

THEATER

When watchers become the watched

Kaitaisha's rendition of Tokyo Ghetto raises issues that will send audiences home with different and dissonant ideas.

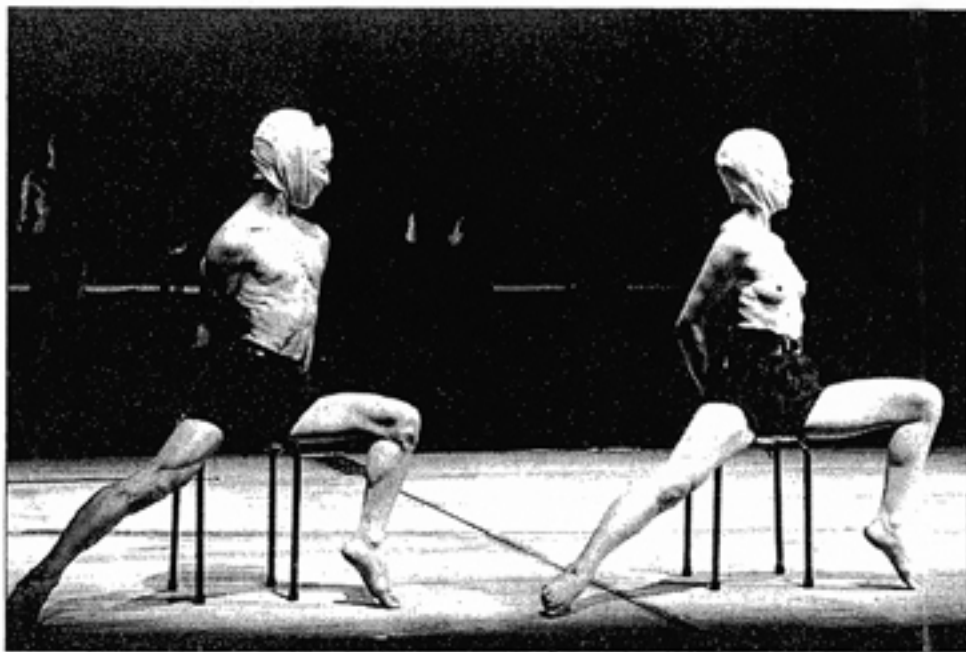
By TADASHI UCHINO
Special to Asahi Evening News

It was the late Heiner Muller, a playwright-director from the former East Germany, who once said that theater is a public forum where issues (social, political, aesthetic, or what have you) are raised but not easily resolved or answered, where people go home with different and dissonant ideas between and within themselves.

In short, he said, theater should be provocative socially, politically or artistically, in the true sense of the word, as he himself demonstrates in the form of a text called "Hamletmachine."

In Muller's kind of theater, artists should always be aware of their surroundings, what is going on in their milieu, socially, politically and culturally, and their theatrical expressions should have something to do with these, so that their work means something more than an aesthetic experience for their audience.

I am well aware of the fact that Muller's rather Brechtian idea of theater can easily be dismissed (if we think not of the "death of tragedy" but the "death of theater," as Beckett foresaw in his last plays) in our late capitalist postmodern cultural climate. If so, we can go on from here to talk about a possible new form of theater, although it may not be called



Performers in Kaitaisha's Tokyo Ghetto express themselves with their bodies.

theater anymore.

However, there is no place like Japan in the 1990s, where Muller's definition of theater can be so easily and dramatically dismissed, or more accurately, wishfully forgotten altogether by both theater artists and audiences. And it is not because of Beckett-like profound philosophical speculation about our future, nor is it because of Japanese theater artists' radical break from the traditional, or historically identifiable and traceable idea of theater.

It is because Japanese theater is so easygoing, so amateurish, so childish, so out-of-date that it has lost any actual and valid relationship with what is going on in the world. Instead, it has become and is becoming ever more entertaining, as if to say that this is the only way

theater can survive in this postmodern world.

But there are always exceptions, even though exceptions are almost unbearably slow in becoming visible in this country. Perhaps we needed the tragedies of the Great Hanshin Earthquake and Aum Shinrikyo to realize that some of our artists are indeed working on and around Muller's idea of theater.

Gekidan Kaitaisha—literally "Theater of Deconstruction"—is just such an exception. Although it has existed for more than 10 years, Gekidan Kaitaisha in the past was considered to be one of those eccentric experimental theater companies whose radicalism was just too much for any audience to appreciate.

But after watching endless television images from Sara-

with a female only to fail, and has to resort to violence. Most of the time, performers are silent; they are not allowed to "express" themselves with words and instead expose their bodies to the world and the audience as if to say it is the very condition we are in—we think we are watching, but in reality we are being watched.

Kaitaisha's work is usually a multi-media event, utilizing music, dance, film and theater; direct influences from foremost artists like Robert Wilson, Pina Bausch, William Forsythe or Tadeuz Kantor can be easily detected.

But all this is not to celebrate our postmodernity but rather to raise issues in a theatrically effective way. Therefore, after watching their performance, we cannot experience any kind of catharsis. Still, it is as Muller would like: issues are effectively raised but not easily resolved and we go home with different and dissonant ideas between and within ourselves.

Kaitaisha's latest piece, which opened last Friday and will run through this month on weekends, is titled "Tokyo Ghetto III," the third in a series they have been working on since last year. If you want to be provoked, be there at Hongo Dok, the studio where Kaitaisha operates and creates vivid and disturbing images.

IF YOU GO

VENUE & DATES—Hongo Dok, March 8-10, 15-17, 23-24, 29-31. Performances start at 7:30 p.m. on Fridays, 7 p.m. on Saturdays and 6:30 p.m. on Sundays.

HOW TO GET THERE—The studio is a five-minute walk from Hongo-sanchome Station on the Marunouchi subway line.

TICKETS—¥3,000, ¥5,500 for two, and ¥2,500 for students.

INQUIRIES—Call Gekidan Kaitaisha at 03-5802-5387.