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Peter Lichtenfels

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Article abstract

Peter Lichtenfels and Ōta Shōgo co-worked on the play Plastic Rose (1994) and had an understanding that there was no “pure” way of “doing Japanese theatre.” Ōta presented Lichtenfels with scripts of many of his plays and asked him to continue directing them. Through a study of two of Lichtenfels’ productions of Ōta’s play Elements—one produced in Davis, California (2017) and the other in Bogotà, Colombia (2018)—this essay explores insights arising from different theatre practices, some of the resonances, and three key issues of theatre directing that Ōta explores at a meta level in the play. With Elements, producing something on stage in the spirit of a different culture became a confidence that theatre bodies can work, within their contemporary possibilities or constraints, with the verbal, visual, and sound records of other embodied cultures. The scripts, those bodies, their voices, and their movements are resources on which transcultural theatre needs to draw before it happens into meaning.

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Directing Ōta Shōgo's *Elements*: From Form to Body

Peter Lichtenfels

Ōta Shōgo (1939–2007) is one of the most thought-provoking playwrights from late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Japan.[1] Ōta worked in the Japanese theatre scene from the late 1950s. He wrote many plays, was director of the Tenkei Theatre, and then artistic director of the Fujisawa Civic Theatre in Kanagawa Prefecture. In the 1980s, he also began to work at Kinki University in the Theatre Department. His plays pose challenges for directors and actors partly because the scripts have few words, partly because they are rooted in an imaginative development of particular cultural elements, and partly because Ōta focused an intensely critical eye on the processes of theatre, an eye that continually undoes convention and generates unusual dramatic forms. For a non-Japanese company, these challenges are profound.

Ōta's plays are embedded not only in post–World War II experimental Japanese theatre but also in classical forms of Japanese dramatic tradition such as *noh*. Noh is itself founded on the Zen philosophy of Zeami, and aspects of Zen Buddhism inform Ōta's plays—in particular the "elements" theory of materials that includes water, earth, fire/air, wood, and metal. Several of Ōta's "Station" plays open out relations with "water" or "earth" or "sand." Drawing from my own work in the Chinese Daoism that informs Zen Buddhism, I have a Euro-American understanding of the ecologies of happening that this philosophy suggests. It is probably fair to say that much of my own directing, including the dramaturgical collaboration that I have always practised, is infused by this "understanding" and generates resonances for me with Ōta's plays, which are themselves infused with a parallel understanding embodied through his noh training.

In 1994, I directed one of Ōta's plays in tandem with him. We each produced *Plastic Rose* separately, yet with a shared set design, and each production played both in his theatre in Kyoto and in mine in Davis, California. After seeing what my non-Japanese company had done with his play, Ōta handed me a stack of his scripts—some translated into English, some not—and asked me to try to direct them. I do not know why he chose to do this, but there was and is something in his work that resonates strongly with how I make theatre. It may be that the kind of collaborative directing to which I am committed was recognizable to Ōta's own work in theatre. It may be my awareness of the body and its vibration, movement, and energy that was recognizable. This essay studies, through two productions of Ōta's play

Peter Lichtenfels is a German Canadian theatre director and dramaturge who has committed his artistic career to intercultural theatre and performance. Former artistic director at Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre and the Leicester Haymarket, he is professor emeritus of theatre and dramatic arts at the University of California, Davis.

Elements, one produced in Davis in 2017 and the other in Bogotà, Colombia, in 2018, many of the insights arising from our different theatre practices, some of the resonances, and three key issues of theatre directing that Ōta explores at a meta level in the play.

My background is in directing shows by, about, and with actors from different cultural backgrounds and with diverse training practices. The study here talks about how we might create a production in one culture that comes from another, and with a group of actors whose members have acting practices that are culturally distinct and particular to their own training. The fact that the productions played in both California and in Bogotà also meant that the directing was working with culturally different audiences. One of the key challenges was not to try to assimilate the difficulties of the play into our mainly Euro-American theatre practices but to honour what we felt was the spirit of Ōta's text. For me, as the director/dramaturge, the spirit of the text came from my memory of Ōta, his temperament, how he moved, how he talked to me, how we spoke about production, and how I learned from him in the 1994 parallel productions. There was an understanding between us that there was no "pure" way of "doing Japanese theatre." Trying to produce something on stage in the spirit of a different culture became instead about a joint confidence that contemporary bodies work within their contemporary possibilities or constraints, and that those bodies, their voices, and their movements are the resources on which transcultural theatre needs to draw before it happens into meaning.

