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Yukio Ninagawa’s *The Merchant of Venice* (2013):
A Rejection of Interculturalism

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Introduction

The late Yukio Ninagawa (1935–2016) achieved global fame in his lifetime as a theatre director, particularly for his Shakespearean productions. In 1985, his spectacular *Ninagawa Macbeth* (premier Tokyo, 1980; Edinburgh, 1985) was received with great acclaim at the Edinburgh Festival and launched Ninagawa as a successful international director. Ninagawa’s use of traditional Japanese Buddhist imagery alongside, and in contrast to, modern music, as well as his fusion of Shakespeare’s text with Japanese traditional theatre, appeared fresh to British audiences, who were transfixed by this experience of, as Michael Billington from *The Guardian* described it, a ‘melancholic meditation on human transience’ (August 22, 1985). Indeed, many people were swept away by Ninagawa’s international productions and foresaw a bright future for such intercultural performances in the world of theatre.

During the same period, as theatre groups worldwide began to study and perform on a global stage, the debate around ‘interculturalism’ in theatre became a topic *du jour*, and was commented on both directly and indirectly in the work of many directors and theorists. Very quickly, the adjective ‘intercultural’ began to be applied to Ninagawa’s productions, particularly his Shakespearean oeuvre. As Ninagawa’s Shakespearean productions gained international popularity, and as expectations of his work grew both at home and abroad, the director became increasingly conscious of and pressurised by the expectation to produce world-
class theatre that spoke to a global audience. In fact, Ninagawa had not been particularly successful in his home country, Japan; his renown was bred in Europe and then reverse-imported to Japan, thus burdening him with the double task of proving his ability both at home and abroad. In other words, he gained reputation as a Shakespearean director before he had enough experience and confidence in his approach to Shakespeare. His increase in global fame heaped more pressure on Ninagawa, who, despite suffering from self-doubt and lack of confidence gained momentum by virtue of his unflagging willpower and pride in his long-term experience in theatre. In an interview with him regarding *Ninagawa Macbeth* and *Medea* at the National Theatre in London, Sam Roberts noted that Ninagawa’s goal was ‘to create a universal theatre beyond the limits of age, nationality, language, customs and habits’ (*The New York Times*, May 18, 2016), and Ninagawa himself noted, in an interview regarding *Ninagawa Twelfth Night* in London (2005), that his intention was to show a Shakespearean play ‘directed from a Japanese perspective’ to the foreign audience in a foreign country (*Kabukibito*, April 9, 2007). Whether he liked it or not, therefore, awareness of interculturalism was an undertaking that Ninagawa had been assigned as an international director.

Here, I would like to emphasise the three main features that often characterise Ninagawa’s Shakespearean productions: interculturalism; faithfulness to the original text; and rejection of self-imitation. In creating an intercultural production, his ideology was to remain at all times faithful to the text (or, the translated version thereof) in order to pay respect to the Bard. For this reason, he avoided cutting lines as much as possible and also adhered to a self-imposed rule not to imitate his past fame but always to move forward in the spirit of challenge. Based on these ideals, he often created a spectacular stagecraft that allowed his Japanese audience to enjoy and better understand these foreign classics, and simultaneously allowed his foreign audience to enjoy his interpretation of their literature by visual means. His work in creating high-quality Shakespearean plays was thus based on his ideology as a director and actor that his work should serve his audience.

However, for *aficionados* of Ninagawa’s Shakespearean productions throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, *The Merchant of Venice* (2013) may have come as a surprise, as he diverged from most of the elements that had previously characterised his works: he cut and altered the text a great deal, used a simple, bland stage, and rejected the tenets of interculturalism. This raises a
question regarding the position of *The Merchant of Venice* in relation to his other productions and his association with global interculturalism. We may also consider what new perspectives this production offered and how it contributed to the progress of global interculturalism.

In answering these questions, this paper argues that Ninagawa’s production of *The Merchant of Venice* presents a rare case in which he appropriated and exploited Shakespeare’s text by rejecting and avoiding cultural or emotional exchange at the performance level. In order to actualise his rejection of interculturalism in this production, Ninagawa presented an actor-centred stage that emphasised, rather than compromising, the diversity and alienation inherent in Shakespearean stage culture. This mixture of adaptation to and movement away from the norm highlighted the globally accepted concept of interculturalism and invited his audience to reconsider its significance or insignificance from the perspective of alienation. Underlying the director’s unusual approach was his aesthetic of remaining ever creative and exploring new methods of directing. In order to analyse the production in depth, it is primarily necessary to clarify the contemporary theoretical understanding of intercultural performance before analysing this production in relation to his other works and the concept of global interculturalism. This is achieved by presenting some new perspectives that this ‘non-intercultural’ performance offered.

