, thought provoking and oftimes exciting romp through the history of the samurai in Japan. There are quite a few ideas, interpretations and propositions that go against the grain of what many readers may have thought and accepted about samurai. If the intention was to provoke as well as educate the book succeeds. It is interesting that the author seems to try to limit the amount of terms usually rendered in the Japanese language, instead preferring to use English equivalents. This may be perhaps as the intention is for the book to eventually be published as part of Oxford University Press's Very Short Introduction series. §

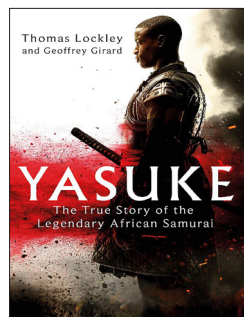
---

## Yasuke. The True Story of the Legendary African Samurai

by Thomas Lockley and Geoffrey Girard

Sphere (2019)  
ISBN-13: 978-0751571615

Review by Laurence Green



Yasuke loomed over them focused, undaunted. Wrathful. One of the soldiers glanced at the sword in his own trembling hand and his look revealed all: it was not weapon enough to fell such a man... The three soldiers remained spellbound, unable to move. Even words failed them. "Yasuke de gozaru," the African samurai challenged, stepping forward into attack position. I am Yasuke.

Powerful anecdotes like this lie at the heart of Thomas Lockley and Geoffrey Girard's account of the life of Yasuke, the African mercenary-turned-samurai who found himself, against all odds, immersed in the very heart of political and military power in 16th century Japan, thousands of miles from his birthplace. The two authors, bringing their expertise from academia and 'historical adventure' non-fiction respectively, combine forces to unleash a fast-moving narrative that takes us from Yasuke's arrival in Japan under the service of Jesuit missionaries, through descriptions of his physical prowess and aptitude at the Japanese language, to his position serving famed daimyo Oda Nobunaga. To this end, we are offered a uniquely imagined 'eye-witness' viewpoint that not only tells us what happens, but strives to let us *feel* it too.

The book purports to be both a biography and military history, and that's perhaps how best to approach the style at play here. At times – as the opening snapshot suggests – it may read like macho, mass market 'lad lit', but while these quasi-fictional narrative embellishments add considerable flavour to the telling of Yasuke's story, it is important to recognise that they are always in service to a wider historical context. Yasuke is central to this tale, but he is by no means the only key player.

Indeed, one of the most engaging figures of the book's opening passages is Italian missionary Alessandro Valignano, whose efforts to ingratiate himself to the powers that be in Japan (and by extension, further the aims of the Christian church there) feels symptomatic of a crucial era in global history where, suddenly, even comparatively isolated realms like Japan became part of a larger field of play. As the book puts it, 'the world had grown much smaller'.

Central to this idea of global flows is, of course, Yasuke himself. As a black man, finding himself as both a minority and curiosity in Japan, ample space is given to unpacking the practical and moral complexities of how he found himself to be there in the first place, and how his 'blackness' was envisioned once he was there. Chapter Five (entitled 'The Terms of Employment') in particular shares a fascinating discourse on the nuances of indentured servitude, as well as how race was viewed at the time. Namely, that modern concepts of skin colour stem from 18th and 19th century 'scientific' classifications, and that to Europeans of the 16th century, darker skin simply signified 'non-Christian'. It is in chapters like these that the book's core premise – essentially a story of a pioneering figure, intriguing precisely because of his exceptionality – feels both freshest and at its most interesting. The version of history offered is not strictly revisionary, but it continually asks us to question what we think we know of both Japan, and the people that interacted there, whatever their race or nation.

Elsewhere, we tread more familiar ground, and when, later on, we are told of Yasuke's encounters fending off attacking ninja, it can all feel a little too much like wish-fulfillment 'Who'd win? Ninja or Samurai?' war-gaming, like a kid throwing all their favourite toys down on the play mat and hoping for the best. In much the same manner, the book's middle passages can feel a little bloated at times, and a momentary diversion into Yasuke's former life serving as a mercenary in India is tonally at odds with the consistently Japanese atmospherics that suffuse the rest of his story. There

is also the larger question of how much this book is ultimately Yasuke's story specifically, and how much is simply another in a long line of dramatic rehashings of this particularly tumultuous period in Japanese history. We might ask – who exactly is the intended audience here, and are those coming to this tale specifically for Yasuke interested in the immensely rich backdrop of associated historical personages? It is easy to imagine some, lured in by the book's unique premise, becoming wearied by the seemingly endless procession of assorted feudal politicking.