There was a significant element of our rehearsal practice that radically broadened the ways that we responded to the challenges in the play. Ōta is well known for using exceptionally few words in his scripts, a practice based on his comment that most people speak for just two hours a day if their words were put side by side and spend the other twenty-two hours silent. For example, the first scene of *Elements* is one-page "long" yet takes about twenty-three minutes to play. When Ōta does use words, they are not naturalistic. For example, scene 5, which introduces two new characters to the audience, begins with the following page of the script:[2]

From above, the corpse of a dog drops.

5. Birth

The direction of the light has shifted in the space. Man 3 and Woman 3 appear. They come to a standstill. Man 3 finds the shovel and buries the dog.

MAN 3: . . . How do you usually manage to leave the house?
WOMAN 3: How?
MAN 3: Well, you see . . . well, when I put down the receiver, I always wonder. Then I forget . . . I can hear the children's voices in the background, so I always wonder how you manage to get away.

WOMAN 3: I don't tell them that I'm going to a hotel.
MAN 3: Uh-huh. It's not yesterday, is it—?
WOMAN 3: Er, what?
MAN 3: No, I mean, it feels like yesterday or the day before yesterday.
WOMAN 3: Right now?
MAN 3: Aah . . . umm, right now.

Man 3 starts shoveling sand.

Looking at a page of this kind of script was exceptionally difficult for the actors I was working with even though they had not had entirely conventional training in Euro-American dramatic narrative scripts. Two members of the cast were dancers (one from Canada, one from Spain), two trained in the Paul Sills tradition of improvisational theatre (both from the United States), one was a physical actor trained in corporal mime (from Colombia), one was a transculturally trained actor (from Colombia), and only one was a conventionally trained US actor. However, I had learned from my work with US-trained actors in *Plastic Rose* that one of the most helpful tasks was to approach the text literally, precisely literally—do just what the text says detail by detail. To begin to engage with *Elements*, I asked the actors not only to read the printed version but also to watch a video record (Lichtenfels 2022) of Ōta's own 2002 production of *Elements*.[3] Using both the visual score and verbal scripts profoundly affected our work. For our productions, we decided to take the visual score and verbal scripts as seriously as the verbal text, and this had an unexpected and deep impact on our theatrical translation. Watching the video of the Japanese production, we were immediately aware of significant differences between those actors and us with regard to breath, gesture, movement, sound-making, rhythm, speed, spatial arrangement, and time—and in particular of varieties of repetition as sensory nodes where things happened in the moment of each performance.

Elements features a number of everyday characters whose paths cross as they roam about the city streets. In the play, these ordinary working people act out their lives on a bed of constantly shifting sand on which they work to keep stable. As the ground under their feet undulates like a wave, unexpected objects such as balls, spades, dogs, and nets fall from the sky. The production asks the audience to imagine walking on sand in their daily life and to experience it as a material that slows us down so we do everyday things in extraordinary ways—living life at "sand-speed." This essay will look closely at the dramaturgical detail of the rehearsal process of three scenes in the play: the first scene, "Breakfast"; the fourth scene, "Tender Meat"; and the sixth scene, "Howling at the Moonlight." Just as Ōta's directing of *Plastic Rose* was founded on a sense of a continual engaging with the embodied energies of the people in his company that is difficult to put into words, so it is difficult to analyze the practices of our productions of *Elements*. To engage in the dramaturgy, a term increasingly used to mark the director-in-collaboration, the following account will focus on precisely what was happening with an actor's body in the course of making the production.

At the same time, *Elements* is a play about contemporary urban life, and on a meta level, it is a play about theatre-making and how that making can change the ways we live. The three scenes that this essay will discuss raise issues of the creation of time and space on stage, of the process of rehearsal, and of the appearance of a shared reality on stage. The meta-level strands in *Elements* mean that there are always at least two layers of theatre emerging from the bodies of the actors: the story about people, and the commentary about theatre building. The first scene is infused with this doubleness, which is only an initial set of layers. It often causes critics confusion because it is not usual for a playwright to set up a dramatization of how theatre makes time and space at the same time as making a dramatic and necessarily unfamiliar use of time and space for the story of the play. In the second scene that I discuss, the doubleness involves the "rehearsal" that is in the story of the play, and the writer's dramatization of how rehearsal works—not to mention the performance of a rehearsal in our productions, and my own critical performance, in this essay, of how we rehearsed a rehearsal. The final scene considered in this essay draws attention to the doubleness of theatrical "reality," not only the reality created by the actors, but simultaneously, commentary on how they are doing this.

