

F A L L 2 0 0 1



JAPAN
SOCIETY

P R E S E N T S

Bye - Bye :
The New Primitive

Kaitaisha Theater Company

October 4, 5 & 6 at 8 pm

The beginning of a new performance season is typically a time of joy and anticipation. This year, however, is quite different. Japan Society expresses its deepest sympathy to all who have lost friends and loved ones in these tragic events. We stand with our fellow New Yorkers in sadness and in resolve to go forward with our work. On a personal note, I was in Tokyo on September 11. The outpouring of shock, sympathy and outrage from friends and colleagues, as well as officials there, was a great comfort. Everyone realized how profoundly our individual lives, as well as the entire world, had been changed.

Throughout history artists have courageously represented both the brilliance of the human spirit and its raw brutality. The theatrical vision of Gekidan Kaitaisha's artistic director, Shinjin Shimizu, is a challenging one under any circumstances. Against the backdrop of recent events, it is even more powerful and, possibly, disturbing. Perhaps, it is all the more relevant, as well.

I am grateful to Kaitaisha for their courage to come to New York and present their work at this time. I am equally grateful to the members of our audience whose presence at this performance attests to the indomitable spirit and vitality of this great city.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paula S. Lawrence". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping underline.

Paula S. Lawrence
Director, Performing Arts
Japan Society

about gekidan kaitaisha

Director and playwright **SHINJIN SHIMIZU** was born in 1956, the son of a master of *kendo* who maintained a *dojo* in his home. While a university student, Mr. Shimizu became acquainted with *Angura* (Underground) theater of the 1960s and the work of legendary butoh dancer Tatsumi Hijikata. He founded Gekidan Kaitaisha in 1985. The group's performances are multimedia and multi-referential, mixing a highly physical ethos that bears the influence of butoh, the theater of the absurd, and spontaneous street theater with a post-modern production style relying on electronic music, video projections and the aesthetics of contemporary installation art. In 1990, Kaitaisha developed its own theatrical training method and launched its site-specific work *Yugyo no Keshiki (The Drifting View)*, performed in abandoned buildings, on river banks and in parks both in Japan and abroad. This piece was intended to inspire the audience to create their own landscape and to transform the actual geographical landscape in the process. In this production, the company invites the audience to be proactive, rather than passive, and to participate in the process of creating the theater. Kaitaisha moved its landscape metamorphoses indoors with the 1991 series *The Dog*, which garnered international attention, and in 1995, began a new indoor performance series titled *Tokyo Ghetto*. In 1997–98, Kaitaisha produced a new series, *Zero Category* and *De-Control*. Inspired by Antonin Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty" and the theories of Michel Foucault, Mr. Shimizu is convinced that a dramatic reality can only be recreated in today's information-oriented society through in-the-flesh, corporeal directness.

Recently, Kaitaisha's theater has emphasized movement, absurd text and raw, emotional performance. Language is sparse. Shimizu takes full advantage of the accessibility of physical movement, using the bodies of his troupe to convey highly-charged and universal social themes. Shimizu and Kaitaisha's work is based on an acute criticism of society, raising social issues such as racism, gender prejudices, sexual hypocrisy and political pretension.

Making their New York debut at Japan Society, the group has performed throughout Asia, and is currently touring Europe, opening the 2001 Laokoon Festival 2001 in Kampnagel, Hamburg.

message from the director

The current trend in Japan is for a “Theatre of Life.” At every turn the Japanese see stirring, valiant representations of “life” defined as Japan, the nation of a divine being. But this concept of “life” is hypocritical, because it attacks people at every turn.

I remember a performance of my work before an audience of children with Down Syndrome that took place two years ago. A child came up on stage during one of the play’s most violent scenes and began to walk about the stage, feebly, like a corpse. The actors started walking along with him slowly, as if this were completely natural and they had all been together for a long time. I thought a miracle had happened. At the same time, I felt a strong sense of guilt about my own healthy, able body.

We must differentiate between force, violence by the system, and the violence which is inherent in life. Until that moment on stage, I had believed in theater as a strong affirmation of life, that the body is the *raison d’être* for those who live the violence of life. I do not believe this now. Now, I fear any violence that inhibits mutual understanding.

I created this work to oppose the “Theater of Life” and the society that endorses it. I aim to destroy the violence living in the body and to wipe out its brutality.

This piece is a theater of the “body,” and is filled with the “desire for destruction.” In that way, it is a “Theater of Death.”



