

At the back of the studio a pair of television monitors flicker. On a chair, her back to the audience, sits a woman just about dressed in a white costume. A man in a fashionably shapeless black business suit shuffles on and starts to beat the woman's back with the palms of his hands. It's a gentle rhythm to start with on this human tom-tom. Then harder and faster. The blood rises red under the skin of the woman's back. And a palpable frisson of horror rises in the audience too, reaching an emotional crescendo when the man in the suit turns his partner round to face us and repeats his rhythmic beating on her thighs. When the show is over someone will murmur that this is the most shocking thing they have seen in the theatre, nastier than the death of Marlowe's Edward II and more cruel than Gloucester's blinding in King Lear.

But if cruelty, man's inhumanity to man and woman is a recurring theme in Tokyo-based theatre company Gekidan Kaitaisha's work we have moved on a good way from that Theatre of Cruelty so beloved by the avant-garde of the 1960s.

Talking to Shinjin Shimizu, Gekidan Kaitaisha's founder and artistic director, before the first performance in the Arnolfini Arts Centre in Bristol of *Tokyo Ghetto/Orgie* (which had already played in Cardiff and Glasgow), it is clear that this company are grappling with that much rehearsed text 'The Death of Theatre' – or why Andrew Lloyd Webber packs them in from Tokyo to Timbuktu. Translate the company's name and you get the idea: *Kaitai* means deconstruction and *sha* is company, so 'Deconstruction Company'.

In performance Gekidan Kaitaisha are fashionably post-modern. Not that the questions posed by this label are any less pressing: what is the crisis about representation in the culture of the advanced economies; what do we mean by performance; and why is the idea of the 'new' in art such a cultural snare and delusion? As Shimizu says, "When I talk about a new piece it doesn't mean a new text or new characters. It means a new way of doing it. I think that what is 'new' is meaningless for most kinds of art today. We have performed *Tokyo Ghetto/Orgie* on this tour in Glasgow and at the Chapter Centre in Cardiff. And now here in Bristol I can say that this is almost a new production because it is different from what we've done before. That's because every space is different."

AND EVERY AUDIENCE TOO? I try on a post-modern hat for size. "So the actual performance is located within a triangle that has the space, the audience and your company at its three points?" The hat alas doesn't quite fit and I am reduced to drawing a diagram. Shimizu sighs. (He's a serious man, in black of course, with a leather cap tugged down over his eyes and the kind of glasses that Raskolnikov might have chosen had he stumbled into a Giorgio Armani boutique). "The relationship between the three is influenced by lots of aspects. Such as social situation. First, the piece is constructed, then it's deconstructed by various aspects of the performance and after it's deconstructed it's built up again. So it is a repeat of construct, deconstruct and reconstruct."

Images from a building site are crowding in on me: the cast carrying hods of bricks, hard hats for everyone and concrete being poured in the background. After all Shimizu has said of his ten actors, "Our performing becomes more like labouring than acting: very forced and tough labour at that." He also keeps a weather eye on the training traditions of Noh and Kabuki, and there is more than a hint of Butoh in the finished work.

In the studio, however, things have hardly begun and after the shock of that opening scene the acting style has a kind of delicacy: a deliberate precision too, and it creates images of remarkable staying power. While the video screens are shuffling images of war and peace, a ritual beheading, high-kicking chorus girls, geisha, two of the cast are rolling bandages. Tucked away at the back a man in a black mask is bodyscrouching a woman. As the scene develops without a line of dialogue, three other women, one naked to the waist, sit like statues on chairs. Theoretical arguments

