

A Message from the IATC Japan on the 3/11 Earthquake

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First of all, may I express deep gratitude for the kind messages that we received after the quake on March 11. So many friends sent us words of compassion and encouragement from all over the world. The show of support reconfirmed that we are not alone in the world.

The massive earthquake that hit eastern Japan at 14:26, March 11 with a magnitude of 9.0 devastated the Tohoku district. Extraordinary tsunami left gigantic scars on the heels of the quake. The number of dead or missing exceeded 29,000 as of March 31, and 200,000 people are reported to be displaced. This unprecedented disaster sent shock waves across the Japanese archipelago. Nuclear power plants in Fukushima were severely damaged, leading to serious leakage of radioactive substances. The ongoing situation in Fukushima threatens the human beings and their posterities not only in Japan but also its Asian neighbours and effectively the world at large, urging us to reconsider our energy policies once again. It was in 1986 that the Chernobyl disaster made us seriously wonder if the survival of human beings was possible. The Fukushima disaster confronts us with the same question.

In Tokyo and its surrounding areas, transport services were disrupted, severely debilitating the functions of the Metropolis. Street lights were turned off in response to the government's call for power saving, and the darkness as well as the cold in the distressed areas sent chills down the backs of those watching media coverage on television. Towns are now in ruins, and the invisible threat of radioactivity is very much in the minds of the Japanese people. Emotional disorders among the evacuees are likely to worsen.

In the face of such catastrophic disaster, what can we do as people committed to theatre? What is the role of theatre critics? These questions keep coming back to me everyday, and I keep thinking as if in a maze without an exit. Fortunately all our fellow theatre critics in Japan, most of them concentrated in Tokyo and its surrounding prefectures, were safe. Their rooms and studies may be in total disarray from the quake, but compared with the dire situation that the evacuees in Tohoku are still facing, life in Tokyo is relatively undisturbed. However, the bleak road to reconstruction and the radioactivity that threatens life are urgent issues for theatre as well.

I remember 16 years ago. On January 17, 1995, the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake that hit western Japan resulted in 6,434 deaths and devastated Kobe, one of the most populated cities in Japan. Many theatre people were affected. I think it is worth recalling here two stages that were performed around the time of this disaster.

Ghetto, written by Joshua Sobol and directed by Tamiya Kuriyama, portrayed the struggle of the Jews who tried to protect human dignity through theatre in the concentration camp. The piece was produced by a theatre in Kobe, and it is easy to imagine that those who were involved in the piece kept questioning themselves what theatre could mean to the devastated city where even the basic needs of life were not met. *Ghetto*, however, turned out to be just the right piece for the post-quake *zeitgeist*, winning almost all the important theatre awards of the year.

The other piece was from Dumb Type in Kyoto. Their *S/N* made the final performance at the Spiral Hall in Tokyo on the eve of the Kobe earthquake. Their stage came to be highly acclaimed on the world's avant-garde art scene. In *S/N*, Teiji Furuhashi, who had admitted he was HIV positive, depicted the prejudice and discrimination against AIDS. Furuhashi himself performed as an artist who is facing death, asking the vital question: Is art possible?

Ghetto set an example of theatre at a time of crisis, whereas *S/N* asked if theatre, or art in general, could really be relevant in the wake of such a disaster. Of course there were different responses. At a symposium organized by the IATC Japan, some theatre people frankly questioned if theatre might not be powerless at a time of emergency, and it was reported that some went to the most affected areas right away to offer emotional support for children. Attempts were made on the part of playwrights to create a new mode of theatrical language out of their experience of the earthquake. Theatre critics introduced to the public the many new thinkings and theoretical efforts that emerged out of this earthquake. They were, in a sense, the fruits that came out of the debris.

We need theatre all the more at a time of crisis. Theatre is a mode of expression which faces death, and theatre people should embrace it as part of their mission to constantly ask themselves if their stages can really be relevant in the face of any extreme condition. Despite this, at this time of emergency, many had to turn their theatre dark, sometimes for days and sometimes nearly a month. The reasons for their decisions were diverse: safety issues, unstable power supply due to rolling blackouts, and pure artistic

questioning of relevancy theatre can have at a time of crisis.

Whether theatres should open their doors in this unpredictable situation which has already seen many deaths and casualties is a question which admits no definite answer. Situations vary from one company to another, and the final call is up to each individual. So, the one thing people committed to theatre can do is to take this opportunity to question and explore the power of theatre.

On the evening of March 11, when all the transports in Tokyo came to a halt, Sho Ryuzanji's company put on a performance for 21 spectators who had turned up at his studio which holds 70. The audience rallied to show their support for their fringe venue.

In contrast, Hideki Noda, artistic director of Tokyo Metropolitan Art Theatre and arguably the most influential playwright in Japan, suspended the performance of his latest play *To the South* (Minami-e). This decision must have been a difficult one as the play was presentient in asking the future course of Japan when volcanic eruptions and earthquakes are reported to be imminent. He issued a statement following the suspension:

I turned the theatre dark for four days. It was the most uncomfortable period in my life because I had always said, 'Just one candlestick, that's all we need to put on a performance anywhere, anytime – that's what theatre is all about.' But what seems to be happening is I have come to be intimidated by the danger that a single candlestick can pose and, consequently, tied my own hands under the call for self-restraint. (*Asahi Shimbun*, March 21)

Diverse reactions and decisions after the quake from theatre managers and practitioners reminded me of Susan Sontag, who performed *Waiting for Godot* under candle lights in the wartime Sarajevo. Her action showed that theatre is possible in the worst circumstances as long as we have a place to perform and an audience. Some turn themselves into actors; others spectators, and the place they congregate becomes a theatre. In the post-3/11 Japan, where the sense of moaning and calls for restraint are still very much in the air, theatre practitioners and critics alike must resist the temptation of conformity and self-censorship.

Theatre can provide what post-3/11 Japan needs most: an *asile* where people can gather, discuss, and exchange views. Providing sanctuary in times of crisis is intrinsic to theatre. What theatre critics can do,

then, is to help theatre organize forums for discussion and debate, draw out different views, and put them back into wider discourse so that what theatre enables us to do may become clearer.

Japan is a country poor in natural resources. Its food self-sufficiency ratio is low. Sensitive to every seasonal nuance, Japanese people have historically seen nature not as the object of exploitation but as a partner to live in harmony with. Many of our communities still cherish the unite-we-stand-divided-we-fall spirit. It is out of this national sensibility that our theatre has become part of us.

Japanese people will be resilient and patient in our road for reconstruction. Kobe was successfully reconstructed in 16 years. Emotional scars will not go away easily, of course, but the disaster will bring about useful lessons and insights. Theatre may not always bring prompt relief, but will surely provide therapy in the long run.

The 21 spectators who rallied to the small fringe venue in Tokyo on the evening of March 11 must have been engaged in the serious question of what theatre as *praxis* permits: how it enables us to form our lives, what is possible, and what is not. This, I think, is how theatrical imagination should work -- a thinking which is open to the world. May we have faith in theatre and may art always be with us.

(Translation: Manabu Noda)