**Review of the literature on interculturalism**

‘Intercultural performance’ refers to theatre or performance that intentionally includes aspects of the performance traditions from different cultures as a form of artistic creation. Intercultural performance studies have focused extensively on the politics of cultural practices, their influence, their position at the intersection of exchange, and the theorisation of cultural transactions in different performances (Tan 2012, 77). Advocates and practitioners of intercultural performance, including Peter Brook, Richard Schechner, Patrice Pavis, Rustom Bharucha, and Ariane Mnouchkine, approached interculturalism from Western and Eastern perspectives in the late twentieth century and demonstrated that interculturalism is a shifting and complex idea in today’s cosmopolitan world with constant cultural, social, and political changes.
According to Richard Schechner (1992), cultural borrowing in intercultural performance is prevalent a priori in the human species, and ‘performance’ refers to a primary means of transmitting syncretism and cultural exchange that facilitates understanding between peoples and cultures. In this way, as Schechner notes, universal performance structures can be found within different social practices in different cultures (1992, 8).

Eugenio Barba explains that intercultural performance includes the ‘meeting between East and West, [in which] seduction, imitation and exchange are reciprocal,’ and people can preserve their own identity and autonomy without annihilation of the other (Barba 1991, 97). Patrice Pavis goes further, defining intercultural theatre that ‘creates hybrid forms drawing upon a more or less conscious and voluntary mixing of performance traditions traceable to distinct cultural areas. The hybridisation is very often such that the original forms can no longer be distinguished’ (Pavis 1996, 2).

According to Pavis, intercultural performance is created and received in pursuit of the coexistence of identities and forms (84). Using an hourglass as an illustration, he envisages cultural transfer as a process wherein ‘only a few elements of the source culture pass through the filters into the target culture, and they are selected according to precise norms’ (16). For example, in intercultural theatre, encounters between the East and the West are created to suit expectations of the appropriating side and strengthen their convictions; thus, it is inevitable that the original culture is altered. Even so, there has been much criticism of the Western appropriation of non-Western cultural forms (Farfan and Knowles 2011, 1) as exemplified by Western director Peter Brook’s borrowing of performance techniques, artistic methods, and cultural forms from the East in his production of the Indian Sanskrit epic The Mahabharata, which was performed in French (1985). In narrating this epic, Brook’s team avoided too strong an evocation of distinctive Indian elements and cultural codes in an effort to remain universal (Schechner 1992, 68).

However, Brook’s approach was harshly criticised by Bharucha as an instance of appropriation and reordering designed merely for the ‘international market’ (1999, 68). In this reading, Brook’s version represents cultural theft perpetrated against India by Western theatre practitioners (14). Bharucha views interculturalism as ‘irremediably tainted by the impure ethics of capitalism, imperialism and Yukio Ninagawa’s The Merchant of Venice (2013): A Rejection of Interculturalism
orientalism, an intertissued web of ideologies within which we are all caught, at least in the West’ (75-76). Adopting a postcolonial stance, he criticises Western interculturalism for appearing to be open to other cultures, when in fact it is Western economic and political domination that has hindered the potential for real exchange/communication.

In response to Pavis’ reference to the hourglass that filters the source culture and fills the target culture, Bharucha proposed the alternative image of a pendulum to connote the reciprocity rather than separation of relations (1999, 241). Appropriate interculturalism should comprise a two-way street based on reciprocity; in reality, however, this two-way street is a ‘dead-end’ (2) that has become blocked as the West extends its control over cultural issues.