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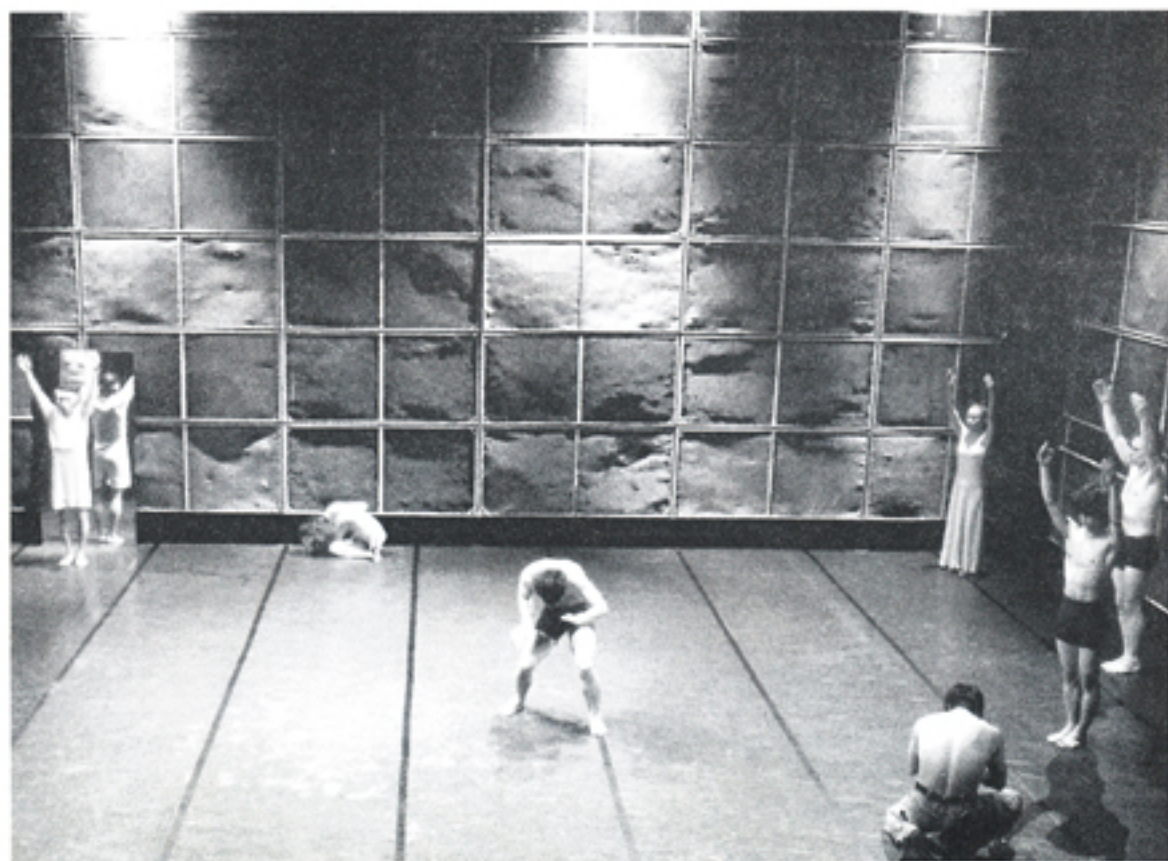
—Shinjin Shimizu

the theatrical world of kaitaisha

Shinjin Shimizu, the artistic director of Kaitaisha, is by no means a kind artist, nor does he “entertain” in either a positive or a negative sense. He is not interested in giving an audience sheer aesthetic pleasure from form or content, or in intentionally provoking the audience’s anger. Rather, he is an exceptionally honest artist. He invites the audience to think and experience the performance with him. “Here are my thoughts, ideas and questions. What do you think? How do you feel? I want you

to share them with me.” We are not asked to judge or evaluate. We are only asked to respond, to think and ask questions ourselves, according to our own point of view.

Shimizu’s theater is not verbal. His major tool is not language but the actor’s body. His mind is filled with the concepts and ideas of an insatiable reader, but his work is intuitively in the “here and now.” He does not try to illustrate any concept. There are no clear-cut messages in Kaitaisha’s





performances. We are provided with often-fragmented pieces of physical movement and visual imagery, intense and tantalizing in themselves.

Bye-Bye is the history of the human body in the 20th century. What was it and what is it now at the start of the new millennium? The performance is accompanied by a series of striking video images from the WW I through WW II and the Vietnam War, up to the Gulf War. Shimizu looks at different types of war, in which a symbolic image of the body is formed and constructed. For Shimizu, a dominant image of the body in the 20th century was born during

WW I, which he calls "the body trapped in the bunkers." This is the image of soldiers forced to stay in battlefield bunkers. Crouched over and jerking with fear, their bodies are intended to function as war machines, as a site of violence. When these bodies are released from the battlefield, many of their owners return to the "world" altered by their experiences.