Breakfast

The story of the first scene of the play is simply a father (Man1 or M1), mother (Woman1 or W1), and teenage daughter (Woman2 or W2), having breakfast and getting ready to go into their day's work.[4] Ōta repeats the actions of the scene three times so that an audience member has to give up on wanting to know *what* will happen and pay attention to *how* things happen: the detail of the relations among the actors, and between them and the objects on stage. It may be that he is creating a "Japanese" time/space, but for a Euro-American director such as myself, a transcultural production is not interested in the impossible project of understanding what that might be or in producing a Japanese play. Instead, it is important that the time/space he or she is building also opens up on aspects of the contemporary experience of the company making the production. My work was to figure out how to do that with the actors, all of whom had trained in a Euro-American setting, although each had other kinds of training in other media and from other cultures.

The main task set by the verbal scripts and visual scores of *Elements* was to slow the body down. Our work in the two Euro-American productions was to find out how to get the bodies in our particular audiences to also slow down. My process as director/dramaturge was to rehearse with a cast of seven people, all but one with exceptional experience and maturity, who came from different cultures and ethnicities, with different conceptions of gender, and with distinctly different training in theatre practice. There was a way that we did this play transculturally by building it from different perspectives, honouring all those differences, finding energy in the moments of disconsonance. As a company of players, our task in the first scene was to repeat the physical form of the words and the movements from

the video text and come to an agreement about what that form was by feeling how it released the energy flow among us—in much the same way that a dance or a *taiji* form can suddenly become a medium for energy. In the printed script, there are no words, nor suggestions for timing for the first scene beyond "considerably slowed down" (Ōta 2006, 232), so we began by taking from the video score the time it took for each repetition and using it as a frame for the form we were developing. The question became, How do we fill the repetitions of those sequences? It was not about understanding specific social conditions but rather about each actor's need to do the activity within those time parameters. From there we began to develop how the bodies had to breathe, move, inhabit, and expand to fill the time frame, to honour the form. Once we agreed on the form, it was not a matter of "we do this more slowly" but "we do this in this amount of time."

When you work with actors, it is a combination of doing "what I need" as a director/dramaturge and giving the actor space for "what they need." This will differ with the culture, experience, and temperament of each actor. For example, Heather Nolan, playing W1, has a task to do. Her temperament is very much about figuring out what she is doing and being practical, which from moment to moment generate their own rhythms. Álvaro Hernández, playing M1, has a completely different way of working. He never seems to transition into the dreamtime of acting, but is always right there in the present, so the rhythm is heightened yet consistent. When the character M1 walks in scene 1, he is present to the walking—not to the way of walking but to the walking itself. In contrast, when the character W1 undertakes her tasks, she is present to the arrangement of objects on the kitchen table, but there is a sense that the character's body does not want to be there. W1's lack of "body" in this scene is a key part of the actor's body in the video, and Nolan builds that presence of absencing or leaving through her own acting—this character, as we find out, has just got to leave the home.

Ōta directed the video of his 1994 production of *Elements*, and in a sense, using its text as a visual script allowed us to read the play through his eyes and ears as well as his words. While I worked together with all three actors in the scene, we worked in stages. During the first stage, I worked independently with each actor on creating their form. The first focus was on the Mother, or W1, mainly because she is the first character to come onto the stage. We looked at the motions, steps, actions she had to do: laying the table for breakfast and clearing it. We undertook the same process for the Father, or M1, focusing on how this character comes in, throws the newspaper down, buttons his shirt, and ties his tie as he is getting ready for work. We repeated the exercise with the Daughter, or W2, played by Melissa Cunha, and what she does in relation to the Father and Mother: coming in and looking at the Mother, going over to the Father (at stage left), and dragging the newspaper to stage right. Each actor learned their choreography from the video text of the Ōta production, repeating it precisely until the actions became second nature. At points when the camera was not on their character, they would try to feel for the rhythm of the actions in that break in the visual script.

In the next stage, we brought the actors together to play out their movements, attending to the rhythm of their interrelation. This involved both precise attention to when Ōta's actors lifted their gaze, or gestured, or changed pace, and an incredibly detailed awareness of when the choreography for each intersected and diverged. Instead of learning words, the actors were learning the rhythm of their bodily activity in relation to the time frame. As we worked together over a long rehearsal period of several months, the actors began to get a feel for the score, fitting the rhythm of their activity to the point in the score that the other two actors needed to get to. For example, M1 had to finish buttoning his shirt at the exact time that W1 finished laying the table and before she started serving the food. We initially worked with M1 and W1, and once they had developed a synchronicity, we repeated the process with W2, choreographing the exchange of looks, the angle of a face, a gaze.

