



## Profile

### Yoshihiro Kurita

Made directing

debut with a production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Formed "AUN" Theater Company with Kotaro Yoshida in 1997.

Presently associate director of the Niigata City Performing Arts Center Ryutopia.

Main

works (productions) include *Pieta*, *Taisho Yotsuya Kaidan*, *Orphans*, *Richard III*, *Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Hamlet*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, "Niigata Community Musical *Fadet*," "Musical *Sans Famille*," *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, "Theater Company 'Tobiraza' 20th anniversary production of *Fortinbras*" etc.

# Artist Interview アーティストインタビュー

2005.3.16



## A meeting of Eastern and Western classics The Noh-staged Shakespeare of Yoshihiro Kurita

東西の古典の出会い 栗田芳宏が仕掛けた、能楽堂のシェイクスピアシリーズ\*

The "Ryutopia Noh Theater Shakespeare Series" produced by Niigata City Performing Arts Center is an ambitious set of works that explores new potential in the classical repertoire by bringing Shakespeare's plays to the traditional Japanese Noh stage with its unique six-meter square configuration. The dramaturge and director who adapted the Shakespeare and staged these productions is Yoshihiro Kurita, an artist who made a name for himself in traditional Japanese *Bu*yo dance and the Kabuki theater of Ennosuke Ichikawa before moving into the field of contemporary theater. In this month's Artist Interview, Kurita talks with a fellow artist involved in Ennosuke Kabuki, Kensuke Yokouchi, about the things he discovered by bringing Shakespeare to the Noh stage.

(Interviewer: the playwright and director Kensuke Yokouchi)

Yokouchi: What initially got you involved in bringing Shakespeare to the Noh theater?

Kurita: It was quite simple, really. There just happened to be a Noh theater facility at the Niigata City Performing Arts Center where I have been associate director for the past six years. (laughs)

Yokouchi: Because it was right there and empty? (laughs)

Kurita: That's right. (laughs) Actually, there had been a plan in the works earlier to stage a production of *Macbeth*, and there just happened to be this Noh theater. Niigata is a region that has a long association with Noh. Zeami [the father of Noh] was exiled to the Niigata island of Sado and there are still over thirty Noh stages remaining on the island today. "*Takigi Noh*" [outdoor Noh performance] is also popular and it has long been a mark of one's status as a Noh performer to have performed in Niigata. That is why a Noh theater was built into the Niigata City Performing Arts Center in the first place, and the proximity of this theater was an important factor in the decision to do these Shakespeare productions in it.

Yokouchi: Even if the Noh theater wasn't the origin of the plan for these productions, the fact that you were able to use it is really something. That is surely one of the advantages of being in Niigata. There are not many places where you can get access to a Noh theater like that. Back in the 1970s there were precedents with people like Shogo Ota and Tadashi Suzuki staging avant-garde plays in Noh theaters, but to bring Shakespeare to the Noh stage like you have done this time certainly couldn't be done without some significant changes in the conceptual approach.

Kurita: The idea of trying to stage the Western classics of Shakespeare in the Noh theater space where your stage area consists only of a six-meter square main stage area defined by the four pillars and the entrance "bridge" (*hashigakari*) walkway certainly involves enough limitations to make most people say, "Hey, wait a minute. Isn't that going too far?" But that wasn't how I reacted. Rather, I thought of it as an interesting concept from the beginning.

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#### Kensuke Yokouchi

Born 1961, director, playwright,  
representative of Theater company  
"Tobiraza"

Began working in theater at Atsugi High School in Kanagawa Pref. and received Excellence Award in a drama contest for his debut performance in *Sanshouo Dazo!*.

Formed the company "Zennin Kaigi" in 1982 while a student at Waseda University and proceeded to present productions of plays characterized by strong narrative and unique characters. Changed the company name to "Tobiraza" with the specific aim of committing to the company system.

Pursued career as a commercial playwright creating plays in a style described as "easy to watch, fun and easy to understand" and

supplied works to groups like the Super Kabuki theater of Ennosuke Ichikawa and other commercial theaters. Also active as a television personality and instructor of theater workshops. Winner of the Kishida Kunio Drama Award for *The King of La Mancha's New Clothes*. Became the youngest ever winner of the Otani Takejiro Award for the Super Kabuki play *Shin Sangokushi*.