According to Fischer-Lichte (2010), the purpose of intercultural performance is not to make the audience familiar with a different culture but to transform the tradition depending on the people who accept it and their conditions; these people may include those who appropriate the culture, the actors who perform the appropriated script, and the audience that witnesses it. Furthermore, Fischer-Lichte Riley, and Gissenwehrer (1990, 33) noted that adopting components from unfamiliar theatre traditions usually serves as a tool to bring about transformations in the sociocultural and aesthetic roles of an individual theatrical tradition. Including foreign aspects leads to a re-examination of and re-apprehension of one’s own and other theatrical traditions. On the other hand, when an intercultural theatre adopts a foreign culture, as Pavis notes, the intercultural project obeys the target culture’s constraints and needs (1996, 16).

The multiple theoretical aspects to interculturalism depend on which culturally informed perspective one adopts, and the parallel views never converge. Thus, in order to understand and create an intercultural production, it is necessary for the directors, actors, and audience to understand not only their own but also the other’s political position and place in history before finding a mid-position of compromise. The current theoretical arguments over intercultural performance are mainly divided between those theorists who encourage further promotion thereof and those who are more prudent, fearing exploitation of the weaker culture.

To summarise the current theoretical arguments over interculturalism in theatre, intercultural performance creates hybrid forms of performance that draw upon a more or less conscious and voluntary mixing of performance traditions that are
traceable to distinct cultural areas. It facilitates a cultural exchange that fosters understanding among peoples and cultures, and cross-cultural staging has the advantage of finding a place for itself. On the other hand, interculturalism is tainted by western ideologies and exploits the borrowed culture (Bharucha 1999). Moreover, the consequent transformation of the sociocultural and aesthetic roles of an individual theatrical tradition (33) may lead to the disregarding of one’s own culture (Fischer-Lichte 2009).

Arguments over the theory and practice of interculturalism and intercultural performance have continued to develop and shift over time, as well as evoking the ‘volatility of the notion of stable culture’ (Pavis 2010, 14). It is in this context that I will analyse Ninagawa’s production of The Merchant of Venice as a performance that rejects intercultural exchange both on stage and within the theatre.

A simple and actor-centred stage

Many of Ninagawa’s Shakespearean productions were structured around the negotiation between his Japonistic stagings of Shakespearean plays and various theories and practices of intercultural performance. Unlike Hamlet (performed six times globally under Ninagawa’s direction) and Romeo and Juliet (performed eight times globally), Ninagawa directed The Merchant of Venice just once, at Saitama Arts Theatre in 2013. It featured an all-male cast, and the kabuki actor, Ichikawa Ennosuke, played the title role of Shylock. For a long time, Ninagawa had avoided directing this particular play despite the many proposals that had come his way, although the reason for his reluctance remains unclear (Akishima 2015, 151). However, persuaded by Ennosuke’s strong desire to play Shylock (Ichikawa 2016, 180), he ultimately decided to produce it. The play, however, was kept strictly within Japan and performed for its native audience, so very few foreigners had the opportunity to witness this unusual representation of Shakespeare’s play. Whether because he was relieved of global pressure or was compelled to appeal to the Japanese audience, this production differed entirely from his previous works in terms of its intercultural aspects. The primary difference was its use of simple stagecraft.

In his interview for Twelfth Night staged in London in 2014, Ninagawa told
reporters that the Japanisation of Shakespeare, by using kabuki and resetting the play in a Japanese historical era, was one of the means he used to filter foreign imported classics like Shakespeare and thus allow his audience to better understand the play (Ticket Pia Interview, September 17, 2008). Indeed, Ninagawa always placed significance on the visual effects of the stage. Particularly for his Shakespearean plays, spectacularisation was an important means to allow the Japanese audience to better understand the cultural background and to allow the foreign audience to make up for the missing English words through visual effects. Moreover, as Ninagawa repeatedly commented, such spectacularism also afforded the audience the opportunity to experience non-ordinary moments within the theatre. For example, Ninagawa’s *The Tempest: A Rehearsal on a Noh Stage on Sado Island* (Tokyo 1987, Edinburgh 1988, London 1992) featured spectacular stagecraft as well as the use of the framing device of the Edo period, which pleased both the Japanese and foreign audiences. This production was set as a Noh rehearsal on a Noh-like stage, and the impact of its opening scene with a large wrecked ship rolling to and fro onstage, followed by an old thatch-roofed local Noh stage, captivated the audience.