There were significant technical challenges. For example, W1 is upstage from both M1 and W2, and all three are facing the audience. Neither M1 nor W2 could look at the actor playing W1, yet they had synchronize their actions with hers. The work at this stage was to become intensely aware of each other. Building that rhythm and awareness with each other took a lot of talking and time, and it became a sense not of trust but of rhythmic cohesion, a feeling of shared space and time. If the characters' rhythms got off-key, it took a lot of work to coordinate the three scores. The character of W1 had to do a large number of actions, while M1 had comparatively few, and W2 even fewer. Yet the scene was a modern family cohabiting, each with their own life yet not really communicating even though they occupied the same room. Their actions had to be precisely in tune yet look as if nothing much was happening—getting ready for work, for school, making breakfast. The Japanese production we watched in the video must have had many of same bodily tasks, even if the actors came to them with completely different training and cultural habits.

The third stage offered its own challenges. These focused on how to extend the first iteration or precise "doing" of the scene in four minutes and fourteen seconds into the five minutes and eighteen seconds of the second iteration and the fifteen minutes and thirty-four seconds of the third. We knew from the video that the activities were the same, but the body rhythms for carrying out the activities became different. The focus of concentration changed because one part of the actor had to be in the present of the kitchen activities, and another part had to attend to the slower doing of the activity. As the times to do the activities got longer, especially in the third iteration, the actors in our production learned how to do those activities "as if" they were actual experiences but to draw them out over longer duration. In some way, they were simultaneously in real dramatic time and in unfamiliar time. Again, the Japanese production, while responding with quite different practices, would have been faced with a similar task for the body of each actor.

As the director, I am aware that our audiences in California and in Colombia needed to begin to understand why there was variability in duration. They saw the same activity happening in the second iteration, and there was still that sense in the body of following

"what happens," that relates to the activities we deal with in our daily lives. But by the third and much longer fifteen-minute iteration, they could be asking "why we are seeing something so mundane and habitual over again?" and "why is it taking so much longer this time?" The sensation tears apart the assumptions of the audience, so that they have to actively decide why the repetition is interesting for them. Why isn't it just boring? There is nothing to "get" anymore, so why am I here? They have to get over that sense of dramatic consumption that is so much part of the economics of modern Euro-American theatre, or leave the theatre—at every performance in California one or two people left, but no one left in Bogotà.

For the actors, the extended time of the second and third iterations meant they had to learn a different kind of rhythm for each, but each actor had their own way of maintaining the same energy as in the first iteration. W1 had to have the same focus yet parcel it out, using her hands and the kitchen implements to do so. M1 had to work on how to put on a shirt over five minutes. W2 had to learn to walk incredibly slowly to stage right, dragging the newspaper quickly-but-slowly. Each actor had to contend with the day-to-day physical elements of their actions happening in familiar time. For example, when M1 ties his tie, it falls down just as quickly as it fell in the first iteration—the actor can slow down his movements but not the acceleration of gravity—or though each iteration is longer than the previous one, the music from W2's radio plays at the same speed. These eruptions of familiar time into the dramatization of elongated time were often what made the scene work, precisely because there was real time involved in the extension of time.

The troubled time that resulted meant the actors and audience members were seeing something still "real" in their imagination simultaneous with feeling the unfamiliar opening out of the "time things take." Especially in the final stage of rehearsal, working on the third fifteen minute, thirty-four second iteration, the actors had to work on keeping the intentionality or impulse of their energy for the action yet parsing the moments of their activity differently so that they were each present in "real" time but slowed down in actual time. This turned into a kind of music felt by each of us in the rehearsal, there was a tempo that the actors began to follow. The relationality among the three was sensed, and there was no need to refer to each other physically. Each had their own score, but were co-conducting the actions and temporality of their bodies.

As a director, I sensed that the first time through, the audience members would try to focus on the events or the activities, the story that is happening on stage. What I expected in the second iteration, when the same activities are played out over a slightly longer period of time, is that some of the audience would resist out of a feeling that nothing is happening, there is nothing new, nothing to digest. This "absence" of something "new" creates a confusion or dislocation. The audience does not know whether they like this repetition, nor do they know what kind of play they are seeing. But when they realize that there is nothing new to see, that is what they see. That is when they begin to fill in the spaces of time with

their own seeing, imagination, rhythm. The repetition begins to help them find out how to slow down for the third much longer iteration: to breathe, to engage in another way of seeing that we do not habitually use in our daily lives. When this happens, the seeing, which on the surface is something that happens every day, becomes endlessly fascinating not for what it does but for the time it gives you to attend.