I had done Shakespeare and other foreign plays in translation before, and I think I had begun to feel that there was a limit to what could be done. I guess I had come to feel a basic contradiction in the act of performing a play from a translated script that was not written originally in your native language. Even if you got the actors to use lines that had a natural sense of daily life, the historical background would still be missing and that in itself is enough to undermine the reality and make a production hopeless.

But, with Shakespeare's plays there is a sense of un-reality or other-worldliness to the words to begin with, and that can make it all more poetic, musical and fanciful. You also have jesters and ghosts and nymphs and witches making appearances, so that it is in effect a world of the imagination from the outset.

As for the Noh theater, it is a stage where traditionally almost no decoration is allowed. It is what you could call a "naked theater" where all you have basically is words as your tools to try to create a world of image. In other words, the Noh theater is a space of image, and I think that fits perfectly with Shakespeare. My hope was that this marriage of Shakespeare's plays with the Noh theater would produce a new mixed breed of original Shakespeare that could not be experienced in Britain or anywhere else in Japan, just on our stage.

The originality I have in mind is not one based on the miss-match between Shakespeare and the Noh theater space. What I wanted to do was not something in the vein of putting Western consommé soup in a Japanese lacquer bowl but to use the same materials and create a unique new soup that is neither Japanese miso nor Western consommé.

**Yokouchi:** Is it really true that you can't decorate the Noh stage with any stage art at all? For example, it would seem there might be cases where you would want to drive in a few nails for a set.

**Kurita:** It is forbidden. The basic rule is that no decoration of the Noh theater is allowed. With our production of *King Lear* this time we premiered in Niigata and then toured Japan starting at the Umewaka Noh Gakuin Kaikan Theater in Tokyo. In the process we found that different Noh theaters had different rules. At some, we were told you can't stride the entrance bridge railing. For this *King Lear* production we had adopted the suggestion of the actress Kayoko Shiraishi that we have the king come on stage from a number of different directions during the course of the play, but we were not able to work this device in freely because of Noh theater rules like one forbidding stage entrances from the audience side. It is a fact that use of Noh theaters by non-Noh productions like ours is generally frowned upon and subjected to strict requirements.

**Yokouchi:** Most Japanese today are far more likely to have seen a Broadway musical than a Noh play, and for most of us Noh is a more "foreign" art than Western theater. Did you undertake any particular study or training in Noh/Kyogen in preparation for these Shakespeare productions?

**Kurita:** No. But since the kabuki dance that I was a performer of is based in Noh originally, I had some knowledge of the basic rules and history of Noh. I watched a few videos of performances and such, and it doesn't take much study to realize that there are rules of performance that have been handed down over the centuries. But, if you start obsessing about elements of the Noh style like the one-breath pause and the pattern for

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Niigata City Performing Arts Center  
production  
Ryutopia Noh Theater Shakespeare Series  
*King Lear*

Written by W. Shakespeare  
Translation: Kazuko Matsuoka  
Dramaturge, Director: Yoshihiro Kurita  
Music: Akira Miyagawa  
Costume: Shingo Tokihiro  
Stylist: Junko Agatsuma  
Producer: Hiroshi Sasabe  
Cast: Kayoko Shiraishi, etc.  
Production: Ryutopia (Niigata City  
Performing Arts Center)  
Dec. 2004 Niigata premiere at Ryutopia  
Noh Theater  
Dec. 2004 Tokyo performance at  
Ume-waka Nohgaku Gakuin Kaikan Theater  
Jan. 2005 Osaka performance at Otsuki  
Noh Theater  
Jan. 2005 Nagoya performance at Nagoya  
Noh Theater  
'Niigata City Performing Arts Center



Niigata City Performing Arts Center  
production  
Ryutopia Noh Theater Shakespeare Series  
*Macbeth*

Written by W. Shakespeare  
Translation: Kazuko Matsuoka  
Dramaturge, Director, Choreographer:  
Yoshihiro Kurita  
Music: Akira Miyagawa  
Producer: Hiroshi Sasabe  
Production: Ryutopia (Niigata City  
Performing Arts Center)  
May 2004 Niigata premiere at Ryutopia  
Noh Theater  
June 2004 Tokyo performance at  
Tessenkai Nohgaku Kenshujo  
'Niigata City Performing Arts Center

taking a single step, you will become so restricted that you can't do anything really. On the other hand, there are advantages from not having excessive knowledge about the tradition; there are new things that can be born from a fresh approach. Those were the things I wanted to allow to develop. Of course, there are cases where you can be laughed at for what you don't know, but I was interested in exploring new possibilities and adaptations that could be possible in the working space of the Noh theater.