However, this visual-oriented staging was also criticised in several quarters. Some critics commented that the over-exotic staging in contrast to the textual context may confuse and mislead the audience. Some felt that Ninagawa’s productions were diminished by his overuse of visually exotic stagecraft and loud music, which drowned out Shakespeare’s lyrical beauty. Charles Osborne, for example, commented that ‘anyone who regards theatre as an art form which communicates primarily by verbal means will derive little pleasure from this production unless he or she can appreciate Yushi Odashima’s [Japanese] translation of the play’ (*The Weekend Telegraph*, 19 September 1987). In other words, Ninagawa’s Shakespeare productions offered transient visual engagement, its overuse weakened the lyrics, a weakness that Ninagawa himself acknowledged. Nevertheless, Ninagawa’s elaborate sets evoked mixed reactions amongst the audience, and functioned not only to support their understanding of the play but also as a trigger to see it in relation to the overall production and literature.

However, Ninagawa’s productions were not always so showy, and in some of his productions he used simple stage sets. For example, in his 2001 *Hamlet*, 2003 *Hamlet*, and 2004 *Romeo and Juliet* productions, the actors acted and spoke
the lines realistically as life-sized protagonists; the simple stage with directorial messages helped focus the audience’s attention on the protagonist in relation to the overall production. The staging demonstrated a consciousness of Western realism in representing the world of the characters and the play.

Compared to such simple stages, however, *The Merchant of Venice* differed in that the set was entirely devoid of meaning and offered no messages or visual support for the audience to understand the city of Venice or its inhabitants. In this production, Ninagawa abandoned the exotic sets, symbols, and props that had previously enhanced his on-stage visuals and helped make his Shakespearean productions internationally popular, inviting no critical arguments over the visual setting. Instead, the stage was unexpectedly ordinary and minimalist, featuring a simple high wall, hung with a painting of Venetian houses and set with three doors for the actors’ exits and entrances. The stage area was also restricted by bringing the wall forward, thus reducing the distance between the actors and the audience. Indeed, there was nothing elaborate, exotic, or Japonistic about the stage at all, apart from Ennosuke’s kabuki-style acting.

This begs the question: what did the director intend to achieve by avoiding the unique visual aspects that had previously brought him international acclaim? In fact, the simplicity of this production was both a challenge and a means of highlighting that the protagonist would help Ninagawa portray the world of *The Merchant of Venice* on an actor-centred stage. As the curtains opened, the Japanese audience suddenly realised that there would be no visual support for the production and thus they were led to focus their attention on the actors and their words.

*The Merchant of Venice* was replete with indications of diversity and the hybridisation of different cultures, which made it easier for the protagonist to stand out. For example, the Venetians and Shylock were represented in complete contrast. The actors themselves came from different theatrical backgrounds, with contrasting acting styles and training that made the group a mixture of Japan-bred but ‘Western-styled’ actors and traditionally ‘Japanese-styled’ actors. The actors playing the Venetians had been trained in modern theatre while Ennosuke, who was born into a kabuki family, had been specially trained in conventional kabuki stylisation. Thus, the ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ acting styles were mixed and contrasted onstage. The differences among the actors and their acting styles were emphasised, distancing the characters they were playing from each other as
well as from the audience and the text. Above all, the differences in acting styles distinguished Shylock from the other characters and audience, placing him in the centre—a decision that encapsulated the method and purpose of this production, as I will discuss below.

On stage, the actors playing the Venetians appeared in all-white Western costumes and gorgeous jewellery, while the women (played by men) appeared in lacy dresses and curly blond wigs. In contrast to the cheerful-looking Venetians, Ennosuke’s Shylock stood out with his highly distinct appearance and acting style. He dragged his bad leg concealed under his dark cloak, walked around the stage, glared at the audience and frowned at the other characters, mumbled incomprehensible things, and marked his uncomfortable existence onstage. His face was made up with a few painted black wrinkles to show old age, and his cheeks were covered with a plastic-like prosthesis, restricting muscle movements (in contrast to kabuki where muscle lines are painted for emphasis) and impressing the audience with the power of his glaring eyes.

The empty stage was divided by an invisible boundary that created racial, cultural, and religious divisions. The Christian Venetians and Jews each emphasised their own demands and turned a deaf ear to the other. Each group spoke unilaterally, and there was no compromise or exchange between the two groups, with everyone keeping conservatively to his or her own people and space. Each side appeared to regard the other as alien, and the emotional distance between them was reflected in the physical distance maintained in the production between the actors: thus, everyone was alienated from each other and confined to their separate spheres.

