

James Sutherland, founder of International Center for Theater Arts, interviewed March 17th.

What is your medium?

I grew up wanting to be an actor, so that was my passion, performing, and then as I was going through my university study, I ended up being inducted into a Masters in directing course. That was after I directed Heiner Muller's *Hamletmachine* in my undergraduate year and I got a very high marks for it, so I thought, I like this, this is interesting, creative control was something that appealed at the time, so I did a Masters in directing, and then moved into that area. Those are my strongest areas, but I also enjoy writing and dramaturgy, because I think those kinds of things inform you as a director.

Tell us something about your influences

I was a really big fan of Bruce Lee as a kid. One of the things I found fascinating about him was that he did not exist inside one style. He was not indoctrinated into one way of doing. He was looking at how to train the inequalities which shape a technique. By inequalities I mean coordination, focus, timing, rhythm - all things that are necessary in terms of creating a good piece of theatre as well. The technique that he would eventually use would be defined by his opponent. For me that has got crossover into theatre making because what is most important at first is the story and second is the technique that frames the story you want to tell. Then it was Stanislavsky. I wanted to integrate my love of movement and martial arts, and I realized his Physical Actions. Then I learned about Eugenia Barba, who runs the International School of Theater Anthropology and that was all physical, so I was thinking here we go, and then someone introduced me to Meyerhold, who was Stanislavski's number one student, and arguable Stanislavsky's only heir to his work.

What is great about Meyerhold's work?

He was looking at a way of performing that first came from the outside - the space outside of the performer would then influence the space inside of the

performer. It's what Peter Brook calls "Outside-in, Inside-out" acting. Stanislavsky and Meyerhold were working from different standpoints.

Why are you doing theatre here in Tokyo?

My wife is Japanese. When we were about to have our first child while we were in England, I was running a physical theatre course at East 15. Professionally I was satisfied but I was not happy, and we were deciding where we were going to raise our child and we weren't particularly comfortable with where we were living at that time, and we felt we didn't have a very big support network, so we decided we are going to move back to Japan. I had a couple of good experiences while living in England, and most of them were overseas, I was working in Iran and Korea, and I was creating, making things. In the physical theatre course, you are making with the students, but essentially managing, administrating, delivering teaching but you don't really feel like a full-fledged artist inside of that environment, so I needed to fulfill this need. So, it began with conversations with a guy from Tadashi Suzuki's company and from there we formed this nameless idea which was an acronym for the International Center for Theatre Arts (CITA).

What are you drawn to a director?

I'm drawn to collaborative creation, I'm drawn to - something I've found very difficult in this country - periods of generating material and research. And this is shared, so we're all giving a shared understanding of the world of the work we are about to get in. But it's always been the most difficult thing to ask actors to come in and offer something. I think the culture of working here is very different from the culture I have brought with me.

You've just finished your production of *Emoto* (2018). What was the process like?

The process was generating material together as quickly as possible because we had a very short amount of time to do the show. We had a new element, a sound designer, who we wanted working with us like a writer would, in the rehearsal

room and building sound and riffing off us as we were improvising. It wasn't quite the case, but the great thing about that experience was that it was our first time having someone design sound for us, so we have a new collaborator. That was a learning process. We were often in the room not being able to use sound, but we needed sound to move to. Essentially the first phase was building small phrases of movement. We had a script and we worked loosely with it, but we knew the story wasn't going to be text driven. We had to be able to move for forty minutes, almost non-stop, and there were only two performers. You can't do very simple things for a long period of time, you have to keep changing what they are doing. We had to find layers of complexity that were not just how they were moving. It had to be other theatre devices - use of mask, use of manual light, projection design, sound. The first projection in the show was the double exposure images. Tatsuya made that. He had to teach himself how to do that for those 90 seconds. We had to source all the material, but he had to learn how to do it. That's not easy. If we want to do something, first we ask people to help, but if no one helps, we have to do it ourselves.