When working on Ōta's plays, I try always to be respectful to the text because its potentiality is elusive. We honoured the text by trying to be literal, attending to the details of the text and whatever affect it had on us, so that what we did was consonant with both the writer's verbal and visual scripts. This developed into a dialogue with these texts, collaborating with the energy in the writer's scripts. In rehearsal, I try to teach myself to attend to the moments that I feel are disconsonant, taking me out of the activity of attending. A director will train to look for those moments, and then, with the actor, reflect on what is happening in their body and have a conversation about why that might be so or not. This is one way that a director builds a relationship with an actor, because the actor, when called to the disconsonant, either trusts you, or, if they do not recognize the feeling, they teach you a new way of responding and you buy into it or not. The process is not about whether it's right or wrong but whether it communicates with you both. And then, the hope is that it will also happen for an attending audience. Drawing on comments from the audiences we played with in both California and Colombia, it seems that at least some of them understood that the scene was not providing answers as much as offering a process. Vision moved from focus into peripheral awareness. The edges of the body became more diffuse. It was as if the body was becoming part of a mixture with other people and things in the theatre, not a solution but intermingling ribbons of colour.

This first scene also prepares the audience for the metatext of the play, here the doubling of Ōta's commentary on dramatic time and space. The performance of elongated time not only draws the audience into a different way of feeling time and space but also into an awareness of the way theatre makes time and space. This awareness may be particularly acute for a Euro-American audience often trained on realist drama, which attempts the illusion of familiar conditions of time/space. Yet we all know that realist drama constructs that familiarity, that is, it is not a "natural" condition. Ōta's texts simply refuse the cultural assumptions of that familiarity, or at least do so for the Euro-American company and the audiences of our production. The meta level of his writing allowed for that awareness of a different space and time to be built in a non-Japanese setting. The scene reminds us of the way that theatre can be an experimental ground for changing our perceptions of the world, and what happens when we do so—in this case what happens when we expand time and its spatial coordinates, and how that changes our inhabitation of relationships.

God Is Dead

The fourth scene of the play, which has the section we are calling "God Is Dead," involves another such doubling of story and commentary.[5] The story of the scene is that the Daughter, or W2, meets a man, Man2 (M2), who we have previously seen breaking up the breakfast room and burying it in sand. Man2 is a loner, but also lonely, and attempts to draw W2 into a conversation about newspaper articles, including an advertisement for Nietzsche's book *God Is Dead*. He does so initially by holding on to her physically so she cannot run away while he tries to "show" her that he just wants to play with the words on the page. After her initial terror at being grasped and held by M2, W2 gradually gets involved in playing, and through continual repetition of the words, they develop a rhythm and a relationship. At the same time, the scene is a performance of a rehearsal. The lines that are spoken by M2 and repeated by W2 are introduced bit by bit, building on each other, until they make up the complete written blurb in the newspaper—just as if the characters are actors learning their lines. In the actual rehearsal of the production, the work became how to rehearse a rehearsal with a verbal script, and then how to perform the rehearsal of such a rehearsal.

The script subtly connects the two characters before they begin to speak to each other. M2 has buried the destruction of the kitchen under the sand and has buried the newspaper that W2 was reading in the opening scene, to look at it later. When W2 walks along the edges of the sand, she stops to look at it. It's partly a recognition of where she came from, strangely familiar as if her body knows it, but what she sees is not consonant with the memory. M2 sees her staring. He is itinerant, he has no home. She asks him a question, and he tries to draw her into the human contact he needs. At first, he tries to be humorous, reading the edges of the newspaper as if to say "I'm not weird." He smiles, he just wants to play. W2 takes a little step into the sand, but like a child, she keeps her distance. You begin to see how people who do not know each other come into contact. But M2 jumps up nervously, grabs her arm, and brings her over to the newspaper he has left behind him on the sand. This change of rhythm frightens W2, and she mistakes it for someone who is dragging her against her will. Yet he keeps holding her because he wants to play, and his only skill is to keep hold of her hand.

It is at that moment that M2 refers to the newspaper and speaks aloud the title of the review "The Death of God." This bizarre statement, for we do not yet know that it is the title of an advertisement, is both completely normalized yet terribly weird. He repeats "the death of god" again and again until she says it, and he gets her to repeat it after him until she says it to his satisfaction. At this point, he simply says "You see?" There is now a sense of shared understanding, so he lets go of her hand because she has relaxed and they are playing. Together they develop the lines of the advertisement, accompanying them with their bodies, with gestures and vocal intensities and range, and build a synergy to a point where she takes the lines somewhere where he has not gone. She has "played" the lines. She has also engaged in a completely different way with the newspaper she was reading in scene 1. She has finally

read the "script," and this rehearsal has also been about how you learn something from the script. For a writer such as Ōta, the rehearsal is also an insight into his sparing use of words. The scene takes many minutes of many repetitions before the people start playing, start embodying the words. They are speaking a very short script, yet to live it they need to rehearse many of its words many times.

