

# Staging *Hamlet* for Japanese Children: Seisuke Yamasaki's 2014 Production of *Hamlet*

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## [Abstract]

This paper examines the ways in which Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was recreated for a young audience in Seisuke Yamasaki's 2014 production, focusing on his textual editing and staging choices. The account on this production is based on the author's memory. Yamasaki made many alterations to the Japanese translation of the play by Yushi Odashima. For example, he made a considerable number of line cuts and omissions of characters as well as rearrangement of the order of the scenes of the first act. As a result, the actual progress of events was stressed and the plot of the play became clearer. In addition, some of Hamlet's soliloquies were transposed to different scenes. In fact, his fourth soliloquy beginning with "To be, or not to be, that is the question" was repeatedly performed, combined with some of other Hamlet's soliloquies. Finally, Yamasaki entertained the audience by introducing modern humor, idioms, and new episodes, so as to create comic relief which he believes is indispensable to attract a young audience's attention to the development of the story. This paper suggests that Yamasaki's directorial approach allows him through bold choices to retain much of the feelings and emotions of the main characters within a production that is undoubtedly designed to appeal to children. It also points out that some of these choices can be compared to similar ones made by famous British directors in productions for adults.

“To be, or not to be, that is the question.” Seisuke Yamasaki’s 2014 production of *Hamlet* opened with the best-known Shakespearean line repeated in chorus.<sup>1</sup> Yamasaki created a prologue combining part of Hamlet’s fourth soliloquy in Act 3, Scene 1 and the very last scene of the play. As a result, “To die, to sleep—/ No more” (3.1.60-61) was followed by Fortinbras’ “Where is this sight?” (5.2.341) and then Horatio’s words to declare his intention to tell Hamlet’s story.<sup>2</sup> Immediately after the prologue was over, the name of Claudius was called several times and one of the players took off his coat and hat, thus revealing himself as King Claudius who is about to make his opening speech in Act 1, Scene 2.

The quick change into characters on the stage is always a forte of Yamasaki’s productions. His directing style is simple. No elaborate stage set or props are used, except for simple wooden classroom tables and chairs, which are quickly rearranged to form a variety of stage sets. Only eight to ten players enact all the characters. Every production begins when all the players appear on the stage together, all dressed in black hats and black long coats, clapping their hands rhythmically. The actors become characters in a new scene by taking off their hats and coats to reveal the costumes they are wearing underneath.<sup>3</sup>

Yamasaki often compares a Shakespeare’s play to a huge tree with many branches and leaves: the plot is the trunk, the characters are the branches, and the lines are the leaves, respectively. According to him, by judiciously trimming leaves and small branches of the tree, its trunk and main branches will appear so clearly that even young children can easily see them. Therefore, the way his plays are adapted includes a certain number of line cuts, omission of characters or episodes, and alterations in the order of scenes, but it aims to avoid substantial distortion of the structure of the play.

As for his 2014 production, the order of the scenes of the first act was elaborately rearranged so as to make the plot of the play as clear as possible. At the beginning of Act 1, Scene 2, Claudius gives a

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<sup>1</sup> The author of this paper watched a performance of this production at the Kitakyushu Performing Arts Center on 26 July 2014. Performing time was two hours without interval. The production marked the twentieth anniversary of the Shakespeare for Children series which started in 1995. For Yamasaki, the director of the series since 1996, this was the second production of *Hamlet*, following his first one in 2004.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from the play are from *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Philip Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> The same actors are also stagehands to rearrange the above-mentioned chairs and desks. Hand clapping is used to indicate scene changes.

considerably long speech to his courtiers, first explaining his hasty marriage to Gertrude and then referring to young Fortinbras' ambition to recover the territories lost by his late father to late King Hamlet. In between this speech, Yamasaki inserted a series of lines taken from other parts of the play. Thus, after Claudius' "for all, our thanks" (1.2.16), Hamlet's first soliloquy beginning with "O that this too too solid flesh would melt" (1.2.129) was inserted and shared between him and the black-clad chorus. Through this soliloquy he reveals, for the first time, his own tormented state of mind and the reasons for his suffering, recounting his mother's rash marriage to Claudius and the loving memory of his dead father. As a result, his every word functioned as his rebuke to Claudius' whitewash speech in the previous scene, effectively creating a kind of juxtaposition.

