



Akira Matsui. ISTA 14, Wrocław, Poland, 2005. Photo: Tomasz Hotod

Akira Matsui

Odin Actors Were My Rivals!

Interview by Jonah Salz

Abstract: The Japanese nob actor Akira Matsui is interviewed by Jonah Salz in August 2021 about his encounters with Eugenio Barba reflecting on his decade-long collaboration with ISTA and Odin Teatret in Spain, Bali, Italy and Denmark. Akira Matsui reflects on the intercultural experience of performing Ur-Hamlet as part of the Theatrum Mundi Ensemble directed by Eugenio Barba, having to interact on stage with performers of other traditions.

Keywords: Ur-Hamlet, Nob theatre; Intercultural performance; Akira Matsui; Eugenio Barba

First encounters

AM: The first time I met Eugenio Barba¹ was in India. He was conducting some sort of workshop there with performers mainly from Suzuki Tadashi's Waseda Theatre Group. But he doesn't remember me being there. I knew he didn't really like traditional Asian actors who had gone overseas and done things as I had. He didn't think such foreign influenced actors could work well with his troupe. He communicated via Mark Oshima and other interpreters and he brought to Odin Teatret and ISTA artists like Nomura Mannojo and his son Kosuke and other performers. So, I had no direct interaction with him, although I knew his name and what he looked like.

Until Jonah Salz introduced me to Eugenio at Bielefeld in 2000, I had only encountered him as a participant in his workshop. I was in Germany for another project with Axel Tangering at the Meta Theatre in Munich, and I stopped at the Bielefeld ISTA with Jonah. I wasn't on the official programme since I was there as an observer. But I guess it was a kind of audition for me, because suddenly Eugenio had me doing many things. He asked me to teach the ISTA participants nob chant and dance every day for a week. Suddenly he put me in a group with other participants to prepare a scene for a play, *The Castle* by Franz Kafka. And once, he abruptly invited me to improvise with



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1. From data in Eugenio Barba, *The Moon Rises from the Ganges. My Journey through Asian Acting Techniques*, Icarus Performing Enterprise/Routledge, Holstebro, Malta, Wrocław, London, New York, 2015; Vicki Ann Cremona, Francesco Galli, Julia Varley, *Thinking with the Feet. Actor's Techniques and Theatre Anthropology*, Odin Teatrets Forlag, Holstebro 2017.

Kanichi Hanayagi, a nihon buyo dancer who had also trained as an onnagata (female impersonator) in kabuki. I was so tense, trying to figure out on the spot how to match my noh with his kabuki buyo timing. I am sure Kanichi felt the same, he didn't know so much about noh either. So even though it wasn't a *pas de deux*, we since each had to figure out an effective way to improvise on the spot.

For the Kafka piece, Eugenio hadn't given us any script at all. The only text we received was a short parable from *The Trial*, "Before the Law". Each group of the international mixed participants prepared a scene about asking admission to the law and Eugenio adapted these scenes in a final montage that he directed. He chose certain members from each group to make an ensemble play. I don't remember much except that one actor recited a text from *Macbeth* ("Tomorrow and tomorrow") in front of the gate. Eugenio made us do this very challenging exercise as a kind of audition. So going from observer to teacher, to demonstrator and to auditioning actor - the first time I participated at ISTA - was rather sudden and shocking!

Ur-Hamlet: the challenges over time

JS: *During intensive periods of rehearsals in Bali and Italy from 2004-2006, Matsui joined the large cast of international actors and musicians for Ur-Hamlet, the production Barba was preparing with the ISTA Theatrum Mundi Ensemble and Odin Teatret's actors. During the rehearsals, Matsui's role changed from the ghost of Hamlet's father to the character of The Queen of the Rats who brings the plague to Hamlet's castle, and simultaneously, with many variations in between, to the foster-brother of Hamlet enacted by the Afro-Brazilian dancer Augusto Omolú.*

AM: With ISTA, I never knew what to expect. The same was with *Ur-Hamlet*: I never knew what would happen. The actors were gathered, the rehearsal times fixed, but the script wasn't there! First, I became the ghost of Hamlet's father, then the Queen of the Rats who brought the plague, then Hamlet's foster-brother or right-hand man. My role changed on a daily basis! Other cast members' roles were set. Mine was the only one that kept changing. So, I had to think up something new every day!