It was within such an atmosphere that Ennosuke’s Shylock portrayed his strong identity through his difference. He delivered his lines slowly and clearly, often accentuated by a mie pose\(^8\) when his emotions were heightened. To indicate the specialness of the moment, the mie was often accompanied by thunder sounds made by wooden kabuki clappers, which are used to cue kabuki fans to give loud applause. This posing process obviously interrupted the dramatic flow, and while the discontinuity of the play might not have suited some audience members, the simple staging allowed the kabuki fans in attendance to turn the Saitama Arts Theatre into a kind of kabuki theatre by shouting out Ennosuke’s stage title ‘Omodakaya!’ every time Ennosuke dramatically struck and held a mie pose.
As in kabuki or noh, where the whole play revolves around the main character, the inclusion of common kabuki rituals in *The Merchant of Venice* served to reemphasise the significance of Ennosuke playing Shylock as the central figure in the production.

Thus, by simplifying the stage and placing Shylock at its centre, the production emphasised the centrality of the protagonist and we shall examine below how the text was rearranged to suit Ennosuke’s formation of Shylock.

**Omission of original lines and its effect on the characterisation of Shylock and Jessica**

While such a mishmash of styles might have been both comic and puzzling for the audience, it also meant rewriting the stage text for the actors, sometimes sacrificing their lines (see below) to make up for lost time and reducing their parts in order to highlight Shylock’s role, but the textual alteration also showed an interesting change in the characterisations and relationships between the younger generations (see below). Takashi Kono commented on Ennosuke’s ‘overaction’ ([Nikkei Shimbun](#), 16 September, 2013), but the production itself was designed to be actor-centred, and was sponsored by Shochiku Company Limited, the main sponsor of kabuki productions in Japan. Thus, the kabuki orientation could not be avoided, and Ennosuke made sure to leave his traces behind, stamping the action with a pose or a piercing glare to thrill the audience.9

Ninagawa approached *The Merchant of Venice* in a very unusual way as far as the text was concerned. As discussed above, he had previously been renowned for remaining faithful to the text ([Roberts, The New York Times](#), May 18, 2016). Kazuko Matsuoka, a translator of Shakespeare’s texts, had worked beside Ninagawa for almost 20 years, and Ninagawa had always consulted Matsuoka regarding necessary script changes.10 Bearing this in mind, Ninagawa’s decision to omit many words (particularly those related to Jessica’s race) made this production particularly unusual.

The actor-centred stage, which prioritised Ennosuke’s carefully planned, stylised acting, meant that some of the other actors’ lines were inevitably omitted, thus reducing their parts. Surprisingly, while Shylock’s Jewishness was enhanced by
his overaction and emphasis on the words, particularly evident was the elimination of references to Jessica’s Jewishness. In a way, the production contradicted itself by emphasising diversity while also eliminating language related to religion and ethnicity. Thus, the deleted lines diminished the ‘Jewishness’ of Jessica, despite many clear indications of other characters’ beliefs or status remaining in the text and the production.

Act 3, Scene 1 presents Shylock in a state of anger and heightened emotions. He persistently emphasises the words ‘Jew’, ‘Christians’, and ‘revenge’ (45, 50, 54, 55, 59, 622-26), which, in Ninagawa’s production, were stressed by the support of a thunder and lightning device to emphasise their significance. When Ennosuke shouted, ‘I am a Jew’, the sound effects brought the performance to maximum intensity. As he delivered the next few lines, in which he enquired rhetorically about the equality or commonality between Jews and Christians, he spoke straight to the audience and some of the moved audience held their breath: ‘Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?’ (3,1.54-56). By accenting the words related to religion and race, the key elements that support the characters’ identities, Ennosuke emphasised the distance between ‘Jews’ and ‘Christians,’ and his bleeding mouth in a mie pose stressed his seriousness. The kabuki mie pose which signifies the character’s heightened emotion, particularly of anger, coincided with Shylock’s feeling of pride in his religion and his anger regarding its oppression, while Shylock’s lines evocatively accompanied the visual separation of the characters.