You've worked a lot with Tatsuya. How has your relationship changed over the time you have worked together?

He was a student of mine in England (at East 15) for a short period of time. I thought here's someone who is going to understand what it is we want to be doing, and the way in which we want to be doing it. We occasionally have personality clashes. He's an extremely talented young man as performer, as a puppet-maker, and at editing and design. It is great to have someone on board with an understanding of all the elements of theatre-making and can do a lot of those things. We're still building and growing our relationship as collaborators.

In your show *The Nose* (2016), you directed yourself as a performer. What difficulties did you experience?

Not having a second eye. Not being able to step back from the project and to look in. I loved the experience, but I appreciated afterwards in hindsight the difficulty of doing that. I'd like to do that more as I really enjoy performing but

you need to have a particular set-up from the beginning to look and step back from your work constantly and assess it.

As a director, do you treat the actors the same way as you would treat yourself?

I'm equally hard on myself and them. I expect nothing out of them that I could not do myself. I give them a lot of space to come up with ideas but if they don't then I have to take over. That sounds very militaristic, but it's very important for me to have them contributing. One is it gives them ownership of the work, it makes them responsible. Then when you perform you are fighting, you are up onstage defending your work. It's about creative ownership, and, for want of a better expression, it's about resource management. If you got three or four ideas from different people coming through to you, you don't know what's going to happen in that situation, you could be incredibly inspired by what someone gives you and then you can start bouncing off each other. If it all comes from one person, at some point you are just going to be drained. So, when someone offers a picture, a line from poem, or they do a movement, I think *wow*, I never would of thought that, that's the most thrilling thing for me.

Where does your work fit in the Japanese theatrical landscape?

We want to create a theatre we are not seeing. Without a doubt, there is a contemporary European flavor to it. It's heavily influenced by pioneers in Europe from the twentieth century. People pay to watch that kind of thing but only if it is imported into the country for a short amount of time - very expensive to see and then it goes. I felt that there was really a lack of technical ability in the actors when I first got here. It seemed to be an apprenticeship training style. Actors go into the company and do the spear carrier for three years and go slowly up the ranks. It is a business model – incredibly deadly and dangerous. We are trying to create artists who have voices and tools to implement what it is they want to say, not an army of followers.

For somebody wanting to join your group, what qualities are required?

We choose people who come through our workshops rather than holding a conventional audition process. That's how we found Kana. She was a regular a year ago in coming to our workshops, and we felt we could work with her. Hiroko was the same. Your company should look like life - tall, short, fat, thin people. I don't want a company of sixteen 20-year old men as that doesn't reflect life. Having Hiroko allows us to have an older character onstage. Hiroko is very well organized. She helps with the infrastructure and the planning, and both Hiroko and Tatsuya delivered elements of teaching in the last workshop at the Satoh Sakichi Festival in March. So, we're trying to give them opportunities to develop as teachers and makers inside of a company.

How do you go about reaching an audience?

We are trying to do all the things that you do in Japan. Go to college sites and send social media invites. Word of mouth is the best publicity. I think it is just going to take time for people to come to the shows and then talk about it. In Japan I heard you need to have a signature for your work, a particular style. Our style would be something that changes, would be its unpredictability.

Do you consider the audience in the different countries you perform?

Yes, that's why we place less of a primacy on text and more of a primacy on movement. Everyone understands movement. Language is particular to a place in time. I believe there is a universal theatrical language. Everyone understands that the horizontal is a place of rest and the vertical is a place of standing. Those things are not argued in other cultures. Everyone has two arms, two legs and a head on their shoulders.

How has your teaching affected your work?

I think the teaching helps you to understand where people are with their bodies. It helps you to read a little more about what's going on and make subtle suggestions about things they can change and possibly improve, and that can be a fantastic transposition into directing. A director, like a teacher, must wear many hats. You're the confidante, the provocateur, the midwife saying 'push,

push...breathe'.