When we rehearsed this scene, we read the visual score of the video to understand the tempo of the scene and its variations in resonance, but since none of us speak Japanese, we did not know the exact timing of word to movement. Taking the video score as a guide, we built a form for the scene, only later realizing that the meta level of the scene is itself about building form in rehearsal. M2 takes the gestures and words, and in the doing of the form, repeating it, he moves his daily situation into something richer, more expansive. When he plays with W2, he teaches her through repetition to find a way of feeling something emerge from the mundane material he uses so that it becomes more than it is in the daily. The form gives the spoken words and gestures a life of their own, beyond the immediacy of survival, so that he and she are creating/absorbing energy. You lose your daily self so you can play with another person, and the activity takes you out of normalized time.

The actor who played M2, John Zibell, is a highly experienced New York actor who specializes in an experimental improvisation that depends on techniques for remaining open to the ways the materials in the theatre ecology can change what happens—and change the actor and the actor's relations on and with the stage. W2 was played by Melissa Cunha, a much younger actor who was working on a graduate degree in drama and acting. Possibly because of the disparity in their theatre experience, the scene took a long time to come into the kind of energy we all felt in the video score of Ōta's production. Our first production in Davis, California, felt as if the form we had created was there so that the actors could do things with it to make things happen. But in the Ōta production, it was clear that the actors trusted the form to do the work for them. It was not until the production in Bogotà, Colombia, that the actors in this scene were able to let the form do its work.

When the form was being used to make something happen, the relationship between the two actors became one in which M2 "teaches" W2 how to repeat and learn. Eventually, W2 "masters" the form and does something unexpected. When the actors finally worked out how to trust the form, they developed a playfulness in which they stayed with a moment in the two scripts (the verbal written text and the visual/oral video text) and waited to see where it would take them. This kind of play asks the audience to go into the process, and if successful, it invites them to lose themselves in a moment rather than try to consume it. There is no "where" to go, so there's "everywhere." For the audience it is another way of feeling what happens if you stay with your self. The actors in the video of Ōta's production become mirrors. They were able to repeat with an apparent lack of difference, or a virtuosity of sameness in the repetition—which is, of course, impossible. But because there is no apparent difference in the form, there is nothing new to see, and you get lost in what you do

see and in feeling what this does to you. You ask what you are looking at in the mirror, and the sameness makes it strange.

For a Euro-American trained actor, foregrounding the difference in repetition, rather than simply letting the difference happen, is a technique often encouraged in rehearsal. Yet the meta level of this scene in *Elements* asks for the play of that happening. Audiences, especially in California, enjoyed the scene, found it exciting, fascinating, titillating, energy-raising. They were probably not going toward the meditative merging of the Ōta production but going to a place where they recognized the virtuosity of difference. One can argue that this is less interesting than the virtuosity of sameness, but it intrigues and involves a US audience. Nevertheless, the audiences for the second production, in Colombia, were also drawn into the more playful activities of the scene, although there was less laughter and more attention to what was happening. It may have been the willingness of those audiences to play that encouraged the actors to leave the virtuosity of difference behind. Ōta is structuring visceral experiences, discomfort, a moment when the audience has no way back except to their body. The difficulty of the iterations of the scene is that you cannot easily interpret them, yet the actor has to act them without knowing what the audience will make of their acting. To put aside this control over what "meaning" is undercuts much of the training of a Euro-American actor and asks a Euro-American-trained audience to do something completely unfamiliar.

Howling in the Moonlight

If, for my dramaturgy, scene 1 makes present a commentary on the generation of dramatic time and space, and scene 4 offers the possibility of exploring the rehearsal of a rehearsal, then scene 6, "Howling in the Moonlight," has become a way of thinking about how the theatrical "real" can happen.[6] For me, directing is all about the audience, and this scene asks how the fictiveness of the stage and its particular reality work to create something for the audience. The Mother character, or W1, comes into the sand area of the stage and enters the scene. We know she has left her home to walk somewhere, and while she may hope that the walking will change something in her life, she does not know where she is going. Unexpectedly, a ball drops out of the sky. From that moment, she begins to act out her internal feelings, her need and yearning, by building a fictive body on the sand. She kicks the ball gently downstage right, and taking off her coat, she lays it on the ground so the ball becomes the "head" of a person. She goes further, takes her sunglasses out of her purse, and puts them on the ball, and so on until she has created a body. Then she lies beside the effigy she has created.

