# Noda Hideki's Theater World. Acting with Joy in His Soul

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Even in today's theater world in Japan, which tends to venerate age, at just 52 Noda Hideki is already a towering, legendary figure.

Noda during his recent JT interview. Miura Yoshiaki photo

Wherever you go and talk to dramatists or stage performers, you will find his name and achievements almost invariably come up. This is especially the case among young dramatists in Japan, who, even though their theater styles might differ from his, almost all acknowledge a huge artistic debt to Noda in their own theatrical creations.

Born on tiny Sakito-jima Island in Kyushu's Nagasaki Prefecture, Noda was just 4 years old when his family moved to Tokyo. His origins, though, have never deserted him, and in 1999 a play he wrote and staged called "Pandora's Bell" dealt with the U.S. atomic bombing of Nagasaki on Aug. 9, 1945, when the grotesquely named "Fat Man" exploded over the city and took at least 80,000 human lives with it in a flash. In that work, Noda posed challenging questions about the Showa Emperor's war responsibility, his subjects' blind fanaticism and enduring scars of World War in Japan.

To begin with, though, Noda entered the theater world in earnest when he started a company called Yume no Yuminsha (Dreaming Bohemian) when he was a 20-year-old university student. Then, in a twinkling, Noda became a theatrical hero and in 1976 his company became a theater-business sensation with their second production, titled "Hashire Melusu (Run Melusu)," at the VAN99 hall in Tokyo's Aoyama district, thanks to the nonstop, speedy, highly physical on-stage movement and Noda's imaginative and puzzling plots.

By reaching out so dynamically and provocatively to a younger and techno-minded generation previously not really interested in theater, Noda at one fell swoop transcended contemporary theater's previously geeky, serious, self-indulgent and academic underground image among young people. In doing so, too, he almost single-handedly kick-started a major youth-theater movement in the 1980s. Moreover, he broke new ground by successfully soliciting sponsorship from Mitsubishi Motors, and also by attracting more than 26,000 people to a one-day theater event at the Yoyogi National Gymnasium in Tokyo.

Then, true to his individualistic form, he broke up his company in 1992 at the peak of its success and took a yearlong sabbatical in London. It was after he returned from that sojourn that he founded Noda Map, the company he has worked with tirelessly since to establish it as the front-runner in Japan's contemporary theater world.

Now, in the 21st century, Noda is vigorously presenting socially provocative dramas that rely less on physical performance than many of his earlier works. In 2003's "Oil," for instance, he tackled the issue of chain retaliations following 9/11, while in 2006's "Rope" he turned his spotlight on the distorted, media-controlled lies of modern war. With his original plays Red Demon" (2003) and "The Bee" (2006) Noda, who is an excellent English-speaker, has launched himself big-time into the English market using local British casts.

Unlike others in the hot-house media world, however, Noda is not a legend because of glitzy magazine coverage of his work or private life, but purely because of what he's done and the fact that he's never shrunk from putting his own of strong opinions into his work.

So, at the beginning of this year, when I heard that Noda was going to become artistic director at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Space in Ikebukuro, and also take a university-teaching position, the news was not only exciting but also a bit perplexing. Why, in his mid-50s, had this longtime maverick decided to go so very public—and what did it mean for contemporary drama in Japan? To explore these and many more questions, I visited Noda's Tokyo office for an interview. There, in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, his answers were not only illuminating, as I'd expected, but also punctuated with laughter and the lively dramatist's sharp wit.

**Play acting: High-school student Noda throws himself into his first original play, "Ai to Shi o Mitsumete (Gaze into Love and Death)."**

What were you particularly interested in during your childhood?

Like other children, I was interested in all sorts of things and my future dreams were changing all the time. I was always the last child playing on the playground. Then, when I was between 9 and 12 years old, I had a really unique teacher who was absolutely apart from the usual school stuff. He banned his pupils from going to outside cram schools and he didn't give us any homework or daily tests —my class was the only one like that. When it was a fine day we played baseball, or played in the school grounds instead of having lessons in the classroom, so we didn't need to study like all the other classes' pupils.