Yokouchi: To tell you the truth, I thought that perhaps you had gone off on a retreat and spent a year or so in training like a monk before beginning these productions. (laughs)

Kurita: I was once asked by someone, "Kurita, how much do you really know about the traditional Japanese style (known as "Wa"). At the time I answered that I didn't know much. But that question also prompted me to consider again what the essence of Japanese *Wa* is and how much we really need to know about it or be concerned with it. In other words, what should a style "of the Japanese and for the Japanese" be, and how much should we focus on that idea to begin with.

Yokouchi: You are one who applied himself seriously to the arts of Japanese *Buyo* (traditional dance) and Kabuki before coming to contemporary theater. So, even if you haven't done any specific study of Noh, you need to show people that you are not just some director with no knowledge of the traditional arts who is jumping onto the Noh stage like a punk rocker and doing his thing. Otherwise you are likely to be misunderstood. For example, anyone might know the concept of what the Noh stage and its entrance bridge are for, but you have an intimate physical knowledge of what these places are and what should take place there. You bring to the stage your experience from your years of training in Ennosuke's Kabuki and with the main branch of the Fujima school of traditional *Buyo* dance. Watching these Shakespeare productions I got a strong sense of that experience at work.

Kurita: It is true that I know clearly the difference between the *shosa* (the steps and movements of Kabuki and Noh actors) of *Buyo* and those of Noh, and I know the difference between Noh and Kyogen. There is the fact that my grandmother was a *Buyo* artist, but even more important is the four years of intensive training I spent as an apprentice of the main branch of the Fujima school of *Buyo*. There I had a chance to get to know the Kabuki actors who came to train with us, and I also saw how hard the head artists struggle to bring a new work into the repertoire. Looking back I realize that I have actually spent 20 years in the world of *Wa*, so I thought that if there was anyone who could use the Noh stage for new theater I might be one of the qualified ones. And since I had studied so long under Murasaki Fujima and Ennosuke Ichikawa, I couldn't really be likened to a punk rocker. (laughs)

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### Data

Niigata City Performing Arts Center  
"Ryutopia"

Opened: Oct. 1998

This culture complex built by the city of Niigata includes a concert hall (1,900 seats), a theater (900 seats) and a Noh theater (380 seats). Ryutopia is administered by the Niigata Municipal Foundation for the Promotion of Arts and Culture as one comprehensive facility along with the adjoining Niigata Municipal Music Culture Center, which includes specialized music practice rooms and a performance hall. The Center's theater division is led by the producer Hiroshi Sasabe as artistic director, with the director Yoshihiro Kurita serving as associate director. The artistic director for the dance division is Jo Kanamori. The total annual budget for the Center is about 400 million yen. The Music division has a Junior Orchestra for young students of music which is based at the Music Culture Center and it also operates a music school for elementary and middle school students and produces original musicals. The Center also creates original productions to tour Japan and has presented a Shakespeare series at its Noh theater featuring famous quest actors.

\* *The King of La Mancha's New Clothes*

Written by Kensuke Yokouchi

Premiere 1991

Yokouchi: When you actually started trying to stage Shakespeare on the Noh stage, what problems did you find?

Kurita: The biggest problem was the play itself, as it is written. In a regular theater you can use the script as Shakespeare wrote it, but works for Noh theater are only about 30 minutes long in the case of Kyogen and at most an hour in the case of a Noh play. You can't put on a 3-hour play in a Noh theater.

Also, the Noh theater is in a sense a place of ritual or ceremony, so you need to introduce *texte r gie* and find ways to make it ceremonial and stylized. To do this you create an outside framework to the world of the players and then you come up against the problem of who is dictating or narrating the events taking place in the world of the players.

Yokouchi: What do you mean by that?

