



## Theatre as intercultural dialogue – a case study of nō theatre production in Poland

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### Abstract

This paper (presented at the scientific conference 'Configuring "World Theatre"' in Edinburgh in June 2019) deals with issues related to the cross-cultural communication of two unique cultures via intersemiotic translation by analysing the first Polish nō play *Stroiciel fortepianu* [The Piano Tuner] by the Polish artist and scholar Jadwiga Rodowicz-Czechowska. While theatre scholars (Pellechia, 2014; Nukken, 2018) have observed the conservative manner through which the nō spectacles are adapted, they have undermined the role of visual, acoustical, and kinaesthetic properties of the language of drama that offer freedom and creativity in adaptation, thus enabling intercultural exchange. The history shows (Waniek, 2012) that despite its conservatism, nō theatre has remained open to European theatrical influences, constituting a type of platform for intercultural discourse. Extraordinary as it was, the first Polish production of nō theatre became an example of a cross-cultural encounter in which two theatrical traditions met to span a bridge between two distinctive nations. Therefore, this paper demonstrates how the trio of Jadwiga Rodowicz-Czechowska (the author), Tokimasa Sekiguchi (the translator), and Tessenkai Theatre (the performers), through the symbols and subtle allusions contained in the sounds, movements and visual elements intertwined in the play's network of meanings, make this cross-cultural communication possible. The analysis is performed using three types of signs defined by semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce – symbol, index, and icon.

*“A man walks across this empty space  
whilst someone else is watching him,  
and this is all that is needed...”  
Peter Brook, The Empty Space, 1968*

“The word Nō means talent or, by extension, the display of talent in performance”, explains the author of *Noh: Classical Theatre of Japan* (Keene & Hiroshi, 1978, p. 9), one of the many publications attempting to capture the essence of this very particular form of Japanese drama. It is possible that only a few forms of drama can evoke a comparable sense of amazement in the audience. Why this should be becomes obvious once one realizes that Nō shares nothing in common with other Japanese and Western forms of drama, and it is only with difficulty that Western audiences are able to gain an understanding of it.

Evolved from religious dances performed at Shinto shrines in order to appease malevolent ghosts by reciting or re-enacting their deeds, the kernel of the rules guiding what we now call classical Nō plays was formed in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and has remained consistent through to the present day (Keene & Hiroshi, 1978, p. 14; Nukke, 2018, p. 4). Those classical plays, approximately 250 in number, represent the regulatory repertoire characterized by certain rules that, though strict, are central to Nō’s beauty. In what has emerged, an economy of means stands at the core of those rules. Indeed, the stage, the arena of the whole action, is bare, at most, with a great pine painted on the back wall - reminiscent of a Shinto shrine – and precisely populated, with its contributors occupying appointed places (Rodowicz, 1994, p. 42). The lack of a curtain and the rather strange stage arrangement foreshadow a different theatrical order. In fact, instead of a rising curtain, the shrill, harsh sound of a flute denotes the beginning of the play, after which all the participants in the sequence pass over the bridge onto the stage. The musicians and choir are followed by *waki*, literally ‘side’, the first of two characters to appear on stage, whose function is to announce the arrival of *shite*, literally ‘doer’, the central protagonist of the play (Nukke, 2018, p. 5). The protagonist’s centrality is further foregrounded by his splendid brocade costume, as opposed to *waki*’s black robe, and the presence of a mask, absent in *waki*’s attire. Before entering onto the main stage, *shite*, always an incarnation of the dead, gazes intensely at the mirror in the *kagami no ma*, or ‘mirror room’, located at the end of the bridge. This symbolic act represents the transition from ordinary living into the mystery of Nō theatre (Keene & Hiroshi, 1978, pp. 13, 62). Worth noting is that in Nō, what interests us is the category of a role rather than the name of a character. Devoid of all confrontation and characterised by limited action, a Nō play is marked by the acting, the purpose of which is to convey profound emotions through highly simplified and stylized gestures. Unlike in Western drama, an actor’s aim is not to achieve maximum expressiveness or realism, but to

give a hint, a suggestion, “to touch the very springs of human emotions” (Keene & Hiroshi, 1978, p. 15). To master this technique, a Nō actor, always male and traditionally the son of a prestigious Nō father, will proceed through sequential levels of acting, beginning with agile, energetic roles that are easier to project, graduating to roles requiring less movement, with the aim of performing the role of an almost motionless old woman (Keene & Hiroshi, 1978, p. 57). Music and dance, central to the Nō play, also adhere to the rule of minimalism. Sung by the poor, hoarse and quivering voices of a choir and *shite*, the music aims to portray a troubled character but never comments on his actions and the dances illustrate the text rather than exhibit the exceptional capabilities of the performers (Keene & Hiroshi, 1978, pp. 67, 69, 71).