While Eugenio never criticised what I was doing, on the other hand he never complimented me. But I knew that he was watching me very closely. I remember feeling that it was a good thing that he never said anything to me. Because he got truly angry with some people. Once he became furious with a Taiwanese girl. And once, although I shouldn't boast, he suddenly announced: "Everyone, watch the way Akira is doing this." He never got angry with me, but he never praised me either. Sometimes he told me things like: "Try using that fragment of what you did yesterday". So I realised that he had been watching me carefully.

He kept checking with me to see whether what I was doing was traditional noh. That was challenging. Because as you know, there are very few *kata* (forms) in noh that express particular actions through realistic mime. Most are abstract expressions that go with many types of plots. There's *shikakebiraki*, the simple stepping forward to point

the fan, and other forms such as triangles and circles. But noh is not like *nihon buyo* classical dance which uses *kata* (forms) closer to mimetic gestures. So when Eugenio saw me executing a gesture or dance, he would ask: "Is this noh?" And then he would be irritated if he discovered that I had tried to create a *new* noh-like form to suit the action. He didn't want me to try to match the other performers by acting with expressive gestures. In other words, he did not want me trying to be an actor. He had a lot of good actors with Odin who could perform in their own more realistic style. He didn't want me to try to alter my abstract patterns to conform with them. But as an actor, of course I wanted to enter into the action of the story and adjust to the performers I was with. So naturally I invented some new forms. But he kept asking me, "Is this noh?" and rejected them. That was challenging for me as a performer.

One of the most difficult things during rehearsal was figuring out how to react during the Balinese and Japanese *tachimawari* (fighting scenes). Eugenio told us to try to use the fighting *kata* of the two traditions to create the battle scene at the end. But no matter how slowly and carefully I tried to rehearse the sword strikes and parries, the Balinese always had a faster tempo, and so we could never adjust to each other. Eugenio wanted a more slow-motion battle of controlled formality but, when excited, the Balinese always grew faster and faster, with an uncontrolled tempo. So, they never meshed with my more measured crescendo. Finally, Eugenio gave up and had me match the Balinese speed.

As for my own role, Eugenio changed my choreography every day. He would throw out most of the movements I had developed earlier, but continued to have me use those elements that he felt worked. But while we were rehearsing, he wouldn't tell me whether



Akira Matsui and Kanichi Hanayagi. ISTA 12, Bielefeld, Germany, 2000. Photo: Fiora Bemporad

my new forms were any good or not. Sometimes I would create something that I thought was good, but it would be rejected the next day. And I didn't know why. Every night, Jonah and I would watch videos to try to figure out what I did that day, since the next day Eugenio might compliment me for something, but I would already have forgotten how I had created it. But usually all those preparations were worthless since he would change it completely the next day, and every day! It was very hard to keep up with. When I improvised forms that he felt were good, I couldn't remember how to repeat them, and those that I invented in advance to show what I thought were good, he would reject them.