The teacher only took a serious view of basics such as reading, writing and calculation, and he respected the children's autonomy regarding most things. Later, if I look back now, that was a little bit of an influence in me starting to do

theater because that teacher was also hugely enthusiastic about tackling the annual school performance day. As a result, we prepared for that play full-time for two months, while other classes usually did so only within the limited curriculum, often with ordinary lessons.

When it's fine, children should play outside—that was the teacher's policy. So he was called to account by the board of education sometimes, but he ignored them (laughs). Then finally he quit—he probably had to quit. That was my childhood.

So was that your first encounter with theater?

Ummm ~ there is another interesting story.

When I was chatting with one of my best friends, Kanzaburo Nakamura (a leading kabuki actor and producer who last summer staged productions in English at the Lincoln Center in New York, and who has also twice enlisted Noda to direct kabuki plays—both to great acclaim—and who has signed up Noda to direct another of his kabuki works in August), we discovered a very funny coincidence. Both of us were born in 1955, and both of us went to Christian kindergartens—and we both played exactly the same role in the Nativity play at Christmas. It was the most inconspicuous, short role as Balthazar, one of the Three Wise Men from the East. We laughed together, saying that maybe all actors should play Balthazar in kindergarten.

Long after that coincidence, you entered the University of Tokyo (Tôdai), even though you say you didn't really study at primary school.

First, I went to a very competitive high school, and the school (attached to Tokyo University of Education) aimed to send all its students to Todai, and actually 130 out of the 160 in my year went there. So it was a matter of course for me to do so even though there were good and bad circumstances about being at such a competitive school, such as students pretending not to study very hard but in reality having great rivalries with others over grades. So I did theater every day, and others did different kinds of things instead of studying for entrance exams. On the up side, there were many interesting and intellectual people there, but on the down side, many of them were already elitist and looked down on ordinary people. Afterward, many of those types become government officials and now have high positions in society (laughs), though I think many of those with a good nature and character tended to escape from such a fixed, elite track early on.

Anyway, that was my starting point doing theater for real. I experienced the audience's applause when I presented my first original play, "Ai to Shi o Mitsumete (Gaze into Love and Death)" at that time. Back then, too, I poured my love for theater into my diary—it was absolutely purer and hotter than today (laughs).

Also, I didn't want to make an excuse later saying, "I could have gone to Tôdai, but I chose not to." So, I had an embroilment at high school between my vanity driving me to select an elite course and my longing to do my favorite thing, theater.

Then later I realized that such torment was not necessary after all, as I dropped out of the university anyway (laughs).

What was your parents' reaction when you told them you were quitting Tôdai?

Master class: Hideki Noda leads a workshop at Tama Art University's Kaminoge Campus in Tokyo, showing a group of students in the department of moving images and performing arts the key fundamental skills of how to move and walk on stage. This and following photos by Miura Yoshiaki

Well, I found I was always asked the same question after I became a professional dramatist. I guess it became interesting news for ordinary people that a Tôdai student should drop out to be an actor, and I got sick of it. So I refused to answer such questions regarding Tôdai. Of course, I don't mind now, so I will tell you now that my father was completely against my decision. So I left home and started to live independently, as Tôdai's fees were so cheap—like ¥30,000 a year—that I could easily afford it. My mother was in the middle between me and my father, and she died soon after I became independent. That's another reason why I didn't talk about my Tôdai story in those days.

Who were your main theatrical influences in those days?

Most of my theater friends at school were inevitably influenced by Kara Juro (a leading figure in the Japanese underground theater movement in the '60s and '70s), and some of them said my plays were similar to his style. So, I intentionally avoided seeing his plays in those early days, though I went to see all the others—such as works by Terayama Shuji and Betsuyaku Minoru—but not Kara's plays, even though he was definitely cutting edge. Of course, a few years later I went to see Kara's plays.