Having taken this shortcut down the alleys of Nō theatre’s singular features, one might ask the question whether it would be possible to produce a Nō play that meets the expectations of a target audience without performing an act of vandalism of sorts. Herein lies an inherent tension: non-transferable and the untranslatable uniqueness of each culture and language. Jacques Derrida’s Tower of Babel metaphor used in his essay “Des Tours de Babel” conveys plainly the difficulty of achieving unity among all humankind. In referring to Paul de Man’s essay on Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator”, this happens because each language (and culture) has “a different manner of meaning” that “resonates through [an endless] chain of signification” producing an “inexhaustible number of associations and connotations” (Davis, 2001c, pp. 24, 25). In Derrida’s terms, all those associations disseminate all along the pathway of a continuously changing spatiotemporal context. In other words, the produced connotations are associated with the subject’s position and their knowledge. Possibly, Benjamin’s concept of ‘pure language’, which recognizes the necessity of one’s own language to be profoundly affected by the original without converting the foreign into its own, may provide a solution to this problem. The consequence would be language growth (Davis, 2001c, p. 41) or, in Derrida’s words, a ‘sur-vival’ of the text that “lives more and better, beyond the means of its author” (Chapman, 2016, p. 11) because it “performs new meanings in the target system” and “completes [the] original’s deficiencies and imperfections” (Davis, 2001c, pp. 40, 41).

Likewise, producing and staging a European version of Nō theatre may evoke a new amalgam of both cultures’ elements, a semiotic counterpart of Benjamin’s pure language. In the past, there have been harbingers of such unification. Though the Aristotelian concept of drama that has do-

minated the tradition of Western theatre with its mimetic, linear plot and a protagonist that the audience can identify with (Ruta-Rutkowska, 2012, p. 31) may hinder such an attempt, nonetheless, some aspects of this tradition may function as vehicles promoting the integration of Nō theatre into the Western world. Medieval European mystery plays, for instance, offer such vehicles with themes like the doctrine of salvation, which shares similarities with a doctrine present in one of the Japanese Buddhist sects, Amidism. These similarities allowed the Portuguese missionaries, arriving in Japan in 1543, to create *kirishitan Nō* (Waniek, 2012, p. 95), intended to aid in evangelization across Japan. Jan Kott, a Polish theatre scholar, finds other channels of connection. He notes similarities between the medieval concept of the mobile stage, “the theatre seen as ‘platea’” where the whole world could be created “at any place, anywhere, at any time”, and Nō’s motif of a bare stage where, through the acting of *shite*, “the empty ‘platea’, so to speak, can become the whole world” (Kott, 1994, p. 24).

The motif of a bare stage frequently appears in the aesthetics of postdramatic theatre. In *Empty Space*, the source of the citation opening this essay, Peter Brook draws on emptiness as the essential and only tool of an actor. He views all else as clutter that only clogs our imaginations. This is particularly exemplified in the works of Samuel Beckett. In *Waiting for Godot*, perhaps the most iconic play of 20<sup>th</sup> century drama, the scenery is austere, with a tree as the only prop. Furthermore, ascetic language and limited movement, so central to Nō theatre, is also a key feature of Beckett’s plays.

Actually, the features reminiscent of Nō in postdramatic theatre may stem from the permeation of Nō elements into the Western world through searches for new forms of artistic expression by key figures in drama, such as Paul Claudel, William Butler Yeats and Ezra Pound (Rodowicz, 2001, p. 36). Although these writers differed in the degree of Nō elements incorporated into their dramatic aesthetics, their fascination with Nō originated from a shared opposition to contemporary naturalistic views of the theatre, views which had become antiquated by the constant flux of stimuli in the new world (Rodowicz, 20, p. 36).