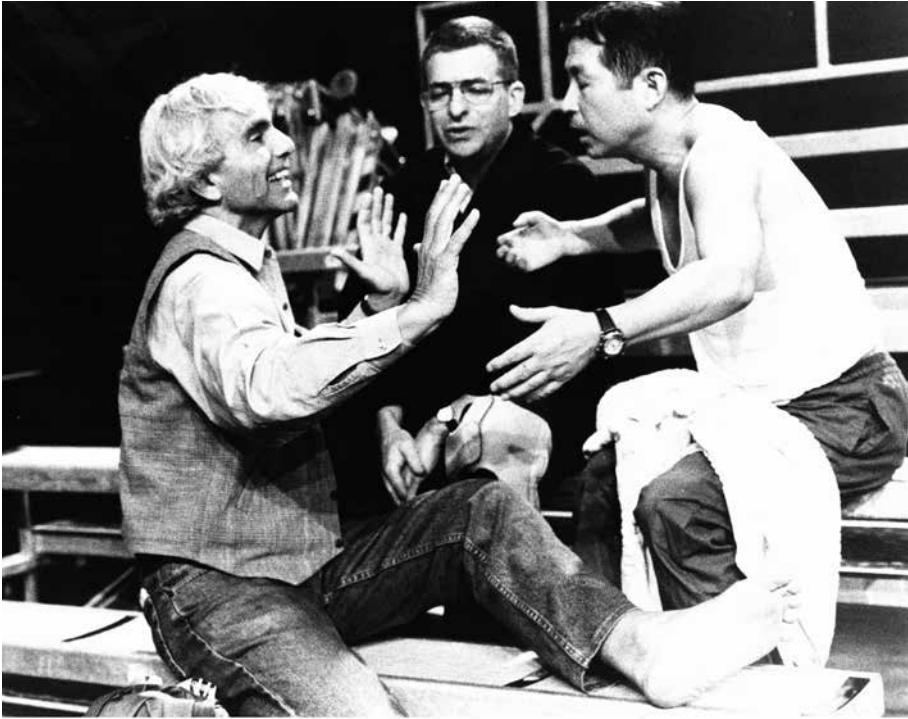
Gradually, I came to understand why Eugenio chose Indian, Balinese, and Japanese performers. He would use performers who would not become actors. Mostly they were masters of forms with dance as a base. I was basically performing using dance for expression rather than as an actor interpreting a scene, even as the Queen of the Rats.

But I am a noh *actor*. So as performer, I was always trying to walk the delicate line between acting and dance. And it was right on the line that Eugenio seemed always to be aiming for. And if I leaned too far into acting, that was no good, and on the other side, pure dance would be bad as well. Eugenio always wanted something that didn't destroy the noh form through acting in a realistic manner, but on the other hand he didn't want me merely to reproduce forms from noh. So, it was hard for me to find that middle ground. I could see that he was employing the Balinese and the Indian performers in the same way. Walking atop the fence, one has to balance on the very top of the boards. As we struggled through our rehearsals, the music grew into a powerful force. The musicians were developing along with the performers in the same way.²

Eugenio's directing style

AM: Eugenio's directing style was always astonishing. In the ancient *Ur-Hamlet* story, he brought me in as the Queen of the Rats who spreads the plague, exterminating refugees who had invaded Hamlet's castle. There was a long wedding scene with a bride and a groom, the burial of the corpses carried away by a bulldozer, an old woman pushing a baby pram like in *Rosemary's Baby*, and all sorts of contemporary scenes woven together in a complicated way. I had seen at other ISTAs Eugenio's Theatrum Mundi productions and Odin Teatret's performances such as *Andersen's Dream* which used the same sort of directing. The Theatrum Mundi performance *Ego-Faust* was hard to follow, even though there were performers of Japanese nihon buyo in it. The story was difficult to make out, although the performers' movements told the story. The plays with just the Odin actors were really difficult for me to understand: sitting at a long table, just talking. When I watched the solo performances, I could understand them, and they were interesting, more or less. But when they performed as a group, the plot was too complicated and without much movement, so I couldn't make sense of it, or figure out where the climaxes were.

2. The orchestra was composed by a 22 people Balinese gamelan, an Indian flutist, four Odin musicians, an Afro-Brazilian atabaqui drummer, and singers from France, Denmark and Bali.



Eugenio Barba, Jonah Salz and Akira Matsui. ISTA 13, Sevilla, Spain, 2004. Photo: Fiora Bemporad

Interweaving genres

AM: In most performances I have been involved in, such as Yeats or Beckett with Noho Theatre (directed by Jonah Salz) or Theatre Nogaku (directed by Richard Emmert), META Theatre (Axel Tangering), Jin Hi Kim's Asian musical *Dragon Bond Rite*, Korean-Chinese-Japanese collaboration *Forgiveness* directed by Chen Shi-Zheng, there is usually a text to begin with. The stage directions were written, so the director just choreographed the movement. We were moved around the stage like pieces in a chess game.