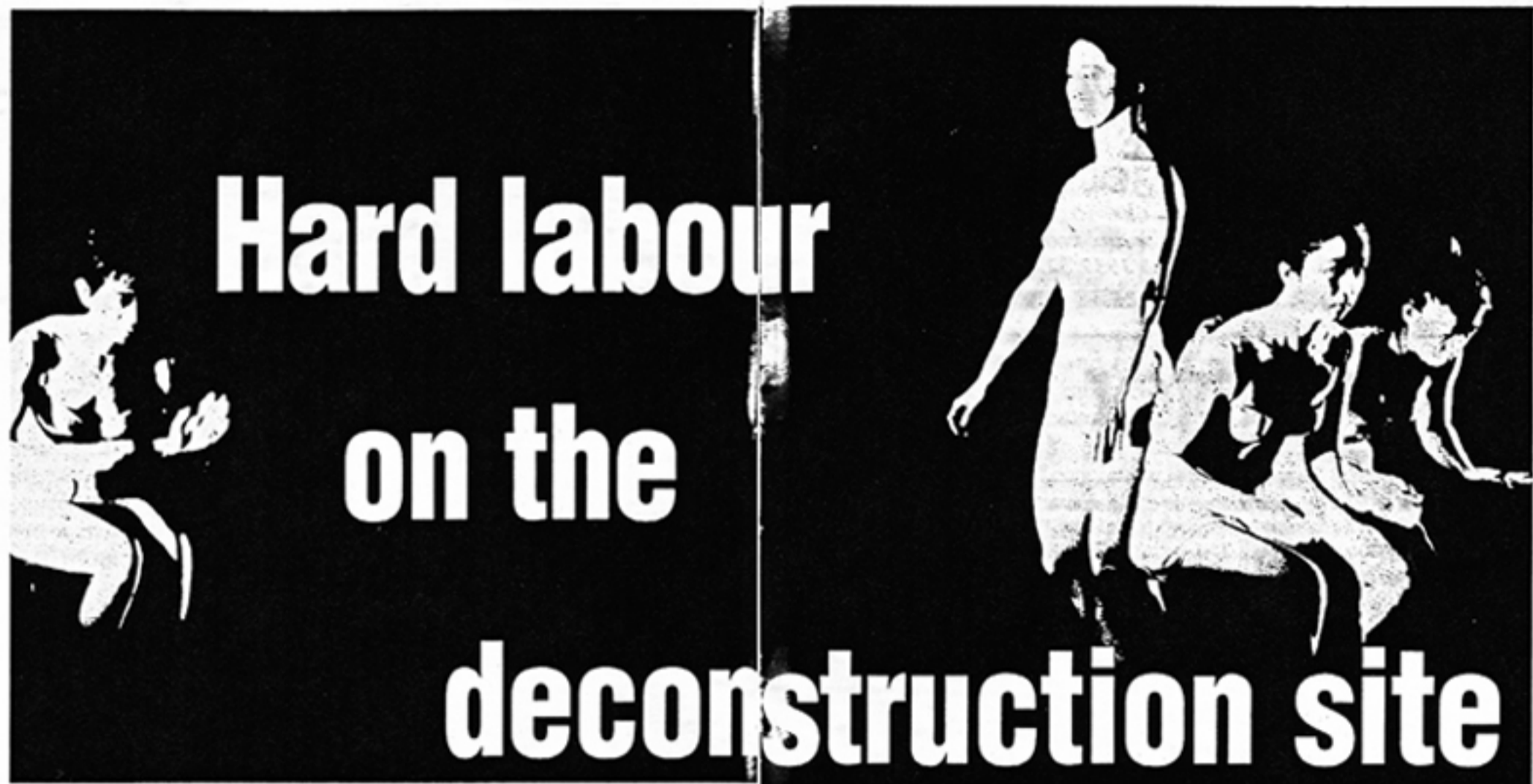


photo courtesy Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff.

about the human body as a site for theatre are pushed aside by these images of a world tearing at its own throat.

As Shimizu has said, "The theme of this production focuses on the subject of what kind of power besieges and imprisons the body of human beings in this age of war and refugees." And the vexed issue of gender raises its head too, "within the context of post-capitalism where a new type of slavery is going on."

TALK TO SHINJIN SHIMIZU and the rhetoric about his work is less forbidding. We live, he says, in an age when the old political frontiers have moved. The collapse of Communism and the tearing down of the Berlin Wall have encouraged "a new settlement of borders. And it also means the revival of nationalism. [Gekidan Kaitaisha first performed in Europe last year at the avant-garde theatre festival in Zagreb, capital of Croatia where they know a thing or two about nationalism and 'new' borders]. Theatrically speaking what I think is important is the scheme to separate our inner self and the outside world. There used to be a clear border between inside and outside and now that too has become borderless."

We're back to the body; and bodies performing gymnastics on a giant wheel lowered from the roof of the Arnolfini studio. In the front row sits Shimizu, hunched forward as if directing the play with the power of his gaze. Are the actors performing for him or us? You do sense the master and his puppets at work; clearly Gekidan Kaitaisha is Shinjin Shimizu.

When we met before the performance I asked how he created each piece. "First of all I don't write a text. The starting point is very peculiar. It can look like chaos. The ten performers rehearse every night and I try to discover characteristics peculiar to each person. We also talk about photos, or cinema or theatre. And through this process I write some text specially for that person or I show them an image. And that is the starting point. There are many occasions when I am surprised, or obsessed or enchanted by the actors and I want to put that surprising character revealed by the performer on stage. These are 'daily' gestures; so when I go home I consider how I can change that 'daily' thing into theatre."

In the Arnolfini theatre a line of women, as if in a dream and all bandaged, walk slowly around the performance area. One of them carries a large curly cabbage. And here *Tokyo Ghetto/Orgie* develops into a kind of movie with long fades and slow

dissolves between different parts of the action. Where did that guinea pig in a glass come from? Why is the woman tearing up the cabbage with her teeth? To feed the animal? And what is the real meaning of the message on the big screen at the back of the studio, **RACISTS ARE COMING?** You reach for the comfort blanket of old ideas, T. S. Eliot's line from 'The Wasteland' "These fragments I have shored against my ruins"; or the popular view that postmodernism can be best described as an 'aesthetic of quotations'.

As we sat talking about Gekidan Kaitaisha's aesthetics – the company is ten years old this year – Shimizu was drawing in a small black notebook. First a square box, then heavily scored lines within it. The performance was to begin in less than eight hours. Surely he must have blocked out his production by now. "There is one scene that I am thinking about hard. It's the scene before the last scene. A group of refugees appear on the stage. In front of them there's a line which represents a division, a border. And I'm wondering if the refugees can step over the line or not."

IN PERFORMANCE THE BORDER HOLDS. The refugees accompanied by that icon of twentieth century diaspora, the battered suitcase, stay to one side. And here is a tingling piece of action. You realise that one of the refugees is the woman who was beaten at the start of the piece. Now her assailant approaches and she embraces him. They smile. Peace has broken out? Not a chance – for now he is slapped hard in the face. If this was remaking *Tokyo Ghetto/Orgie* for the Arnolfini one summer night it was making theatre of great power.

And there most directors might have ended the performance. But Shinjin Shimizu goes farther. There is a coda for two actors, a woman ending on a man's shoulders. On the screen at the back cityscapes, stonethrowing and a last title, **KRISTALL-NACHT IN TOKYO**. Not really an end at all but an intellectual and an emotional beginning. How has the persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany travelled on over sixty years to the capital of Japan? "Construction, deconstruction, reconstruction". Kaitaisha. There are no answers now; only shifting meanings along unstable cultural frontiers. □

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