Claudel, Yeats and Pound were not alone in exploring the possibilities of Nō in the Western world. Later, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Polish theatre practitioner and theorist Jerzy Grotowski turned toward Nō with his ideas on the actor’s craft, performance and his admitted ambition to explore the possibility of transplanting Nō theatre onto the Western ground (Osiński, 2011, p. 114). Under the influence of the Japa-

nese theatrical form, the founder of the Laboratory Theatre experimented with the unleashed human element to explore the possibility of human understanding through the sensitivity of the human body (Osiński, 2011, p. 116).

Aesthetic influence in the theatre has also travelled from west to east. In Japan after 1916, after the Meiji period, the highly-regulated and often-repeated repertoire of Nō plays was thought to threaten a loss of Nō artistic creativity. That concern triggered the appearance of new westernized dramas, technically called, *shinsaku nō* (Waniek, 2012, p. 96). Although the new oeuvres revitalized creativity, their status has remained relatively low. *Shinsaku*, literally translated, means ‘other’ or ‘outside the repertoire’, yet the term ties in closely with plays considered to be of low quality (Nukke, 2018, pp. 3,7). The new works have proliferated with themes, characters, materials and sources borrowed from Western culture, but which follow the form and spirit of Nō theatre and contain references to other works in the same manner as the classical Nō plays are supposed to do (Nukke, 2018, p. 3). There are further relevant Western assimilations. Nō scholar Jadwiga Rodowicz-Czechowska argues that the prohibition of admittance after the commencement of a performance and, ironically, the requirement of solemnity and the sense of spirituality among the audience came from the West (Rodowicz-Czechowska, 2001, p. 40). A ritualistic mood during the performance, she continues, was non-existent in early Nō. Rodowicz-Czechowska’s claim is ironic indeed if one realizes that it was this atmosphere of solemnity in which the West was so eager to participate.

In recent years, a number of Western productions of Nō plays have been staged. These productions have actively shaped perceptions of Nō plays in the West, and the similarity of the context and problems they address is intriguing. *The Seagull* from 2006 and *Jeanne d’Arc* from 2012, for instance, were written for an international event promoting interculturalism. The usual themes of these plays seem to include the problem of identity and the uneasiness associated with complex cultural backgrounds. Therefore, those plays bear an uncanny message; they appear to serve as tantalizing ‘tools’, political emissaries of a sort. Perhaps the Italian playwright Dario Fo is correct in saying that every theatre is political if it comments on reality in any way (Bal, 2010, p. 294). Fo’s view is hard to deny, especially if one looks at the meanings and associations these plays produce. To say, then, that these plays merely provide “fertile cross-cultural exchange” (Waniek, 2012, p. 96) is perhaps incomplete. As Nō scholar Diego Pellicchia (2011) insightfully observes, what matters

in these plays is not only their artistic aspects but also the political relevance they create.

An echo of these issues can be found in the first Polish production of the Nō play *The Piano Tuner* (original title, *Stroiciel fortepianu*), written in Polish by Jadwiga Rodowicz-Czechowska - a Nō scholar, a former member of the avant-garde theatre group Gradzienice and also the Polish ambassador in Japan at that time – for the 2011 commemoration of Chopin's birth. The text was translated into Japanese by Tokimasa Sekiguchi and further adapted for the stage by Nō actor Tetsunojo Kanze and director Kenichi Kasai. Both the preview at the Warsaw Theatre *Teatr Studio* on 17 February 2011 and the world premiere at the National Theatre Nō (Kokuristu Nōgekijō) on 28 February 2011 were performed by actors from Tessenkai Theatre, a well-established theatre company known for its experiments with Nō form (Rodowicz, 2001, p. 43).

This theoretical discussion on the possibility of a union between Polish and Nō theatre traditions now will shift into an intersemiotic analysis of *The Piano Tuner's* Warsaw preview, one of three types of translation defined by translation scholar Roman Jakobson, here understood in a wider sense than in his definition, “the interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems” (Jakobson, 2012, p. 127). Charles S. Peirce's three categories of signs: an icon, a sign physically resembling its meaning; an index, a sign that makes correspondence to other things and phenomena; and a symbol, a sign representing certain notions, abstractions or ideas, will serve as an analytical device for this study (Snell-Hornby, 2007, p. 108).