A director cannot know too many details about each genre. When Jonah directs a piece for the Noho Theatre, you might know about kyogen plays and movement, but you don't know the detailed *kata* information about noh plays. If you are directing kabuki, you wouldn't know which parts of the acting and dance you could extract from them to use. It would be hard for you to direct performances from a different kyogen family, like the star Nomura Mansai. He would say: "This form doesn't exist in kyogen, at least not in the Izumi school," so it would be hard to work with him. He would just show off his own form, and not want to go beyond his own box. So, there is no bond between the performers; each would be playing to their own genre. In such kinds of productions, Balinese are doing their own style, all united by their common dance. That's true for

Balinese dance, kathakali or Brazilian capoeira, etc. For *Dragon Bond Rite*,³ everyone performed inside their own frame. There was no bond! The Chinese and Korean and Indonesian performers just performed according to their usual traditional expression.

I once wrote something about this practice of merging forms, regarding *manga*, Japanese comic books. Long ago, they used to say: “Hey, you’re reading *manga* comic books? Why are you reading such silly things at your age? It used to be for kids.” But when I saw the Broadway Disney musical *Lion King*, with those animated characters brought to life, I thought: “Perhaps that’s how Japanese theatre will develop from now.”

Noh started like *manga*. Each pose and gesture were carefully constructed within a frame. But when those individual scenes are strung together, you have a play - like flipping through a book of drawings. So I have been thinking that in this age when performance is made like pictures that come to life, noh is still a vital art form. Noh doesn’t have to develop into anything as complicated as *Lion King*, where you’re not sure who’s human, what’s a puppet, or animation, and what’s a real animal. You don’t need to mix it with CG effects, but perhaps it can develop into something else, maybe even a Noho performance.

In that sense, Eugenio does a great job of stitching the best parts of various traditions together to create something new. There’s a good structure and balance. I wonder whether the same could be done within the genre of noh itself. But sometimes directors say, let’s add noh here, let’s put in more noh-like elements here. They are not so interested in creating new forms, but a kind of shortcut of patching old ones together. In that case, isn’t it better for spectators to just watch the real thing?

***Ur-Hamlet* as a long-run**

AM: Most of the performances I have been involved with are over after one or two shows. *Forgiveness*, involving a Chinese Peking Opera star and Korean p’ansori singer, was like that. So, repeating *Ur-Hamlet* over many years was unusual, and gave us a chance to have fun with our parts.

There were three different productions of *Ur Hamlet*: the Ravenna Festival in Italy, Kronborg Castle in Elsinore in Denmark, and Wrocław in Poland. The last was best, as the actors had become accustomed to their roles. For the first two, held outdoors in spaces that were sometimes difficult to move within, there were always challenges. At the beginning, things changed all the time, but once we got to Wrocław, we all could play a bit inside our roles. And Eugenio no longer had the leeway to tell everyone what to do from scratch. We already had the costumes, and knew the general choreography, so we had a bit more independence. He couldn’t change much, although the performance got faster as we got used to it. I guess it was shorter too, as we learned to create a good tempo.

3. Jin Hi Kim’s cross-cultural mask dance drama (1997), featured musicians and dancers from India, Indonesia, Korea, Japan, Tuva and the USA.

Learning to be stricter at ISTA⁴

AM: I performed a one-man show at Seville, *Women in Circles*, including Samuel Beckett's *Rockaby* and *Utoh* (Blood-birds), based on the noh play about a cormorant-fisher in hell, employing projections of woodblock prints of Munakata Shiho. I danced twice, first as the fisherman, then showed slides in between as I dressed, then I came on again as the Ghost. I remember Seville the best; afterwards I went twice for workshops and performances there, invited by the Spanish director Ricardo Iniesta. In that sense, ISTA gave me a great opportunity to network with performers and producers outside Japan.

Although I have been giving noh workshops since the 1960s at American colleges and theatres, I learned something new from Eugenio: to be stricter. I gave noh workshops, and I recall Eugenio telling me I shouldn't be so forgiving of those students who couldn't kneel for singing lessons. In America, the teachers organising the workshops would just say, "*shikata ga nai*," (it can't be helped). I became accustomed to that way of thinking, and when I was teaching, students could stand or lie American-style! But when Eugenio observed my first class at ISTA, he was a bit annoyed, and spoke to me afterwards. He wanted me to teach the authentic, formal way of taking a lesson. So that even if students couldn't kneel on the floor to bow, they had to sit cross-legged or on cushions in a way that they could breathe and sing as if kneeling. And I realised that the etiquette of bowing and humbly receiving and thanking the teacher for lessons was important too. While I was teaching, he would peek in occasionally, and I didn't have to explain unnecessarily. In that sense, Eugenio was far more conservative than I, who am much more flexible.