Shylock’s Jewishness is a key issue for the actor to pursue and speak ‘against the Christians’ (Kono), who had excluded the Jews as outlaws. Nevertheless, while Ennosuke’s Shylock dramatised the unfair treatment of Jews by emphasising the related words, Jessica’s character showed the opposite effect, supported by the other young Venetians. For example, in Act 2, Scene 6, while Gratiano and Salarino awaited Lorenzo in front of Jessica’s house (2.6.6-20), their epistrophes and metaphors of love and money were all removed from the production. Then, Lorenzo finally arrives at Shylock’s house, ‘Here dwells my father Jew’ (24), which is the only time in the production when he utters the word ‘Jew’ in relation to his beloved Jessica. Gratiano may have been sarcastic about Jessica or women in general, as his line ‘Now by my hood, a gentile, and no Jew!’ (2.6.52) suggests. In the text, a ‘gentile’ indicates a Christian from a Jew’s perspective and ‘no Jew’
is uttered from a Christian viewpoint, emphasising Jessica’s ambiguous position, but this is also eliminated, consequently avoiding textual references to religion and race.

Moreover, the script changes parallel Jessica’s wish to ‘Become a Christian and thy [Lorenzo’s] wife’ (2.3.21). Since many of her lines are cut, we cannot see the representation of the anguish of her heart but witness her desperate effort to overcome her fear/shame of choosing to speak and behave like a Christian, hidden in a boy’s clothing, as ‘Cupid himself would blush / To see me thus transformèd to a boy’ (2.6.38-39). She then ‘gild[s]’ (49) herself to be with Lorenzo as a dowry on the surface but also indicating an ironic reminder of her merchant father. For Jessica, her father stands for Jewishness (or vice versa), and she rejects both (‘what heinous sin is it in me / To be ashamed to be my father’s child!’ [2.3.16-17]) in favour of Christianity and Lorenzo.

One can imagine that the omitted lines, while serving to detach Jessica from Shylock, were partly cut to diminish Jessica’s Jewishness or to show her effort to detach herself from it, instead portraying her as an ordinary young woman who tries to be the same as any other character in Venice, not distinct from Lorenzo, Bassanio, or Portia. This was also demonstrated by the support of the other characters: the Venetians treated Jessica, unlike Shylock, just as they would treat other Venetian Christians. Lorenzo and Jessica are a good match, just as are Bassanio and Portia.

Thus, in Ninagawa’s production, Jessica’s clique represents a ‘new generation’ in Venice who are moving forward and will make their world a happy place. However, the production also has elements of irony; by diminishing Jessica’s religion and race and by making her join Venetian society, it highlights the harsh reality of the acceptance of differences in Venice and the artificiality of interculturalism, leaving the audience in doubt—can Jessica, born and bred as a Jew, ever be happy in a new society of people? The textual omissions, dovetailed with the stage directions, thus detached the characters from any ethno-culture or faith, seemingly emphasising interculturalism on the surface but, in fact, denying the potential of its existence in Venice.

Additional examples also indicate the weakening of the tie between the father, who is a devout Jew, and the daughter, who renounces her religion and converts to Christianity. In Act 3, Scene 1, when the news of Antonio’s shipwreck is
announced (3.1.2), Solanio and Salarino panic and discuss their concern for Antonio. Ennosuke’s Shylock then totters onto the stage, worried about his own money (3.1.27-33). Strangely, however, the production omits the lines referring to his daughter, including the line ‘I say my daughter is my flesh and my blood’ (30). The decision to omit these words is particularly surprising since the words ‘flesh’ and ‘blood’ (repeated twice in this short scene) are keywords that connect and disconnect people (Shylock, Jessica, and Antonio) throughout the play. Such deletions obfuscate not only the father–daughter relationship but also the issues that decide the future of Shylock and Antonio. The deletion cut out information regarding the characters’ relationships with each other, thus weakening Shylock’s parental role as well as the emotional charge of the action, to say nothing of the other characters. At the same time, however, the textual deletion allowed Ennosuke’s Shylock more time to speak and act.