*The Piano Tuner* is set in Nohant, the rural residence of George Sand, where an old painter, Eugène Delacroix, walks whilst remembering his dead friend, Frédéric Chopin. There he meets an old man, a piano tuner, identified in the second act as Chopin's ghost. The painter and piano tuner discuss art, music and the Chopin identity dilemma: Chopin's body lies in Parisienne Père Lachaise and his heart in one of the Polish churches, preventing him from finding peace after death (Karpoluk, 2017).

The structure of the play is immediately recognizable according to the conventions of Nō drama; Eugène Delacroix fulfils the role of introductory *waki* and Frédéric Chopin the role of ghostly *shite*. A plot revolving around the dead returning to the world of the living is also in accordance with Nō standards. Yet, as Polish theatre scholar Tadeusz Kornaś observes, Rodowicz-Czechowska chose a Western theme instead of setting her play in the context of Japanese traditions, mythology and beliefs (Kornaś, 2011, p. 124). This Western theme not only inscribes *The Piano*

*Tuner* in the style of *shinsaku* but also, given the worldwide popularity of Chopin, provides a cognitive framework accessible to both Japanese and Polish audiences. Notwithstanding the complexities of re-creating the traditional architecture of a Nō theatre, the stage was compliant with Nō protocol: bare, austere and surrounded by black and dark backcloths, with a choir in the background – an image of stage design also similar to that characteristic of postdrama. Therefore, the structure of the play, based on its most essential features, resembles that of two cultural planes (Japanese and Polish) superimposed upon each other. It is like a jigsaw puzzle assembled from two wholes, the carefully selected pieces rearranged in a new form.

On the left side of the stage is a piano – the first departure from the strictly delineated norms of Nō theatre. Its presence defines and controls space. On another level, the piano lends the sense of a music recital, denoting (as an index) a forthcoming classical music concert rather than a theatrical performance. The icon of a piano is pregnant with hidden and overt meanings. Immediately, one recognizes that the piano points to Chopin's eternal attribute, his music, as it contributes to national and world heritage, the nostalgic themes present in his melodies, the Romantic era, and then to his life as an émigré. Or perhaps, this icon may also evoke the famous (in Poland) poem *Chopin's Piano* by Polish poet Cyprian Kamil Norwid, Chopin's contemporary, that recounts events from 1863, when Chopin's piano was thrown out of a window by Russians during the January Uprising. More remote connections associated further with Romanticism spring to mind, such as the partitioning of Poland, Poland's loss of independence, the merciless Russian regime and the exodus of thousands of Poles into the West after the Uprising. Of great importance is the motif of the dropped lyre in *Chopin's Piano* that plays itself after Orpheus' death, bringing to mind the mystery of the immortality of a work of art, possibly another hidden meaning encoded in *The Piano Tuner* (Cedro, 2012, p. 137).

This Derridean dissemination grows further when the performance begins with the sound of a flute and the actors enter: first *waki*, Eugène Delacroix, and then a moment later, *shite*, the piano tuner. The traditional Nō black robe, white under-kimono and *chūjō omote* mask worn by *shite* produce suggestive associations on both Japanese and Polish cultural planes. Composed of a black coat over a white linen shirt, the *shite*'s outfit parallels 19<sup>th</sup> century European men's attire, whilst white, a traditional colour reserved for roles of the highest dignity within the indexical signs in Nō (Keene & Hiroshi, 1978, p. 66), refers to innocence

and purity in the Western tradition. The iconic *chūjō omote* mask bearing the face of an aristocratic military commander touched by pain and suffering, as Polish scholar Jakub Karpoluk notes, resembles degerotype of an ill and distressed Frédéric Chopin taken by Louis-Auguste Bisson in 1847 (Karpoluk, 2017) and the association he makes, I believe, is very apt.

More detectable associations are produced later through the music and text. In pursuit of mutual signifiers that would reach the ears of both audiences, Rodowicz-Czechowska, Sekiguchi and the performers from Tessenkai Theatre interlace both Japanese and European music. Japanese guttural choral singing is followed by a medley of Chopin's music performed by a woman (another breach in Nō tradition), Magdalena Lisek, laureate of the Thirteenth International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw. Signifiers, therefore, are constantly shifting, arranging into a dialogue to be finally merged when *shite* performs a dance in line with Nō aesthetics accompanied by Chopin's Nocturne in C-sharp minor, Op. 27; it is the pinnacle of *The Piano Tuner's* pure semiotic language. The musical patchwork combines smoothly, though a certain squeak is audible when the pianist eventually returns to the Nō world (Kornaś, 2011, p. 125), a possible gap between the pieces of a puzzle that otherwise fit together.