Kurita: Since the Noh theater is a ceremonial world there is no way to just put on a realistic straight-out-of life type play. For one thing, you only have the [single] entrance bridge as an entrance to the stage, so you can't even have characters make entrances and exits from the wings like in a regular theater. You need to stylize the play so that it becomes enclosed in a particular world-frame, and to do this you need to create the "eye" that watches over this world you have created and dictates or narrates its events.

In the case of the first play of our series, *Macbeth*, you have the three witches who are manipulating the world of *Macbeth* and his wife. But I felt that just having three witches didn't give enough 3-dimensionality to the staging, so I introduced "mirror direction" for them and had them take on the aspect of six witches instead of three.

In *King Lear* I introduced three shadow figures for the king and in turn eliminated the appearances by Kent, Gloucester and Edmund, having their information supplied instead by the shadow figures so that the play could be reduced to a story of just Lear and his three daughters.

For our third production, *A Winter's Tale*, the style is one in which a mother is relating a tale to her children, so I want to use a stylization where the children appear as *kotodama*, or spirits of word, who tell the story of the play. In other words, you simply can't put on a play in a Noh theater unless you clearly create this kind of external [narrative] framework. To do this I make use of *texte r gie* or perhaps directorial restructuring is closer. What I do is to rewrite the script by putting the scenes aside and by taking out just their core, with which to create the world of the play.

Yokouchi: (With a big nod) I see. But why does there have to be someone to dictate or narrate what goes on in that world? That is something that doesn't apply in Kabuki, does it.

Kurita: That's right. The Noh theater, as a theater (stage) itself is different from what we usually think of as a theater. This is because its roots are the ceremonial platforms of ancient Japan where ritual dances were performed to summon up rain or appeal to the gods for a good rice harvest. That is why you cannot marry it easily with the plays that seek dramatic realism.

Yokouchi: So, what can an audience get from a play enacted on the Noh stage?

Kurita: Before considering what the audience can get, I think it is important that the audience bring imagination to the viewing of this kind of play. The

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audience of a Noh theater comes to it knowing from the outset that they are entering a boldly created fictitious world, and this should constitute a different set of rules applying to the people of the audience themselves compared to those of proscenium theater.

For example, if there is a real chair on the stage in proscenium theater, one centimeter of that chair is the same one centimeter as that of the chairs the audience are sitting in. But on the unadorned Noh stage the same one centimeter can imply one millimeter, or one kilometer. The lighting on the Noh stage is mostly just the natural or fixed lighting of the theater space itself, so you can't use lighting effects in your staging. The only tools you have are the bodies of the actors and how they are directed or how they act.

Yokouchi: And language.

Kurita: Yes. You only have the body and word. So, you can make it a joint effort between the actors, with the images they project, and the audience, who bring the imagination with which they receive those images.

Yokouchi: So, that is the kind of space a Noh theater is.

Kurita: Yes. I believe that is the kind of space it is.

Yokouchi: Are there any other types of plays besides Shakespeare that could possibly be performed on the Noh stage?

Kurita: That's difficult. When I think about it, it might be possible to stage Greek tragedy on the Noh stage, but I don't imagine it would be more effective than Shakespeare.

I think Shakespeare's plays are ones where the director and actors can create very original performances. Whereas many playwrights write down everything about how they want the play to be staged, there is actually very little notation of that type in Shakespeare's scripts. So a director or actor can feel that they are being left free to take it from there and present it as they please. This incompleteness is appealing. Although researchers and translators might say that this is not true. (laughs)

Yokouchi: In Shakespeare, the relationship with the play's structure is often very loosely defined, but each word of the dialogue supports that looseness and adds something on top of it.

Kurita: That is why I believe we should leave the research to the scholars and allow ourselves to enjoy working freely within Shakespeare's world. And I feel it is the same with using the Noh theater.

In this sense, I think your play *The King of La Mancha's New Clothes*, where you stage a play with just a single bed on the empty stage, is a work of imagination that connects to Noh/Kyogen. Because you built the whole world of the play within that one context.

Yokouchi: But that was because I had created a meta-theater work specifically to be performed in the limited small-theater space of The Suzunari, which has no wings and there is no way to change the set during the course of the play. It is true that a specific space can set a story in motion, and I can see how there is a kind of drama that the unique Noh theater itself demands. That is why it would surely be meaningless to try to stage Chekhov in a Noh theater, wouldn't it? And it seems that someone might plan a production for the Noh theater from Yukio Mishima's *Kindai Nohgaku Shu* (Modern Noh Collection), but it wouldn't work, would it?

