

ROMEO AND JULIET IN TOKYO

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Producing the play this summer (August/September 09) with a cast of ten actors has been a very interesting experience of both high's and low's, bringing some unexpected contradiction in its wake. On one side there was the will on the part of the producers [Himawari Theatre](#) to further debate and bring about change in society and on the other side the lack of readiness, coupled with conservative fear of dealing with the consequences of that change.



Capulet and Juliet - when Juliet refuses her father's order to marry Paris

When inviting me to direct this play for teenagers I was asked to *"create a production that would support the challenges of contemporary Japan in all spheres - economic, political and social."* Discussions took place about the economic crises having a negative effect on the confidence of young people, the growing number of suicides by young people and *"the need for society to learn how to cope with the many crisis's in today's world"*. There was the need for *"education and the arts to not only play a part but to also lead"*.

It is in the light of this context that I set the play in a contemporary city environment, taking into account the specific issues I had been asked to address. I was also asked to be *"experimental, to be adventurous, to engage actors in the process of creation, to make an 'artistic' production, to make a laboratory, to explore"*.



Tybalt on hearing of Mercutio's death

I did not set out to make a dark, deeply personal play that focuses on the intimacy of family life but that is what emerged over a period of four weeks as a consequence of exploring the potential contemporary meaning of Shakespeare's text - undue parental pressure, physical abuse, sexism, knife crime, gangs, under age sex, alcoholism, flawed personalities, delusional thinking leading us along a road to hell paved with good intentions. Of course there was also much that is hugely positive and fun, not least the

language and the sympathetic nature and humour of many of the characters. Design wise, the costumes are spectacular. I was also able to use video and film projection, shadow and over head projections, live music and dance and Noh masks. In all this is a multimedia extravaganza that smoothly blended together the scenes, building nicely to a powerful and rather emotional climax incorporating an 'out of body experience'.

Later I was told that teachers in Japan are often frightened to confront the truth and so it proved. After the premiere it was clear that many had been shocked and surprised by what they had seen. I was confronted by questions that exposed the older generation's fears about being confrontational by laying open ulcers of society as demonstrated through personal experience of the individual, spoken about in broad terms in the press but ignored by those who are charged with the responsibility of education. I tried to speak about theatre as a tool for changing lives and that this Romeo and Juliet was a very powerful tool to do just that.

Instead I was asked to consider some 'editing' *'Do not use the knives', 'Remove anything that may in any way stop people from buying the performance for schools, i.e. make sure that there's absolutely no reference to sex or anything sexual', 'Introduce more songs and dance routines and so lighten the story', 'Ensure that the suicide of Romeo and Juliet is in no way alluring, to avoid audiences copying their example.'*



Lord and Lady Capulet



Romeo and Benvolio

I came away feeling that most people think of Romeo and Juliet as a fairy tale or romantic love story, where all the characters are heroes who somehow are destined to do as they do and that nothing happens as a consequence of their own actions, i.e. there's no such thing as personal responsibility in this classical tale of Romeo and Juliet.

The reaction from those for whom the play was intended was very different though, the overwhelming response being that the contemporary setting made it accessible and relevant. To many the play came as a total surprise because they had never been asked to consider this play as having the potential for contemporary meaning or value. One 29 year old commented that she had no idea that Juliet's parents tried to force her to marry Paris (arranged marriage is still a reality in Japanese society and how this made it a motivation for Juliet to want to marry Romeo as a potential way out of the dilemma.

Quote from a 17 year old

"I am surprised to see scenes that Juliet writes her dairy on PC and the Friar sends his e-mail. I think junior and high school students will feel close to this production. Thank all the actors for this preview performance, I wish you a continued success."

Quote taken from a 32 year old

"I like the following scenes: the dance scene where Romeo first met Juliet. The sleeping scene, where Juliet drinks the potion. All the scenes with Benvolio and Mercutio and Romeo, the bed scene, the scene where Juliet writes in her diary. If this play is targeted at teenagers, I am afraid that the bedroom scene may be where the audience, especially girls, love. but will be objected to by school teachers". "I liked Juliet very much." I also like the live bird songs and the chant scene on the screen"

I'm personally very proud of this production and I'm also convinced that over time (the play will be in repertoire for at least the next ten years) the older generation of Japanese too will come to recognise it as a wonderful piece of theatre. I already know from the responses that the younger generation will need no such convincing. As they left the theatre, their shining eyes and excited faces told me so. In spite of the reaction I have found the experience incredibly positive and enriching. I'd do it all again tomorrow.

<http://www.quicksilvertheatre.org>