

# **Melodramatic imagination in the Contemporary Theater to Fill the Gap Between Urbanization and Its Shadow**

**Akihiro Odanaka**

Osaka City University

## Introduction

Theater and the city have been closely connected to each other for economical, ideological, and artistic reasons. In the first place, theater production needs the audience, which presupposes the existence of a certain population size, whether they live in an urban area in the strict sense of the term, or not. Secondly, theater goers want to see their expectations materialize in the form of stars, gorgeous stage settings, and unbelievable stories, most of which are ideologically biased, if they are not directly controlled by censorship. And lastly, the quality of theater productions depends on the aesthetic sense of the audience nurtured by the competition of theaters, which are only possible in an urban area.

Anne Ubersfeld, a distinguished French theater scholar, defines the relationship between theater and the city as follows: "All theater is collective in a double sense; it is produced by a group and received by collective individuals assembled for that effect. All theater is theater of the city. Whatever it is - antiestablishment, revolutionary, elitist, or avant-garde - all theater supposes viewpoints to be added and implies a connection to the collectivity as a whole."(\*1)

## 1. Melodrama – a theatre of urbanization

However, the relationship between theater and the city is not constant, especially since industrialization has changed the mode of life. As more and more people were obliged to leave the provinces to find jobs in the large agglomeration, particular subjects in literature, and drama became popular in Western countries from the late 18th to the early 19th centuries. Especially popular was the theme of family separation and reunion, including as a variation, themes of abandoned orphans seeking their parents, or bandits who yearn for family comfort in their solitary lives.

If we borrow a scheme of Immanuel Wallerstein about the Modern World-System, it could be said that these literary subjects reflect the systemic change triggered by

the development of worldwide capitalism, which has sucked the labor force from the peripheral regions into the core part of the system, regardless of the resultant sacrifice of the human aspects

In literature and theater these themes, however, were expressed as melodrama. Melodrama originally refers to the kind of stage production accompanied by music, but during the course of time it evolved into a sentimental and cheap drama, urging the audience to come to tears. Peter Brooks, in his study entitled *the Melodramatic Imagination*, indicates how this specific form, with its exaggerated emotion, and gestures as well as its quasi-manichaeistic view of good and evil, prepared the framework of our modern conception of the world. The remark of Brooks is worth quoting in this regard: "We might do well to recognize the melodramatic mode as a central fact of modern sensibility, in that modern art has typically felt itself to be constructed on, and over, the void, postulating meanings and symbolic systems which have no certain justification because they are backed by no theology and no universally accepted social code."(\*2)

It is in this social and literary context in the modern period that we discuss the performance of contemporary theater companies in terms of their melodramatic aspects linked with the problem of urbanization. For this, I will first discuss the recent work of Théâtre du Soleil.

## 2. Theatre du Soleil – an urban people's theatre

Théâtre du Soleil is a French theater company founded in 1964, by the female director Arianne Mnouchkine. The company has remained in the front-line of the Western avant-garde theater for over 40 years. It marked a new period in modern French theater history with the performance entitled *1789*, first staged in 1968. As its name suggests, this play treats the French Revolution, but interestingly enough, it draws the audience into the stage production as if they were a part of the crowd who assaulted the Bastille. This performance ends with the triumph of the people, alias the audience, who are considered to have participated in the Revolution.

Théâtre du Soleil, following the idea of a people's theater created by their forerunners in France, searched for a way to concretize both festivity and social messages connected to theater productions in an urban area. The venue of the

company, la cartoucherie, a former factory transformed into an elaborate performance area, conforms to this notion.

Like other contemporary theater companies in the West, Théâtre du Soleil has been greatly influenced by various styles of Eastern theaters such as Kabuki and Kathakali. They even imitated the techniques of Bunraku in the performance titled *les Tambours sur la digue (The Flood Drummers)*, produced in 2000, which criticized the arbitrariness of politicians as a parable in ancient China.

This was followed by another ambitious stage production in which they depict illegal immigrants who, after having escaped from their home countries for political or economic reasons, reach France but find themselves in hopeless situations. The play is called *le Dernier Caravansérail*, first staged in 2007 Paris, and presented in cities including Buenos Aires and Taipei.

The play is composed, like a motion picture, of some 50 short scenes conceived through the cooperation of Mnouchkine, the director, with the actors. Immigrants from various origins such as Afghanistan, Iran, and Russia were interviewed preceding the production.