Heather Nolan acted this process not as if the character thinks the effigy is a real body but as if it gives her a closeness she yearns for but does not have with her family. She lies beside it, holds the sleeve as its "hand," and falls asleep. On some level, it becomes a dream the audience can dream, in between the physicalized yearning of the effigy and her just lying

there. At that moment, Woman4 (W4), played by Caro Novella, comes in. This character does not simply walk into the scene, but her body has been called into the reality that has been created as if the dream is pulling her in. When W4 approaches the sleeping W1, she clearly recognizes where she is going. She realizes who W1 is, and there is a warmth there. Even if the W4 character has been called into the scene, she has an independence, and quite a different energy to W1. W4 smiles, and lays down on top of the effigy, and as she holds W1's hand, the effigy and character become about flesh and blood, and something to build a conversation upon. The action is a reality made on stage for the audience. At the same time, it is about how the actors work with the scripts and scores that they use. They copy the actions and gestures until these become part of their body, they have to dream them, in the sense of a person who learns a language and recognizes that they are beginning to "know" the language when they start dreaming in it. The audience watches this embodiment of some new reality. The stage calls the audience in, and the audience calls their self into it. If they come into the theatre with nothing, they will leave with something. Each person in the audience has their own calling, but there's also a communal sitting or watching.

The story of the scene follows the two women as they reminisce, get upset, remember something from their joint past and start howling as if they are dogs howling at the moon—which makes them feel better. Ōta had previously worked with these two characters in an earlier play, *Plastic Rose*, but this scene plays out at a different point in the women's lives. In *Elements*, they are revisiting a conversation from the past, and while there is some kind of understanding, they are searching for each other at this later age. They do not say "It is you," but ask "Is it you?" Both are trying to find a way to the energy of each other from their younger selves, and each wonders if there is something that will grow between them now or not. If this happens to the characters, for the audience it is about how you tell stories, how you make a reality, and bring it into your life. The scene is slow and not much "happens," but you see "something happening." The actual number of words is small, but they are repeated and repeated, engendering different meanings. For an audience the question becomes: why does this matter now on stage?

From the story, an audience member knows that even when younger, they reached out to each other as women who are alone, trying to find love and companionship. But in the past, it never got to that stage, was never requited. Here, they again try to find the love they have not had. In the past, literally in *Plastic Rose*, they talked about howling at the moon but never did so. Here in *Elements* they do. They get past social constriction, become playful in a space that is both real and not real. As they "become" dogs releasing their bodies to howl in the moonlight, it is animal. The moon is shining, far away. They reach it over distances, and way beyond their social lives, they make a unity. The reality of a "unity" that is appearing on stage for the audience happens all the time in a play, but here the howling is also an enacting of that appearance of theatrical reality.

As a director, I became fond of the different energies of each actor. Heather Nolan is not demonstrative gesturally or verbally, so the internal working of the character is harder to identify. But her work invites you to put your feelings onto her. I can watch her body and make up whatever I learn about her inner impulse. For example, there is so much time for the audience to fill between her kicking the soccer ball and then placing it on the sand. Or, when she takes off her coat, it is not a spur-of-the-moment action, but more a divesting, the actor's body taking off a layer and putting that layer onto the sand so that it generates into a skin or a body as she lays it down. When she laid down her body beside the coat, it was with the same energy that she had laid down the coat. Holding the sleeve of the coat made it feel like an actual body, but not a real body. It was extraordinarily tender, but there was no way of knowing if the actor was tender toward it, so there is space for the audience to infuse the effigy with their own feeling of yearning or need.

Both Nolan and Caro Novella have extensive knowledge and experience of, respectively, acting, and performance and dance. They are also culturally quite distinctive in the way they hold themselves, one being from the United States and the other from Catalonia. Although their bodies carried different energies, they developed a rapport, and a way of working with each other, listening and speaking to each other, that did not involve me. Yet as the director/dramaturge, it was this difference in energy that I was looking for, because it was also the key to the Ōta production of this scene. Nolan acts not by reacting but by "doing." Novella always feels more part of a vibrant current in ongoing living. For me, it was important that when Novella entered, acting W4, the character was leading the scene, and had flesh and blood and sexual energy, while W1 was almost ghostlike. Yet in the video, midway through the scene, this leading-following shifts, and suddenly the body of W1 takes over and becomes more animated while W4 becomes more reactive. There are many aspects, from the actors' backgrounds, training, and experience, as well as from the verbal script, that contributed to this shift, but the visual score of the video was key to our realizing some of the spirit of the Japanese production.

When we rehearsed, we worked again from the outside in as we had with previous scenes. We looked at the video of Ōta's production and repeated not only the corporeal and vocal details of the movements but also their temporality. Each actor was responsible for their character, and then we tried to make sure that the relationship between them scored together into a synchronicity. These were the technical qualities, and as before, we used them to build a form for the scene that we came to an agreement about. Once we had the form, it was a matter of practising it so that it became embodied, so the actor could relax into it, focus their particular energy into the spirit of the movement and the words. Embodiment meant that the form would begin to drive the actions of the actor, and their external expression would become the expression of an internal energy. This process is what I would expect a Japanese actor/company also to engage in, although the technical qualities used to build a form would probably be different.