What do you think about English theatre in Tokyo?

It serves its purpose. But it's pretty self-serving. If I was in the position they (Tokyo International Players) were in, we'd be creating much bolder projects. With the support that they have, the infrastructure, and the amount of people, they should be riskier with what they decide to do. They also have a very particular audience which they build projects for. To their credit, they are aiming for their target market and hitting it. But it seems to me to be unnecessarily fractured. There is that theatre over there for foreigners, and there is that theatre over there for tourists or Japanese. What perturbs me the most is there is not enough cross fertilization, especially with the 2020 Olympics coming.

Would you consider collaborating with any of these groups?

It depends on the project and the people. I want to do things and say well if they don't work at least I learned things from my mistakes rather than tiptoeing softly through the years of my life. I'm not going to learn anything if I don't challenge myself and be prepared to fail. And that's something we should all embrace a little more. The danger is you do that and put that up, and people don't come back. But what may end up happening is people saying 'I acknowledge the boldness of what you are doing, I see what you are trying to do, and I want you to continue doing what you are doing', and those are the people you want gravitating towards you, you want the risk takers coming towards you. You want the people who have bold ideas but nowhere to implement them yet, so we are going to have to think creatively how we are going to get that done.

Do you think that theatre in English can be a tool of learning?

For me, a big part of theatre making is being playful. Being playful when learning how to communicate in a second language is a good idea. You want to learn the culture as the culture is in the language. You throw a whole bunch of very shy Japanese students into a Drama improvisation where they have to use a second language and you are putting too much pressure on them too fast. So,

I have never been a big fan of saying ‘let’s use Drama as a way of trying to learn English’. Let’s use games and being playful, but let’s not put it in a context where you have to have an argument with your wife in the kitchen.

What would you consider doing if you had the opportunity of putting something on with a group for 2020?

Ideally it would be nice to sit down first with those involved and decide ‘What would we like to do?’ An important question would be: What’s happening now? Can we reflect what is happening around us now through ways in which the audience can identify with? For example, everyone is doing *Richard the Third* again because of (Shinzo) Abe. It’s incredibly topical. I think what is important for us is looking at stories that are rooted in the local community, whether that be our municipality, our neighborhood or Japan, which also have universal themes. So, when we go overseas we are telling stories that have a strong Japanese flavor to them, a visual or a narrative flavor, but have themes people can understand or connect with.

What are your plans for the next project?

We’ve got a great magician, Tanba Tanba, who went on *Britain’s Got Talent* last year. We want to do a solo show with him, use his magic to tell a great story. We also want to do an adaptation of Albert Camus’s *The Stranger* in Colombia. We want to turn it into a modern commedia dell’arte with masks. Then we want to develop a show based on the themes of dementia, because one of the things I am interested in is mixing science and theatre. All those shows have something to do with us now in our time, in the place in which we live. *The Stranger* is not about us, but it is about someone who is an outsider, and I’m sure we can both relate to that one.

Do you feel you can work as you want in this country?

No. I think we have to do our best to play with the circumstances we are faced with. We applied for Saison Foundation funding this year, we didn’t get it. I was recommended to apply for it a year or two ago based on my resume. Nothing,

absolutely nothing. Not even a hundred thousand yen. And you know what it is like booking a space for rehearsal, it's a lottery system, you are not working in a studio space, you are working in a lecture room with tables and whiteboards. The circumstances aren't great and then you got to think about how to get your show marketed. It's not fun at all a lot of the time.

How do you juggle life as a father and a theatre maker?

Terribly. I'm still learning about how to do that. It's not easy at all. If I was earning more money as a theatre maker I think it would be easier. But it's a lot of time away, and a lot of time to think and process what you are doing, and how to fix or develop something when you have got two little sprogs running around, so you have got to compartmentalize and at the same time they also need someone who is their father and that's a bit tough. I'm still learning. That's a work in progress.