Since you started your first theater company, Yume no Yuminsha, when you were at university in 1976, has your life been all about theater?

Yes—sort of. In my case, I have not been unfaithful to theater. I only took a major role in a movie once; I have been in TV dramas very occasionally; and just once I wrote a novel for a close publisher friend—but then that novel became a play. I have not taken a break or a long vacation in my life. When I went to England on a yearlong government (Monbusho) scholarship in 1992, it was the only long break in my whole career. When I speak to foreign directors, they are shocked about my hectic schedule. For example, Kanzaburo is crazy about golf, but I don't play it, in fact I rather made up my mind

against golf. I don't like people who are fascinated by golf and are always only talking about it. It's not cool, I think.

Now you are also working in England. What do you think about working conditions in theater there?

Although people there call their free time holidays, they see and experience many things during holidays. So actually, creators gain many useful things for their work through such free time. We Japanese, though, still have the idea that "no work means no dinner and no pay," so there is a general tendency to be extremely busy all the time.

I am also a part of that way of thinking, to be honest, so basically I am quite straight and I didn't want to do unconventional things. That's true (he added with a sarcastic grin).

So I didn't expect at all to drop out of the university, and I believed I was not a person to get divorced or, even more, to have a love affair. I think life is full of unanticipated things (laughs).

In England, there is the idea that theater has a public role to enrich people's lives, but in Japan, don't you think that idea is lacking?

I agree with that. When I was young, I kept saying that theater should be profitable and was about making money so it could stand on its own feet, but the theater world was not mature enough then and many theater people performed for their own private satisfaction, as their hobby. So I ventured to say as much. To begin with, if we only stress the economics, the arts would not be effective at all. If I were to ask why someone is doing theater, then I'd have to ask why am I doing it? Hmm (laughs).

All I can say is that people reach a point where they can't live without culture and art in their daily lives. The current weak situation in the Japanese economy stems from the country's poor culture, I think. For example, when I see a new design of something, it's not usually so attractive. So, both the arts and economics are stuck in today's Japan. As a result, people tend to fall back on traditional ways of doing things, thinking they have a firm cultural background.

What is it about theater that has kept you so fascinated throughout your life so far?

Theater has all sorts of elements. As Richard Wagner said, it has a language in text, in the visual arts through stage sets, and it also has music. Moreover, things don't just fit into specific fields, and theater also includes human bodies and it connects to the process of growing old as well. So, it further enters the philosophical field, and all this links together.

Hence, everything I am interested in is involved in theater. For instance, I am now writing a new play about Mars, and once I start to write a play about something, I research and study the subject a lot. So, theater constantly fuels my curiosity and I can play with this kind of thing indefinitely. That's why I've never gotten bored with theater work. As long as I continue to make theater, I don't think my life will ever be boring and it will finish before my curiosity is exhausted. In that sense, it seems like theater people work too hard and never stop working—people such as Ninagawa Yukio (one of Japan's and the world's most famous directors. He and Noda once presented the same play, "Pandora's Bell," written by Noda, at the same time at different Tokyo venues). Probably theater people have plenty of things to do and they are happy that way.

If a child came to you and asked, "How can I have a theater job or be an actor?" how would you respond?

When I think about child actors, I have my doubts. Namely, to play is children's principal

work, but child actors are "playing" as their occupation. In a sense, it is unfortunate for them. Deliberately choosing to act is, in some way, an adult attitude as it's necessary to have a cool, third-person's view for acting. It's mature people's work. On the other hand, when an adult acts, they have to keep the "playing" and the "fun" fun part there. Dramatists who can't play, and who can't have fun are not able to make good theater, I think. In that regard, mature actors should be eternal children—but it's impossible for very young people to be "mature" child actors.

Tanaka Nobuko, is a free-lance drama writer for publications in Japan and elsewhere. She published this article in The Japan Times on May 4, 2008.

This slightly revised article is published at Japan Focus on May 8, 2008.

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