As with previous scenes, the resonance with Ōta's production lies not only in the distinct energy of each actor but also in the way the actors' energy presences their body. The acting in scene 6 became a mirror for the audience but in a way different to scene 2. In the story, the two women striving for a closeness are like old friends meeting after a long absence who are trying to rekindle a relationship. Their conversation becomes a series of reminiscences as they recall the events of the past and keep missing a recognition of what the other remembers. Unlike scene 2, they are not playing with the virtuosity of sameness but repeating each other's lines as if trying for a unity. For an audience watching for the story, the frustration of the actors plays out the difficulty of their attempt. At the same time, on the meta level of the scene, their conversation does not work out precisely because they cannot achieve the unity they want until they leave their human bodies behind and become animals.

Partly because we could not understand the words being spoken on the video, and because Japanese words are of a different duration and have different qualities to words in English, we had to look to the spirit of the scene yet keep it expressive through a Euro-American body. The "howling" scene in Ōta's production had the same "form," being acted upstage with the actors on all fours, facing away from the audience, but the rhythm that emerged was quite different. We explored the howling through what it was that the actors' bodies wanted to do with the form of the sound and movement. When they were howling, there was a tension in how the backbone was concave because the head and neck were turning up toward the moon—how do you get a lungful, a full throat of sound, with the body extended in a way that compresses the larynx? It is difficult to howl in this position, so there was an effort or odd physicality involved, that we don't experience in our everyday life.

Because they were positioned upstage for most of the howling, with their hind quarters facing the audience, the butt became a physically expressive part of their bodies in the way it moved side to side or up and down. Because the audience saw them on all fours, from behind, it allowed them to imagine what the rest of this strange body was doing. The physical unfamiliarity of the human body and voice in this position helped express the abandonment and joy in each other—doing this sound beyond themselves yet in consonance with each other. In the howling, the two women find the unity they are seeking. They create the reality they yearn for. Although the enaction of that appearance of reality occurs during the howling, all through the scene, there is a theatrical reality that is appearing on stage for the audience. It is as if the actors have made it possible for the audience to see their self, in the process of the characters working on becoming their selves together.

Resonances of the Body

Directing *Elements* has opened up some new ways of thinking about theatrical process, partly because of the differences between the Japanese training and performance with which we engaged and our own, but also because of the similarities. Attempting here to articulate the theatre practices of the *Elements* company that performed in California and Colombia has

made me far more aware of aspects of time, space, rehearsal, and theatrical "realities" inherent in performance, because it is these aspects that I can recognize working differently, yet similarly, in Ōta's own production. Yet these transcultural resonances arrived from the body of each actor as it found an energy in the words, the sounds, the gestures, and the movements of the video of the Japanese production and the English language translation. In rehearsal, we found ourselves collaborating not around the meaning of the printed script or video but around their forms. And, as with all embodied work, we repeated and repeated the forms until they resonated with breath, movement, vibration, gesture, and could carry the energy that was needed. What is particular about Ōta's *Elements* is the way both verbal and visual texts have inbuilt repetitions that invite this way of meeting transcultural difference.

Notes

1. Ōta was recognized in Japan as a significant director and was invited to Tadashi Suzuki's first Togo Festival (1982) as one of two Japanese directors (the other was Terayama Shūji) in an international field that included Meredith Monk, Robert Wilson, Peter Brook, and Tadeusz Kantor among other practitioners. For a more detailed biography, see http://www.glopad.org/jparc/en/node/23029.

2. Script from Ōta (2006, 238) as translated by Mari Boyd, a preeminent scholar of Ōta's work (Boyd 2006) and translator of many of his plays.

3. Ōta Shōgo's *Elements* was written and first produced in 1994. The video used as a score for our production is from a 1994 performance at Spiral Hall (Tokyo), starring Segawa Tetsuya, Shinagawa Tōru, Ōsugi Sazanami, Suzuki Rieko, Tanigawa Kiyomi, Kino Hana, and Andō Tomoko. The video is on disc 3 of Ōta (2008). During rehearsals, in addition to the visual and verbal scripts, we also engaged with Bleeker (2008); Knowles (2014); Massumi (2014); Quinn (1995); and States (1987).

4. This first example looks specifically at the opening repetitions in scene 1, "Breakfast" (Ōta 2006, 231–32).

5. This second example analyzes the opening of scene 4, "Tender Meat" (Ōta 2006, 235–36).

6. This third example focuses on the opening of scene 6, "Howling at the Moonlight" (Ōta 2006, 242–46).

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