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- Kurita: Actually there was a proposal to stage *The Cherry Orchard* but it just couldn't be done. (laughs) I read Mishima with the idea of possibly staging it, but I found it wouldn't work. I also found that Dazai's *New Hamlet* was undoable. I guess it is the ambiguity in Shakespeare that makes it suitable for the Noh theater.
- Yokouchi: Even if you depict human relations, the play doesn't get off the ground without a sense of universality, or a worldview.
- Kurita: Yes. But that doesn't mean that I have any intention of using the Noh theater as a place to expound philosophy. Still it is difficult if you don't have a play with a universality that contains those kinds of ideas.
- Yokouchi: I noticed that for your *Macbeth* and *King Lear* productions you held your auditions in Niigata and most of the actors you chose were young people that you have been teaching. It would seem to me that it would be necessary to teach young people like them the kind of stylization the Noh theater demands. Even if it would be impossible to give them a real training in the techniques of Noh/Kyogen, some training in acting technique was necessary wasn't it?
- Kurita: The training of actors is the problem I am most concerned with right now. Once a production has been decided on and the auditions are complete we begin with the training, including voice training, which continues for about three months before performances begin. It would be ideal if we had an ongoing training program in place that the actors would work constantly in and we could have a Noh professional come in and give real lessons in the basics of Noh performance. But for now, all we can do is this training period for each production. One of the difficult things about the Noh theater is that the voice doesn't reach throughout the theater with normal stage voice technique.
- Yokouchi: For example [director] Tadashi Suzuki has made an effort to develop his own style and formats of training called the "Suzuki Method" that is used for training actors. Are you interested in doing something like that?
- Kurita: I have never considered the idea of creating my own style that could be developed into a method. I am interested in the kind of work-by-work creation that interests the audience. So, although there might be some specific rules for the performances of *Macbeth* and *King Lear* this time when they are being staged in Noh theaters, there is not necessarily any staging or directing style that these productions will have in common. The Kurita-ism that you see in *Macbeth* may not be applicable to *King Lear*. The important thing is to look at each individual work in its own context.

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Yokouchi: What about the specifics of the staging in the Noh theater series? What about the lighting, for instance?

Kurita: All we have is the lights built into the ceiling of the roof over the six meter square stage and a few lighting fixtures we hang behind the audience seating area. We can use colored lights, but all we did this time was to think about the brightness of the basic light setting.

Yokouchi: Did you decide on this as a rule?

Kurita: I didn't really decide it. I just had the idea that since we are staging this series in Noh theaters we will basically respect the rules of Noh and attempt to maintain the quality and dignity of the Noh environment. But, if a production comes along where I feel that I want to try some dramatic lighting effects, I may attempt to do that.

Yokouchi: How about music? You have collaborated in the past with Akira Miyagawa in theater musical productions.

Kurita: In the Noh theater series Miyagawa is performing live on a piano placed below the stage. In the *Macbeth* production he played something sounding like a children's song that you could hear all the while the witches were performing their rituals. For *King Lear* there were seven or eight pieces prepared originally but we ended up using only two. Since the shadow figures bring in a shadow world, I began to be concerned about using an instrument like the piano that plays clear melodies or progressions of notes. Perhaps since the Noh theater is a ceremonial or ritual space, instruments like the Japanese drum that encourage more imagination may be better suited.

Yokouchi: The feeling that a piano would fit the Noh stage or not fit it, the feeling that a drum would fit but not a shamisen, the feeling that you had about piano music not fitting *King Lear*, for example, do you think that these are common sensibilities that most Japanese share innately? Or do you think these are sensibilities only known to people who are particularly sensitive to spaces?

Kurita: Music is difficult. If I were to cite one director who has pursued the problem of music with special sensitivity, I might say Peter Brooke. In his production of *The Tragedy of Hamlet* that he staged in a Noh style on a six meter square rug, there were musicians performing live and creating an instrumental effect. The lighting was yellow in tone and simply focused softly over one fixed area. I imagine that as the result of his studies he arrived at the conclusion that this was the kind of music to best accompany Noh style performance. And the instruments used were vague-sounding ones like bells and drums, not a piano.

