

Kaiki Shoku (Eclipse)

Judith van Praag

The Aono Jikken Ensemble reminds me in more than one way of Le Theatre du Soleil (not to be confused with Cirque du Soleil), the multidisciplinary Parisian troupe headed by Ariane Mnouchkine. Both companies create entertaining sociopolitical performances, in both musicians and actors play equally important roles, and each makes use of an intricate soundscape created with a multitude of instruments from around the world.

"Kaiki Shoku" (Eclipse) is AEJ's second of an ongoing cycle of performance works based on the lives of Asian women who have been marginalized by history and society.

The title of the work, and central metaphor, was inspired by Raicho Hiratsuka, a feminist writer who wrote that "In the beginning, women were the sun... Today women are the moon."

"Eclipse" is based on the true story of journalist and activist Suga Kanno who plotted to kill the emperor, and in 1911 became the first female political prisoner to be executed in Japan's modern history.

Writer and director William Blauvelt asked himself, "What would make an ordinary, disenfranchised person take up violence as a tool for change?" He considers Suga Kanno's story relevant for contemporary audiences because today Suga Kanno would be considered a terrorist and would-be suicide bomber. He likens the situation in Suga Kanno's Japan to present day America, with wars of aggression abroad, and social-political-religious-cultural upheaval at home.

Aided by choreographer Yoko Murao, Blauvelt interweaves Kanno's gritty Meiji Era (1868-1912) story of survival and resistance with dreamy tales from ancient mythology, focusing on the sun goddess Amaterasu (stylized performance by dk pan), who's considered to be the most important of deities and a direct ancestor of all Japanese emperors.

The play is set amid the tumultuous changes sweeping Japan at the turn of the last century, as seen through the prism of the social, cultural, and political movements of the time.

Much of the story is told in Suga Kanno's own words, taken from interrogation and court transcripts, as well as her letters, articles and the only surviving fragment of her prison journal written during the last week of her life.

William Blauvelt credits dramaturge Naho Shioya with translating Japanese texts as well as Suga's original prison journals. This undoubtedly serves Naho Shioya, the actress, well in portraying a more complex Suga, the woman who went into history as the lunatic who wanted to kill the emperor.

"Eclipse" opens with the dance of an ancient shamaness, performed by Mizue Trinidad, who also plays Suga's sister Hideko, Uzume the goddess of mirth, and a Japanese feminist speaker modeled on writer Akiko Yosano.

We're introduced to Suga Kanno in prison, where she reads, writes and studies English, "I should learn a foreign language before I die."

Suga's interrogator and prosecutor is portrayed by Michael J. Perrone (also responsible for the voices of Judge and a Policeman), whose feet keep tap on the actor's emotions.

Mary Cutrera plays Tsukiyomi the moon god to dk pan's sun goddess Amaterasu, and Marie Broderick as Susano-o the storm god wrestles both (Broderick also plays Suga & Hideko's Stepmother; a Christian Reformer and a Socialist Demonstrator).

In flashbacks Suga's story unfolds as that of an abused Cinderella with a political agenda. A scene between Suga and her lover, performed by Sam Tsubota (who also plays a Miner who attacked Suga, and gives voices to a guard and a policeman), reaches a beautiful high point, the arch of a perfect marriage.

The original and adapted score is performed live by Michael Shannon (erhu, dilruba, bass, rejek, beene, zurna, shinai, harmonium); Esther Sugai (flutes, clarinet, hichiriki, zurna, melodica, accordion); Susie Kozawa (sound toys, objects & inventions); Marcia Takamura (koto, shamisen, sanshin, biwa); Stan Shikuma (taiko, percussion, sho); Dean Moore (drums, gongs, cymbals, percussion); and One World Taiko [Gary Tsujimoto & Nancy Ozaki] (taiko, percussion, clarinet, sheng).

Film/video projections by John D. Pai, lighting by Mark Baratta, costumes by Kikuko Dewa, musical direction by Esther Sugai, sound design by Susie Kozawa, dramaturgy by Naho Shioya, and stage management by Rachel Rene Araucto.

The performances are not recommended for young children. Although not explicit, themes of sexuality and violence are presented.

Previously published on June 1, 2005 in the International Examiner. © 2005 Judith van Praag, All Rights Reserved.
www.dutchessabroad.com