That said, the book saves its masterstroke till late in the game – this comes in the form of a nail-bitingly dramatic set-piece that sees Nobunaga's last moments (and Yasuke's pivotal role in them) unfolding in real-time as he makes his final stand against treacherous rival factions. The sense of timing is palpable as, faced with insurmountable odds, Nobunaga decides to commit harakiri, bestowing Yasuke with the incredible honour of bearing his severed head and sword to his son Nobutada. Fleeing the scene with seconds to spare, dodging bullets and arrows, to arrive breathless at Nobutada's feet with the fateful package, the authors' movie-like command of the narrative reaches its peak here with an action-packed dynamism straight out of a thriller.

But there's more – in some ways even more compelling than this frenetic explosion of violence is the book's more reflective final chapter where we are presented Yasuke's legacy in an overview of materials featuring him (and figures inspired by him) that takes us right up to the likes of anime, manga and video games in the present day. The long shadow cast by Yasuke's story is an impressive one, all the more so given we have just spent so many pages in his direct company. His life, for hundreds of years lost to history, was ultimately not in vain.

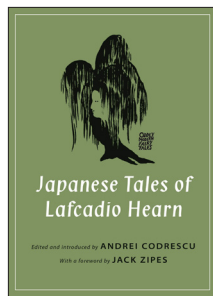
As one of the most readable histories to grace the field of Japanese Studies in a while, Yasuke's story deserves as wide a readership as possible – not only for its subject matter, but also the consummate skill by which its authors have blended history and dramatic narrative in a manner that opens the tale up in a way far drier academic tomes invariably fail. Some may sneer at the glossy, movie poster-esque cover art or the simplicity of the language – but this is to both ignore the clear scholarly input addressed in the ample end-notes, and to miss the point in the purpose of a book like this: To above all else, tell an engaging tale. And what a tale Yasuke's is. §

## Japanese Tales of Lafcadio Hearn

by Lafcadio Hearn  
edited and introduced by Andrei Codrescu

Princeton University Press (2019)  
ISBN-13: 978-0691167756

Review by Azmina Sohail



*Japanese Tales of Lafcadio Hearn* is a great example of how literature has evolved and should continue to evolve in every sense of the word; in representation, theme and language. In order to appreciate or even understand this collection of folk tales, you must detach yourself from your present reality and open yourself up to a world not just of fantasy but of ancient mythological history where Shinto traditions, mysticism and anthropomorphism are very much alive.

Lafcadio Hearn, also known by his Japanese name Koizumi Yakumo, was of Greek and Irish descent but moved to Japan during the nineteenth century after emigrating to the US and the West Indies where he worked as a newspaper reporter and a teacher. It was in Japan that he found a real sense of belonging and soon married a Japanese woman, became a Buddhist and had a family, spending the remainder of his life there.

Before embarking on this collection, it's important to note that Japan during the nineteenth century was still considered an exotic and somewhat uncharted place for the Western traveller and subsequently subject to voyeuristic observations by writers. Hearn seems to play into this notion by writing in the genre of fantasy, but upon further analysis it's clear that, with his amalgamation of Japanese language, ancient Shinto traditions and folklore, his appreciation for Japan is an extension of his identity. The stories often centre on a single traveller (usually a farmer, priest or samurai) and his encounters with supernatural forces; nature that has come to life, wondering sprites or the spirits of deceased and disturbed women. It is these supposed "good" people of the world that come into contact and often succumb to the strange forces of evil. Women play a significant role in these stories and it is this representation that I want to pay particular attention to.

In Western literature, feminist ideals were not known until the late nineteenth century, until then women were notably depicted as flat subjects admired for their sensitivity and physicality. Despite embracing an Eastern lifestyle, Hearn's descriptions remain similar to these Western narratives. In 'The Screen-Maiden' a young scholar falls madly in love with a painting of a

young girl who he describes as 'so delicious a creature' who he would gladly give his life to. In 'The Corpse-Rider,' a deceased woman who died from grief after a divorce 'would have been useless to bury... because the last undying wish of a dying person for vengeance can burst asunder any tomb.' Instead the husband is instructed to 'astride her', grabbing her hair and twisting it until morning in order to save himself from her vengeance. In another story, women are described as 'mystical gods who serve the lusts of men only to withdraw at the last minute' and save them from the 'perils of their illusion.' It seems writing within the fantasy genre has given Hearn leeway for representing women in such a manner. Instead of submissive governesses, wives of farmers or clueless daughters, he presents women from the perspective of the "flaneur" in that that they become dangerous, seductive and fantastical beings. It is this idea that begs the need for evolution.