An interesting point is, as is always the case with the production of Théâtre du Soleil, that the entire stage is tinted with a melodramatic atmosphere. In the following scene, you will see how a cinephil (a movie lover) in Afghanistan is mercilessly punished by the Taliban.

The scene is marked by a strong theatricality. Compassion for the man who loves Chaplin is emphasized by sentimental acting, but it turns out to bring more horror when the Taliban rushes into the room.

I cannot afford to discuss this at length so because of the time constraint I have chosen one excerpt of this stage. It shows a bus stop where a girl from Russia is forced to prostitute herself by her compatriot.

The implication of this scene becomes more serious along the continuation of the comical surface. This technique of making a clear contrast between significant and signified also belongs to melodrama.

This play of Théâtre du Soleil is constructed on a melodramatic dramaturgy using contrast, exaggeration, sentimentality, and easily understandable visual elements.

Interestingly enough, the same melodramatic touch is found in the performance of another contemporary theater company called Ishin-ha, although its performing

style is much different from Théâtre du Soleil.

### 3. Okoku- the vision of a city

Ishin-ha is an Osaka based Japanese Theater Company. Their activities go back to the 70's but the company's reputation was confirmed when Matusmoto Yukichi, the director, took responsibilities of stage production in the late 80's. Matsumoto calls Ishin-ha's stage Jan-Jan opera. Its name derives from the popular quarter near Tennoji; the area known for cultural and ethnic diversity typically found in Osaka.

Ishin-ha is now recognized as one of the most avant-garde theater companies in the world, having toured countries such as Australia, Germany, Mexico, and Brazil. However, Ishin-ha's world is inseparable from its origin, the city of Osaka, especially the area called the Jan Jan quarter.

It is a place marked with fake images, in other words, a place abundant in imitations such as we find in East Asian big cities. There you will see, for example, the tower called Tsuten-kaku, which is literally translated as the tower to reach heaven, but in fact it is a bad copy of the Eiffel Tower in France. In the shopping streets around there, you will find a variety of imitation brand products such as fake Louis-Vuittons and fake Chanel.

Matsumoto says that unlike traditional European cities, Osaka, especially in the southern half, spreads out in chaotic disorder. In fact, many people coming to Osaka migrated from their countries in the process of capitalist and imperialist industrialization. Osaka is by no means utopia.

Matsumoto's vision of the city is demonstrated in the opening scene of *Okoku*, or the Kingdom, first staged in 1998.

In the performance, the real city of Osaka constitutes a part of the stage settings because it was outdoors like other productions of Ishin-ha.

But, what is interesting in this show is that the narrative structure, though fragmentary and deformed, constitutes a kind of melodrama, because it is a story about an orphan boy whom, after having stabbed a Chinese person during a struggle, is lost in the ruined Osaka city as portrayed in the near future and in his wandering encounters boys and girls from the past.

This rather sentimental story is counter-balanced by the presence of a group of boys and girls who dance and sing in a peculiar style. Their songs remind us of Kecak

of Bali Island.

As for their movements, technically speaking they are very "under developed." The strange movements, accompanied by voices repeating simple phrases or fragments of words with Osaka intonation almost interminably invites spectators to go into another world of a fake Osaka, which belongs, either in the future or in the past, to the chimerical imagination of people living in this junk city.

## Conclusion

In summary, as I have shown, both Théâtre du Soleil and Ishin-ha, each in their own way, apply the melodramatic structures to their performance. The reason they make use of this anachronistic approach is worth considering. Perhaps the greatest reason is the effort to make their avant-garde stages more accessible to the audience with the aid of simplified storylines and exaggerated emotions. In this sense, a melodramatic conception of the theater serves as the same function as the Brechtian epic theater which intends to provide spectators with critical eyes on what is happening on stage, by way of giving them an implicit message of "it's really interesting and fun, but it's not real."

As mentioned earlier, theater, as well as motion pictures, needs a relatively large audience mobilized for production, compared to other fields of arts. Consequently, it must be interesting enough to attract a mass of people. Even in the sphere of modern urban culture, theater cannot be satisfied with a status of high culture, or art for art's sake. Considering the fact that both Théâtre du Soleil and Ishin-ha have mobilized a large number of people, which is exceptional for contemporary avant-garde theater companies, their strategy of taking advantage of melodramatic structure seems quite successful.

## Notes

(\*1) Anne Ubersfeld, *Le Théâtre et la cite: de Corneille à Kantor*, Éditions AISS-IASPA, 1991.p.7,

(\*2) Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (with a new Preface), Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1995,p.21.