Thus, Shylock is centred and highlighted, but the alteration of the text concerning Jessica clearly demonstrates their mutual refusal to understand each other and denial of exchange. In other words, by emphasising words related to Shylock’s religion and ethnicity but deleting those concerning Jessica and her relationship with her father, the performance focused tightly on the Japanese kabuki actor playing the Jewish Shylock, and rewrote Jessica’s story by stressing her detachment from her father, who symbolises religion and race (or vice versa), and her choice of a new husband for which she must accept Christianity. In this way, The Merchant of Venice did not demonstrate mutual understanding, exchange, interaction, or even the exploitation of the other that Bharucha criticised in intercultural performance. Rather, it showed the two sides showing no interest to interact with each other, let alone understand each other; all that is portrayed is the indifference or ignorance that existed between the Venetians and Shylock, between Christians and a Jew.

These changes by Ninagawa were partly intended to suit Ennosuke’s performance style. Ennosuke also mentioned in an interview that he added some ad libs depending on his mood (Kono), which the translator, Kazuko Matsumoto, had to incorporate into the text for his convenience. Thus, Ninagawa, long known as absolutely faithful to Shakespeare’s words as translated into Japanese, had sacrificed the text to give more freedom to Ennosuke’s representation of Shylock while destressing Jessica’s Jewishness.

While words referring to religion and ethnicity were eliminated, they were,
in a way, highlighted by their awkward absence. In the production, the contrast between Shylock and the younger generation was made clear at the end of the play: the happy young couples left the stage through the middle door, laughing and dancing and holding hands. Jessica had chosen Christianity and a new husband over her Jewish father and thus closed the door behind her, leaving her father alone on stage as the lights went out. However, the closed door was suddenly yanked open by Shylock, who walked lividly towards the audience, tore off his large crucifix necklace, and held it up towards the sky so tightly that his hand began to bleed, making his final proud mie pose, emphasising his continued existence and determination, and reemphasising the production’s rejection of interculturalism. Ninagawa altered the text a great deal to suit the production’s purpose, but interestingly, the missing words and acting made up for the omitted parts and also told different stories about the characters and their effect on the overall production and its audience.

Conclusion

In The Merchant of Venice, most of the elements that had previously characterised Ninagawa’s work were omitted. The simplified stage included no visual hints for the audience, and the empty stage and acting styles encouraged an actor-centred stage. The textual rearrangement helped to emphasise the characteristics of Ennosuke’s representation of Shylock while diminishing Jessica’s Jewishness. As a result, Ninagawa’s adaptation rejected the notions of cultural fusion and compromise. In the conservative world created within this production, where the characters showed no desire to understand or be understood outside of their cultural groups, communication did not function as a tool of intermediation between people. This was represented by the actor-centred stage and the kabuki-derived emotional symbolism of Ennosuke’s Shylock, which made up for the attenuation of Shakespeare’s rhetorical power.

At the same time, the omitted lines tell us how the production formed the character of Jessica and her relationship with the other characters. The formation of her character made her choose Christianity and a new husband over her father, religion, and race, allowing for symbiotic dynamics between her and her new
Venetian friends. The interculturalism that is rejected by Ennosuke’s representation of Shylock seems actualised by the other characters who are more at ease with accepting and intermingling with each other, but only after their differences have been commonised. In other words, intercultural exchange is embraced by neither Shylock nor by the other Venetians in this production.

At the same time, close attention must be paid to Ninagawa’s methodological approach to this production as a director and artist. According to Pavis, an artist’s purpose in creating intercultural theatre often depends on his relationship with the foreign culture, but usually, an intercultural project is restricted by the restraints of the target culture (Pavis 1996, 16). In The Merchant of Venice, however, Ninagawa, as the adaptor of a Shakespearean play, does not fully preserve but alters the foreign culture in order to frame it in Japanese kabuki acting, and he represents most characters as unwilling to accept each other. This rejection of exchange served to obfuscate elements of racial, religious, and cultural diversity. What emerged was a strong message about the director’s refusal to be controlled by the concept of interculturalism that had frequently been applied to his previous productions and which had pressurised and restricted his imagination. But does this mean that the production rejected all the methodological elements that Ninagawa had long preserved as a director?

Drawing himself away from these significant elements in his Shakespearean production was itself a challenge and a means to avoid self-imitation. In this respect, his ideology of not self-imitating but creating was increased in its intensity by diverging from the norm. When asked why he continued to make Shakespearean plays, Ninagawa replied that he felt he was being tested by the global theatre and that this was a challenge that he had to undertake (Komatsu 2012, 237). In another interview, when asked what measures he had taken to actualise his ‘never self-imitate’ slogan, Ninagawa replied honestly that it was only his pride that kept him going; he would be embarrassed as an artist if he was labelled a copy-cat, and this feeling of shame motivated him to continue exploring new directions.