Eugenio's demonstration improvisations

AM: Even when Eugenio suddenly called me out in front of everyone to do an improvisation or show a certain stance, I could quickly pull something out from my repertoire. That was because of my early training. Since I had grown up at the *iemoto's*⁵ house since the age of 11, I learned that I had to be ready to show something I had been taught at a moment's notice. So I was always on my toes.

I saw a lot of shows when I was young: Japanese traditional theatre of course, but also ballet, opera, and musicals. So I had no problem when called upon to show something from my memory. And I thought about what I could do that Eugenio wouldn't recognise as being not noh. I took some good parts from kabuki and made them more noh-like. And I took the arabesque or other forms from ballet and did

4. At ISTA, Matsui was asked to teach noh song and dance, present work-demonstrations, and rehearse *Theatrum Mundi* productions with Odin actors that would eventually lead to the *Ur-Hamlet* project. He participated in ISTAs held in Bielefeld (Germany), Krzyzowa/Wrocław (Poland); Seville/La Riconada (Spain).

5. *Iemoto*: Japanese term referring to the founder or master of a certain school of traditional Japanese art.

them in noh style. With all the instructions he gave, I was forced to think outside the box. “Do this in a noh way,” so I couldn’t just stand there and say, “This is the truest noh movement, just standing still!”



Akira Matsui, Eugenio Barba. ISTA 14, Wroclaw, Poland, 2005. Photo: Tomasz Hotod

What do you think about the ISTA experience?

AM: Although for participants in a residency for ten days may normally be a bit expensive considering housing and food, it seems that Eugenio chooses places for holding ISTA where there is a low cost of living. So that makes it affordable even for young artists and researchers. Members of a small theatre company can step out of their own world by learning all these different styles, from Asia and elsewhere. It’s important that they recognise that there are these other streams of theatrical knowledge.

I shouldn’t denigrate myself, but I am not very popular in Japan. However, I am often asked to go abroad to participate in workshops and collaborations. I have always been interested in such things. So, when I was young, if I weren’t already a professional noh actor, I think I would have tried such a program like ISTA.

What can participants take away from ISTA after learning noh or Balinese dance for only a few weeks? Of course, they can’t be expected to remember everything they learned, or to become a professional Balinese dancer or noh performer. They have to continue working within their own genres. But through ISTA, they have the opportunity to taste a great variety of other disciplines in a short time, at least on a superficial level.

And they learn from commonalities, for example the low center of gravity both in Indian dance and in noh's *suriashi* (sliding feet).

So why not study more intensively in Japan? Discovering those fundamental principles of performance is not something that I myself can teach; I can only do noh. Eugenio has the theory, and it's that perspective that makes the noh practice meaningful to various artists. Usually when I go abroad, I only have an interpreter or a Japanese literature scholar hosting a physical workshop, so we cannot get to that level of abstract understanding. So those theoretical discussions and sudden improvisations that Eugenio elicits during ISTA were certainly useful to performers and scholars, because of that intellectual framing.

Personally, I can't really apply what I learned at ISTA to my own art, noh. There is little room for "acting" in noh. But my sensitivities as a performer changed from these experiences. I could see, "Oh, so there is *this* kind of timing," different from the one I was accustomed to. And when I performed in Noho performances or in other non-noh productions overseas, I could employ some things I had observed at ISTA. I think my own performance deepened from the experience. It was useful when I tried to do things outside my noh traditional forms. Instead of just imitating the puppet-style (*ningyoburi*) in classical Japanese dance nihon buyo or a kabuki form (*kata*), or merely presenting a gesture I knew from the Western theatre, such as ballet or modern dance, I was internalising it in a more profound way before expressing it. When I experimented this way, if audiences were happy, I was satisfied, and if not, then I could return to doing it in strict noh style. This sort of experimentation became a part of my career adventure.