Symptomatic signifiers are also omnipresent in the text (Karpoluk, 2017). Although written in Polish, the text leans heavily on Nō aesthetics. Polish textual elements were then woven into the text, providing fertile asides that generate multiple allusions and references. These are most directly and forcefully present when the Japanese choir sings a line and its Polish translation appears on-screen, "Idę z daleka, z piekła, czyli z rajnu... I dążę do tegoż kraju" [I've come a long way. Perhaps from Hell, perhaps from Heaven]<sup>1</sup>, a quotation from a well-known Polish, Romantic poetic drama by Adam Mickiewicz, *Dziady* [Forefathers' Eve]<sup>2</sup>. In this manner, as Karpoluk observes, familiar in each culture's literary topos the motif of a dead person mingling with the living is juxtaposed in a single line (Karpoluk, 2017). *Dziady* follows the story of a man called Gustav, a suicide, who comes as a hermit to the home of a priest, his former teacher, on All Saints' Day to relive his life. As in Nō theatre, a tragic conflict takes place in the soul of the protagonist - Gustav in *Dziady*, Chopin in the Nō play – and as in Nō theatre, the protagonist's identity is revealed at some point in the performance and disappears unexpectedly at the end of the play.

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<sup>1</sup> London: Glagoslav Publications: 2016:347, Translated by Charles S. Kraszewski

<sup>2</sup> Henceforth *Dziady*



Beyond the immediate reference back to Romanticism, the line from *Dziady* has accrued a rich set of palimpsestic correspondences and images. Karpoluk (2017) argues that the staging of *The Piano Tuner* was first and foremost a dialogue between cultures, in which the creators sought unified contexts for Polish and Japanese culture and art. It is, he claims, part of a wider phenomenon of theatrical cross-transferring initiated at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But for Pellecchia, “the plot and the characters of *The Piano Tuner* vividly foreground interculturalism as the main theme of this play”, highlighting the play’s political overtones (Pellecchia, 2011). By weaving a line from *Dziady* into the text, Rodowicz-Czechowska makes a direct confirmation of that assertion; firstly, because of the textual content suggestive of the movement, the process of the migration; secondly, because of the reference to the poet. Mickiewicz, like Chopin, was a principal figure in Polish Romanticism and lived most of his life abroad. Born in the Russian-partitioned territories of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania, a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, his background appears much more complex than that of Chopin’s. Yet Mickiewicz is considered his country’s greatest national poet, whose works express longings for a free state. Thus, what the audience is repeatedly prompted to encounter is resonances of life as an émigré and the problems of exile and complex identity.

These political overtones increase even further when the audience hears and sees on-screen a quotation from the first book of Samuel, “Mów Panie bo sługa twój słucha” [Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening]<sup>3</sup>, then at the end of the performance hears Lisek playing Chopin’s Nocturne No. 20 in C-sharp minor and recognizes it as the piece played by holocaust survivor Natalia Karp for SS functionary Amon Goeth, and also by Adrien Brody, as Władysław Szpilman, in Roman Polański’s *The Pianist*. That this nocturne was written when Chopin was immigrating to the West, feeling homesick and concerned about Poland’s political situation (Crisp, 2011, p. 101), adds complexity to its function in *The Piano Tuner*. It is uncertain, however, whether the producers intended these resonances. As is often said, it seems that history repeats itself; issues repeat themselves. Each restaging of the play changes the subject position, evoking images and connotations specific to the location and historical moment. Consider, for example, the staging of *The Piano Tuner* in Żelazowa Wola in June of 2014 vis-a-vis the migration crisis that began in the same year. The spatiotemporal context secures the Derridean

<sup>3</sup>From: [https://biblehub.com/1\\_samuel/3-9.htm](https://biblehub.com/1_samuel/3-9.htm), unknown translator.

‘sur-vival’ of the original production and in the post-Brexit era accelerates its course, persistently repeating its cycle through a recurrent reference to the émigré life and with the contingencies of images stored in the vast human reservoir.

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