For the director to go against the theatrical fashion and adamantly reject the label of interculturalism required courage, but Ninagawa’s aesthetic, as a director and artist, was to reject self-imitation and continually challenge his own boundaries. While interculturalism has become a trend in modern theatre, it is necessary to comprehend the dynamics between the different cultures and ideals to span gaps
between cultures. In this aspect, Ninagawa’s production goes against the trend but it undoubtedly shows that the real challenge in making an intercultural performance productive is to live up to one’s principles by recognising the differences and confronting the politics of locations of the source and target cultures.

Notes

1 For example, John Russell Brown suggested that Ninagawa’s works transcend ‘national borders’ (145). Further, Emi Hamana’s in-depth analysis of Ninagawa’s works as well as other Asian productions assumes that they contain intercultural elements.


3 At the time, he was called Kamejiro Ichikawa, before he succeeded his father to the name in 2012.

4 Michael Billington commented on the opening scene that it was ‘a majestically thrilling storm complete with riven galleon and flying mariners’ (The Guardian, 19 August, 1988). Moreover, Paul Taylor described the storm as ‘spectacularly evoked with violently fluttering sheets, and the thundering prow of a galleon’ (The Independent, 5 December 1992).

5 Tetsuo Kishi noted the incorrect usage of the storm in the Shakespearean context and warned against the flimsy usage of traditional Japanese theatre conventions for the purpose of evoking the audience’s emotions (Kishi 1998, 112).

6 In Akira Yamaguchi’s interview with Ninagawa, he acknowledged that, in Richard II, in place of the rhetorical (textual) rhymes, he created visual rhymes by adding elements of pop and kabuki culture to the scenes (Ninagawa Yukio no Shigoto, a, 2015, 128–135).

7 Ninagawa’s 2001 Hamlet (his fourth Hamlet) featured a simple stage with red wires hanging from the ceiling to metaphorically confine Masachika Ichimura as Hamlet. His 2003 Hamlet also had a simple stage with only wire gauze surrounding the stage and Tatsuya Fujiwara, the 21-year-old actor who played a young Hamlet. Placing him alongside three other youths (Ophelia, Laertes, and Fortinbras), this production emphasised their fatherless state and showed how they grew up to take responsibility for their lives and the world they inhabited. These stage designs included metaphorical hints, with the hanging wires indicating the restriction of Hamlet’s body and mind by his ghost father, Gertrude, and Claudius, and by his own indecisiveness. Ninagawa’s 2004 production of Romeo and Juliet was also minimal, featuring black-and-white photographs of people’s faces affixed to the walls. According to Tsukasa Nakagoshi, the stage designer of this production, these faces were pictures of those who had died of ‘love’ (Akishima 2015, 12), indicating that love and life comprise ‘death and rebirth’.

8 Mie means ‘appearance’ or ‘visible’. When an actor strikes (or ‘cuts’ in Japanese) a mie pose, he freezes for a moment to indicate that the character’s emotion is at a peak. If the
character is supposed to be angry, the actor’s eyes are opened wide and are crossed.
9 His view can also be supported by the filmed version of the Horipro production, shown
in cinemas in May 2017 to commemorate Ninagawa’s death. The camera follows Ennosuke
most of the time, recording his expressions, particularly his soliloquies and mie poses,
which elicited applause from audiences, even in the cinema. The camera work delivers an
Ennosuke-centred performance as opposed to conveying cultural mixing and hybridisation.
10 Whenever Ninagawa had to alter the text, he always worked with the translator. However,
The Merchant of Venice production included so many necessary cuts that Ninagawa asked
the translator to cut the lines herself for Ennosuke. She had suggested cutting the lines in
Act 1 Scene 3 (75-89) where Shylock talks about Jacob and the rams, a reference that the
Japanese audience would not understand. However, Ninagawa unexpectedly decided to leave
this line for Ennosuke who was playing the Jewish Shylock, as he was certain he would
make the lines exciting.
11 He noted his respect for both the original and translated texts in the director’s
commentary for the Richard II (2015) brochure, in which he enunciated his hope that his
direction would not tarnish Matsuoka’s reputation (Hasebe, 142).

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