For Shimizu, the image of "body as war machine" in the 20th century was valid until the Gulf War, when there was a drastic transformation. The body became virtual. No longer do we see bodies of soldiers fighting in a war. "The body trapped in the bunkers" is now concealed,

the theatrical world of kaitaisha

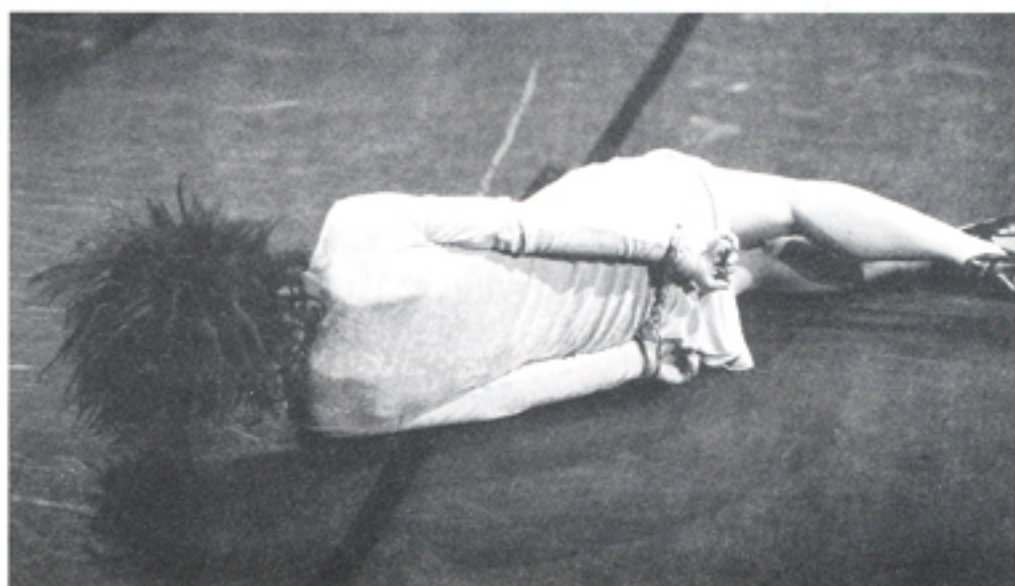
hidden. In the age of the Internet, this virtual ontology of the body has become a given.

Where is the body and what will become of it in the new millennium, especially now that cloning technology has made possible, at least theoretically, the reproduction of any body? Is it a blessing or a curse? Can we restore our physical-body-made-virtual with cloning technology?

This is the basic theoretical framework behind *Bye-Bye*. Shimizu does not illustrate this in the performance. Rather, he confronts us with three thematically distinctive scenes: "A Flock," "Blood and Earth" and "Future of the Human Body."

In "A Flock," bodies from a cityscape meet, alternately trying to communicate yet clashing with each other. Are they familiar city dwellers? Maybe, but they look more like lumps of flesh, thrown into a post-human cityspace, struggling for existence.

In "Blood and Earth," perhaps the most accessible scene of the whole piece, Shimizu presents us with a vivid image of how Japanese bodies are located culturally, politically and physically. It is an apt visualization and physicalization of what is usually referred to as the space of the Emperor System. In it, each performer exists separately and individually, and while repeating an almost identical movement.



A Caucasian male actor hits a Japanese female actor. Is this domestic violence? Western colonization of Japan, deemed “feminine?” In “Future of the Human Body,” we are led to witness cyborgian bodies (or cloned bodies?) wandering about the performance space.

What do those bodies mean?

These three scenes are not necessarily in chronological order, as Shimizu conceives them concurrently in different parts of the globalized world. Shimizu is neither a pessimist or a nihilist, he presents us only with what

he observes. He is an exceptionally honest artist who doesn't pretend to have answers. As an artist living in a very complex world, among its mesmerizing physical and virtual networks of power, he can only ask himself and the audience questions. He does so provocatively. Aristotelian catharsis is not operating here. Rather, we feel disturbed, displaced and disrupted, in both our emotions and our minds.

—*Tadashi Uchino, Associate Professor,
Department of Interdisciplinary
Cultural Studies, Graduate School of
Arts and Sciences, University of Tokyo*

U.S. DEBUT

Kaitaisha Theater Company

Theater of Deconstruction



"Powerful... and not for the faint-hearted. In exploring the operation of power in human society Shimizu exerts his own power on us..."

—Hilary Crampton,
The Age (Australia)

October 4, 5 & 6 at 7 pm

Discussion of Kaitaisha's place in contemporary Japanese theater with Associate Professor **Tadashi Uchino**, Tokyo University

October 5 & 6

Post-performance discussion with **Shinjin Shimizu**

Avant-garde performance company **Kaitaisha** presents **Bye-Bye: The New Primitive**, the latest work by innovative director **Shinjin Shimizu**. For more than 15 years, the group has staged multimedia performances eschewing verbal delivery in favor of physical movement. Shimizu has been profoundly influenced by the avant-garde dance theory of butoh founder Tatsumi Hijikata, in particular by Hijikata's concept of *shintai* (body as expression). Many of Kaitaisha's productions are designed to question the status quo, and Shimizu takes full advantage of the accessibility of physical theater, using the bodies of his troupe to convey such highly charged and universal social themes as rape, slavery, apathy and the smothering of individuality. *Bye-Bye: The New Primitive* is a visceral production staged in front of a video backdrop of apocalyptic imagery. Don't miss this controversial company's only American performances.

Thursday, Friday & Saturday, October 4, 5 & 6 at 8 pm

Tickets: \$22, Japan Society members \$20

(includes pre-performance lecture)



Photo © Katsu Miyauchi

fall 2001

3 sensational
theater
productions