As the stories progress, they become evidently darker and more disturbing, preparing readers for the unexpected. But amid all the fantasy, time travel and illusion, there are flashes of morality carefully woven in. In one tale, Hearn states that 'by drinking too deeply of life we do not become young.' A noted universal truth in that no matter how much we engage in worldly pleasure, we cannot fulfil our true desires; a clear intimation of Hearn's interest in the afterlife.

Buddhism is a constant theme in each tale. The fundamentals of Buddha's teaching is the practice of morality in order to escape rebirth and the attainment of Nirvana. Hearn writes in a way that serves as a reminder to not only respect these beliefs but consider them as a part of reality. The fact that his characters are everyday people, who are on a quest for happiness in the physical world but find meaning in the supernatural, suggests that true Japanese culture is rooted in religion; a noble message for contemporary society. Japan's increasing fascination with technology, wealth and fast-living is worldly pleasure. The publication of these tales has possibly come at a good time. It suggests that in order to achieve true happiness we must look to the old ways and the teachings of the past. It suggests that the current life we are living is possibly an illusion designed for mankind. By seeking knowledge and achieving true morality we can control our future and what may lay in store for us after death.

As a writer, Lafcadio Hearn uses language beautifully in both his characters and imagery whilst paralleling nineteenth century Western themes. His eloquence surpasses these themes and allows us to reflect on the language and representation

contemporary writers use today. This collection of fantasy tales is essentially a snapshot of a time passed, but a strong reminder of how the world and literature

is changing in sometimes wonderful and sometimes strange ways. §

## Spark

by Matayoshi Naoki  
translated by Alison Watts

Pushkin Press (2020)  
ISBN-13: 978-1782275909

Review by Laurence Green



When the cover of a book quite literally bursts out at you in vivid, fluorescent orange – glistening fried eggs spewing out from the centre – it's hard not to pay attention, even more so when said book is the recipient of Japan's prestigious Akutagawa prize. *Spark* (in Japanese, *hibana*) proclaims itself the 'cult Japanese phenomenon', but truth be told, having sold more than three million copies in Japan, one could quibble about where to draw the line between cult success and bonafide blockbuster mega-hit. Either way, the sales figures are remarkable, and make for envious reading for UK booklovers for who such dizzying heights are almost never scaled here. Is this the sign of a Japanese reading public head-over heels with high-brow, prize-winning literature?

The answer lies in the book's origins: comedian turned author Matayoshi Naoki. Famous as part of the comedy duo Peace (alongside partner Yuji Ayabe), he is also known for his numerous TV appearances, where he has a history of playing historical figures such as Natsume Soseki and Tokugawa Iyemasa. One might scoff at Matayoshi's seemingly easy transition from comedy to books – it's easy to draw parallels with similar celebrity successes here in the UK – but what is immediately apparent on sitting down with a copy of *Spark* is that this is no hastily bashed out cash-cow, but a serious bit of quality literature.

Akutagawa Prize winners of late have had a tendency to revel in oddball characters – think Murata Sayaka's acclaimed *Convenience Store Woman* – and Matayoshi's *Spark* is no exception. Very much a kind of autobiographical work, the story focuses on manzai comedian Tokunaga and his elder partner Kamiya, following the duo as they rise to success, whilst simultaneously portraying the nuances of the two men's relationship with each-other. Neither is initially an attractive figure; they drink a lot, swear a lot, and in general act like a couple of guys up to no good. What fascinates most about *Spark* is how so much of

the novel puts narrative drive aside and simply leans on this central relationship between the two men to propel it forward, a dynamic completely and utterly defined by the Japanese *senpai* (senior) / *kohai* (junior) bond. For all his faults, Tokunaga looks up to the crazed genius-like Kamiya, seeking his guidance and knowledge as the pair look to make their way through the fickle world of comedy.

This is a very 'talky' book, whether it be the constant, rapid-fire back-and-forths between the two main characters, or the more reflective introspective monologues, giving a window into Tokunaga's morose view of the world. This is both a blessing and a curse, on one hand, this perfectly encapsulates the feel of *manzai* comedy (and this is, after all, a book fundamentally *about* comedy as a concept) but there is also a lingering notion that not all the jokes hit home as hard as they'd like. Readers with a sufficient knowledge of Japanese culture and language will have a clear sense of how certain passages would sound in Japanese, and that sometimes, they just don't connect in quite the same way rephrased into English. Still, for the most part the translation by Alison Watts is of excellent quality and tonally, fits well with the other Japanese output published over the last few years by Pushkin Press.