In fact, there were times that I thought of leaving noh. I'm 75, there are only five or so more years when I'll really be able to move on stage. So, if I do something that gets me excommunicated, it doesn't really matter at this point. As far as the future, I don't really have any hope that my way of experimentation and intercultural performances will continue. Although it's perhaps contrary to expectations of generational shifts, I am the innovator, and my son has no urge to experiment. He is much more conservative than I am.

Personal reflections on Odin Teatret

AM: For the decades that we worked together, Eugenio was always kind to me. His relations with me were always very friendly and open; I never considered him a fearful director. He seemed to treat me specially compared to other performers, letting me bring my own costumes, at some expense, and so forth. I knew where I stood because there was always a clear hierarchy in the group: students ate last, after teachers, and shared rooms whereas we had private rooms. And I always had an interpreter, so that I could fully participate. There was always a budget for specialist interpreters like Jonah Salz, not just someone who could speak Japanese, and that allowed me to relax.

Everyone at Odin was very kind to me, Julia Varley and Roberta Carreri, Kai Bredholt and Torgeir Wethal and Augusto Omolu, individually. I got along with everyone, but especially with the musicians. I thought the composer and conductor Frans Winther

was especially watching me carefully all the time. I got along with the actors, but they were in a sense my rivals for Eugenio's attentions, and on stage! The fact that they lived together and worked together for so many decades is proof of the trust that developed in the group. It is sad that some of them passed away.

I was happy to discover that Eugenio had contributed to my 70th birthday and honorary doctoral commemorative pamphlet for my London performances. He wrote that he had been told I couldn't speak English, but when I sometimes laughed before I heard the interpretation, he wondered whether I was just pretending not to understand English. But I'm an actor, so it might have been a false laughter, who knows? Joking aside, it was important to have proper translation since I was working as a professional. I couldn't get by on just superficial understanding of what was said in English.

Please convey my wishes to Eugenio to enjoy in peace healthy, continued activities with Odin and ISTA. And also to Julia.■

Poster *Ur-Hamlet*. *Ur-Hamlet*, based on *Vita Amlethi* by Saxo Grammaticus (1200 A.D.). On stage: Akira Matsui (Japan), Cristina Wistari Formaggia (Italy/Bali), Ni Nyoman Candri, I Wayan Bawa (Bali) and 32 performers and musicians from the Gambuh Pura Desa Ensemble (I Made Suamba, I Wayan Naka, Ni Wayan Sudiani, Ni Wayan Nugini, Ni Nyoman Jumiat, Ni Kadek Ariantini, Ni Luh Nik Windasari, Ni Made Srimpi, Ni Made Partini, Ni Wayan Pia, I Ketut Karwan, I Nyoman Doble, I Wayan Purnawan, I Wayan Martawan, I Made Suteja, I Wayan Suamba, Ida Bagus Negara, I Wayan Lesit, I Ketut Rida, I Wayan Merta, I Ketut Suana, I Wayan Sandi, I Made Budiana, I Wayan Lambih, I Wayan Rawa, I Made Renanta, I Made Geten, I Wayan Berata), Brigitte Cirila (France), Augusto Omolu e Cleber da Paixão (Brazil), Annada Prasanna Pattanaik (India), Magnus Errboe (Denmark), Yalan Lin (Taiwan), Odin Teatret's actors (Kai Bredholt, Roberta Carreri, Jan Ferslev, Mia Theil Have, Julia Varley, Torgeir Wethal) and the Foreigners' chorus (43 performers from 21 countries). Music: composed and arranged by Frans Winther, classical Balinese and Indian songs. Scenic space: Luca Ruzza. Costumes: Jan de Neergaard and Odin Teatret. Light design: Luca Ruzza and Odin Teatret. Sound: Cy Nicklin. Production director: Patricia Alves. Production assistants: Emanuela Bauco, Anne Savage. Photo and video: Claudio Coloberti and Torgeir Wethal. Poster: Luca Ruzza. Technicians: Hans Kobberø, Fausto Pro, Oscar Alonso Sánchez, Stefan Tarabini, Søren Lykkeager. Director's assistants: Julia Varley, Cristina Wistari Formaggia, Ana Woolf. Administrative director: Søren Kjems. Literary adviser: Nando Tavian. Dramaturgy and direction: Eugenio Barba.