Yokouchi: How about costumes?

Kurita: In *King Lear* the main characters are the shadow figures, so I had each of them wear a wisdom hat. In other words an eboshi. I drew pictures of what I wanted these hats to look like first.

Yokouchi: Where did the idea for *eboshi* come from?

Kurita: I based them on the *eboshi* worn by the nobility in Japan's Heian Period

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(9th to 11th centuries). And of course the designs also included the original touches of the costume planner. Considering our budget limitations, the types of old clothing (material) we could choose from were limited, and we took functionality into consideration based on different the types of movement we tried. Shoes are not worn on the Noh stage, only *tabi*. So we also had to take into consideration the balance with the footwear. What you have to be careful about when creating costumes like this that are neither kimono or dresses and mix Western and Japanese elements, is to make sure it doesn't look like a fashion show. This is a difficult job ...

Yokouchi: You must have learned some things now having done two productions in this [Shakespeare] series.

Kurita: It has indeed caused me to think a lot about the Noh stage. You know that there is a front and sides to a Noh stage. For example, in theater-in-the-round there is no particular front. But with Noh theater, when you face the front you are being seen in side profile from the sides, and if you stage a scene with the actors facing the side they will be seen in side view by the audience to the front. This is something you always have to be conscious of. It is more difficult than a round stage because you can't show a bad side from any angle. I would change the position of my seat when directing to check the different angles, but there would be times when a composition looked good from the front but didn't come together from the side.

Also, you have the dead zones of the entrance bridge and the four pillars. In our Noh theater in Niigata one of the pillars can be removed, so we don't have a problem there. How do you make an actor stand when they are behind one of these dead spots, and if you can't leave them there long, how do you then move them? In the case of the *hanamichi* (walkway) in Kabuki, there is an area between seven and three where the actor can be seen well from everywhere in the theater, and so you use that area in your staging. But if you have *King Lear* stand on the Noh theater's entrance bridge, there will always be some places in the audience where he won't be visible. I want to have him stay in that one position for some time, but I also feel it is unfair to do so for certain parts of the audience. Sometimes it makes me want to sneak in the theater at night with a saw and just cut out all the pillars. (laughs)

Staging for the Noh theater has been full of tough situations like this, but the more minuses I encounter the more strongly the pluses stand out too. One very interesting thing happened in the staging of *Macbeth* in the scene where the king is first killed. The guard is supposed to come just after the king has been killed, but in the Noh theater version I had the king turn instantly into the guard just after awaking from being killed by the witches. Because in the Noh theater there is no way to get the king off stage after he is killed, I used my imagination and had the king play the guard's role as well. As it turned out, that bit of staging unexpectedly worked to very interesting effect.

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Yokouchi: Of course that is a device that you could also use sometime in a regular theater, but then the intention might appear too clear and it would end up bothering you. Perhaps it fits better in the Noh stage, however.

Kurita: If you think in terms of *Mugen* (Dream) Noh where all the characters are ghosts to begin with, everything is OK. No matter what characters may change into other characters, or how you have them leave the stage, or how you let them stay on stage after they have died, if the audience comes to the play with the image of a world of ghosts, you can do anything. It can succeed because this is not a realistic world to begin with.

Yokouchi: What it tells you is that there are plays that are enlightened by their stage.

Kurita: Yes. And, another thing is how you effectively use the silence of the Noh stage in your staging. The movement that is allowed in Noh theater is only a moment's movement. You need to stage the silence after that moment of movement so that it becomes movement that extends beyond that moment. It is a reversal of silence and movement. I think there is a wonderful degree of perfection in the way that this uniquely Japanese Noh theater uses silence and movement in "*Kurozuka*."

Yokouchi: Having worked in small theater where there is no master, I have known the nicer aspects of having the freedom to create your own style, but when I see the freedom with which you are working today, I sense the strength of someone who has polished his technique for 20 years in a particular environment. The strength of a person who has been taught what kind of a space this particular space this is. Because there is a lot that can't be learned just by watching.

Kurita: Our Shakespeare series is something that was born out of a chance encounter with the Niigata Noh Theater, but I now feel the potential in this series and definitely want to continue it. And I want overseas audiences to see it and see how they feel about it and hear their reactions.

(Edited by Tomoko Tajima)