So, while readers with less of an intimate knowledge of Japan might struggle a little, those primed with some cultural background will find plenty to love here, especially in the book's detailed description of its primary setting, Tokyo's trendy suburb Kichijoji. Against a backdrop of this eclectic hipster paradise, the book does a good job at visualising the intangible essence of comedy onto the page – it's worth noting here though that the book has already been turned into a televised adaptation available on Netflix (something the front cover is also keen to advertise). One of the best jokes hangs on the simple but ridiculous wordplay inherent in the fact that to eat a hotpot could be taken as meaning either the foodstuff, or the pot itself. Humour like this thrives in the fabric of the humdrum actions and habits that form our lives, the moments that seen out of context, seem utterly banal. *Spark* excels as a comedy of the absurd, but it is an absurdity shot through with the constant struggle against melancholic everyday tedium. A Japanese *Withnail & I*, perhaps?

While so many books fall victim to 'strong start, weak finish' syndrome, *Spark* is immensely satisfying in that it grows into its strengths. By throwing us in at the deep end, we are forced to acclimatise slowly to the foibles of its characters, the world of Japanese comedy and the way our two leads co-exist with it. Because of this, when the book hits its stride in an exhilarating final third that sees one of their most impassioned performances play out in real time, it is all the more propulsive. Somehow, the exercise of transitioning the power of a stand-up routine onto the printed page works, and the punchy, breathless energy of the sequence works wonders.

And then there's the stunning, and quite literal, revelation that comes in the book's closing passages. To say any more would be to spoil the surprise, but it is a moment that once encountered, cannot be unread, and arguably transforms the reader's entire relationship with *Spark* and its two main characters. Both emphasising and complicating a potentially homo-erotic reading of their relationship, one can question whether the sheer dominance this moment has over the rest of the book potentially cheapens

it, or is simply the tour-de-force in a sequence of progressively more outlandish stunts the book pulls as part of its comedic arsenal. Suffice to say, said 'reveal' is what will stick in the minds of most readers first and foremost. As a remarkable punchline to an already strong final third, *Spark* reminds us here that sometimes it really is the most brazen comedy that can be the most effective at hammering home a point.

It all feels like a fine companion to 2018's Pulitzer-winning *Less* by Andrew Sean Greer, another compact novel that was not only unafraid to portray the more emotional, fragile side of masculinity, but also to pair sharp humour with a kind of begrudging world-weariness. These narratives thrill because they feel so distinct from the kind of chiselled Hollywood heroes we are used to seeing on screen. In the pages of a book, these men are given room to ruminate in the depths of their thoughts, and it is testament to Matayoshi's satirical skill that *Spark* feels like a ripe skewing of contemporary Japanese culture. Peel back the prim, pristine exterior, and there is a whole lot of messiness beneath. §

---

## Music Kyogen Scrooge

with Kyogen masters Zenchiku Juro and Zenchiku Daijiro

Oxford Playhouse (27 November 2019)

Review by Alice Baldock

A story so established it has become almost archetypal, Dicken's *A Christmas Carol* once again swept across Europe this November. It is the tale of the supposedly transformational power of a season, the forced introspection of one man which causes him to move from a mean old money-pincher to a cheerful and charitable friend. Audiences in Europe are all-too familiar with this story, having read it or seen it in numerous screen and stage productions. There is even an animated Disney version. However, the version that dropped by cities such as Vienna, Geneva, and Oxford last month was very different. It was called *Music Kyogen Scrooge* (*Sukuru-ji Ongaku-Kyogen*), a combination of music (*ongaku*), the comic intermissions of Noh theatre (*kyogen*), and *A Christmas Carol*.

The idea seems faintly ridiculous; how can we combine these three things in a way that makes sense, let alone be entertaining? And yet, the three concepts combine surprisingly well. The original story is one that

many people know, making the less-familiar elements easier to make sense of. Meanwhile, the story of the miser Scrooge confronting a number of ghosts, can be stripped back to involve only two Kyogen. They are Zenchiku Juro and his son, Zenchiku Daijiro. Zenchiku Juro is the grandson of the first Kyogen actor and a Living National Treasure. He plays Scrooge (*Sukuru-ji*), and his son embodies that various ghosts: Marley, and the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future. Zenchiku Daijiro is part of a group of young actors that are trying to revitalise and continue the art form, making it relevant and accessible in the 21st century world.

Having only two actors makes it simpler to apply the structure of Kyogen to the story. Meanwhile, it has a curious effect on how audiences interact with the scenes in the story. In other versions, ghosts bring Scrooge face-to-face with painful moments from his life, or moments where he has caused harm to others. In *Sukuru-ji Ongaku-Kyogen*, the audience can see none of this. They are blinder than *Sukuru-ji*, only taking his reactions as a sign that he can see something else, something that isn't in the performance space. Is it, perhaps, a reminder that everything *Sukuru-ji* sees is an illusion, but that illusion has the capacity to transform his world-view. This makes the audience work harder,

which is perhaps not what they are expecting; we are used to having whole, imaginary worlds put in front of us. Nonetheless, the lack of prop and character brings our attention closer to Sukuru-ji's reactions – sadness, pain, and joy. Some parts were incredibly funny, yet others were more sombre, bringing a different dynamic to what one might expect of Kyogen, which are usually overwhelmingly comical.

The music was composed by Walther Giger, and performed by Kawamura Noriko, Ota Tomomi, and Shirato Fumio. It is very powerful, and is the aspect that makes Ongaku-Kyogen unique. It is not just

acting or music; it is both. The music did contribute greatly to creating atmosphere in the room, but on a few occasions did jar a little with the story. This is because audiences had to both watch the actors, picture what they were seeing, read the subtitles, and listen to the music. In key scenes, this became a little overwhelming. Despite this, the whole production has a wonderfully festive feel. Even though it is not being quite-December, audiences cheerfully wish each other a 'Merry Christmas' as they leave the Holywell Music Room, Oxford. §

---

## Tipping Point: Our World in Crisis

by Café Reason Butoh Dance Theatre

Al Jaber Auditorium, Oxford (11 & 12 January 2020)

Review by Alice Baldock

*Butoh*, an avant-garde artform that tiptoes along the precipice between performance art, dance, and absurdity, began in post-war Japan. It was a way of finding new means of expression, and it was also a form of protest. Café Reason interprets it as a way to 'uncover the dance that already exists in the body'. Since the 1950s, what *butoh* is has both expanded and contracted in meaning. Those who founded it did not want *butoh* to become something with characteristics, yet, elements like painting the whole body, creating grotesque facial expressions, and moving with slow, grounded steps, have somehow become 'butoh'. However, the reach of *butoh* has expanded to envelop the whole world, with groups still strong and active in Brazil, the US and the UK. Café Reason is the only UK *butoh* group outside of London. Their latest piece, *Tipping Point*, uses a dash of these *butoh* 'characteristics' alongside many other interesting ways of moving. More importantly, these dancers use *butoh* to protest, much like their distant Japanese predecessors. In this piece, however, the protest is about a concern that is both urgent and global: our climate emergency.

The completely sold-out piece, conceptualised and choreographed by Cath Blackfeather, Ayala Kingsley, and Karen Goonewardene, has been a year in-the-making. They join the other dancers in performance, costume-making, and even videography to create a piece that is varied, fractured, and continuously unravelling before the audience's eyes. The piece is split into seven parts, exploring the environmental impact of human life upon aspects of the non-human world, such as migration and ocean environments.

There are many moments that the group intended to be shocking. In 'Gaia', Fabrizia Verrecchia, playing Gaia, is stripped of a beautiful, trailing cloak by three business-suited, animal-masked villains. They rip at her clothes, tear black material – reminiscent of coal – from her, and take away her basket. Haunting sounds from musicians Jill Elliott and Maggie Nicols accompany this looting, making it a piece not for the faint-hearted.



Another shocking moment is when these villainous creatures return to the stage with three black sacks, larger than a person. They upend them all over the stage, and all over Gaia, and out of them, tumble empty plastic containers, drink bottles, yoghurt cups, CD covers. The dancers try desperately to build something useful from them, sandcastles of plastic, to no avail. They end the piece as a group, looking out on the audience, daring them to do something about habits, habits all of us keep, that are leading to this mess.

The dancers obviously put a great deal of thought behind harmonising concept with costume, music, and lighting. Each element of the performance worked seamlessly to bring about the pressing message of the piece. Some sections, perhaps, went on a little long for some audience members. However, the overall performance was already only 75 minutes long, and just as one piece began to teeter towards the repetitive, the entire setting of the dance changed, relieving that feeling. From dancers imitating migrating birds, to being wrapped in cling film, to rolling through a sea of packaging, the performance was both diverse and thought-provoking. §