In Shakespeare's original text, Hamlet delivers his first soliloquy alone, after everyone else leaves the stage with Claudius' "Come away" (1.2.128). Thus, Yamasaki's transposition is undoubtedly bold. The concept is, however, not unprecedented. It is interesting to note that Steven Berkoff, who played the title role in his own stage productions of *Hamlet*, did not interpret this "as reflective speech with Hamlet left on the shore of his introspection as the court goes out like a great tide of scum, leaving him to make his speech."<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, he stated:

The whole speech is almost a voice-over in his mind as the King is speaking. In a film I would have the whole speech as voice-over while the King makes his opening speech. I would feed it between the pauses.<sup>5</sup>

Admittedly, Berkoff did not incorporate this voice-over in his theatre productions. Nevertheless, in one production, based on his intensely personal analysis of the play, he changed the staging of this scene completely. He let the actors move throughout the scene and say farewell to Hamlet, patting him on the back, shaking hands, or kissing him. As he explains:

Now during this movement I timed the (silent) goodbyes to coincide with the text, so I would be saying *married with my uncle* while

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<sup>4</sup> Steven Berkoff, *I am Hamlet* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 12.

<sup>5</sup> Berkoff, 14.

actually shaking hands with him. And *Frailty, thy name is woman* neatly occurred as I was kissing Ophelia's hand. The effect was startling and gave the actors an involvement with the scene that required just about perfect timing. As they leave Horatio is just another figure that I shake hands with. I have finished the speech.<sup>6</sup>

Intriguingly, in Yamasaki's production, Hamlet's above-mentioned first soliloquy was followed by his fourth one which was staged in a kind of interrogation room. In this scene, line sharing occurred between Hamlet as a suspect and the chorus as his interrogators, perhaps in efforts to visualize his existential dilemma and struggle to find a way out. Eventually, Hamlet left the room ignoring his interrogators who shouted "Stay!" This might have reminded some in the audience of Horatio's vain command to the Ghost of Old Hamlet: "Stay! Speak, speak, I charge thee speak!" (1.1.51). In fact, following Hamlet's exit, Act 1, Scene 1 where the Ghost of Old Hamlet appears to Horatio and two sentinels was enacted. In this production, the single combat between Hamlet's father and Fortinbras's father, which is verbally explained by Horatio in the Shakespeare's original text (1.1.80-95), was actually shown on stage with their sons witnessing it. This flashback scene was timely succeeded by Claudius' "Now follows that you know: young Fortinbras" (1.2.17) and the remaining part of Act 1, Scene 2 was performed.

The productions of the Shakespeare for Children series use the Japanese translations by Yushi Odashima, which are widely regarded as easy to understand for the general public. Yamasaki makes many changes to these translations. For example, he adds jokes and slang current among Japanese children or lyrics of popular songs of their parents' generation wherever he finds them necessary. As a result, his productions, meant for family audiences, are always inventive and never for a moment dull. He is sure that laughter is essential to stage a play for children.

The script itself can cause laughter; however, there is a kind of laughter which grasps the heart of the audience. To arouse this kind of laughter, I create moments of relief in tough situations. Children cannot put up with long serious scenes like adults. They cannot concentrate for a long time, so it is necessary to let them feel

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

relieved and then let them concentrate, and vice versa.<sup>7</sup> (My translation)

This was also true of his 2014 production. A good example which amused the audience into explosions of laughter was in Act 1, Scene 4, where the Ghost of Old Hamlet played by Yamasaki appeared and beckoned Hamlet to follow him, as in the original stage direction: “*Ghost beckons Hamlet.*” Here a surprising prop was employed to glue the audience’s eyes to the stage. The Ghost surrounded by a group of black-clad stagehands beckoned Hamlet with one hand raised, in the same way as a paw of a *manekineko* (a beckoning cat figurine) is positioned. Actually, one of the stagehands was seen holding such a *manekineko*, while others were all taking the same beckoning posture as the Ghost.

Yamasaki also introduced comic relief through Fortinbras’ uncle, the King of Norway, played by Masahiro Totani. He is a character who is mentioned but does not appear on stage in the original text. However, the director let him appear on stage, partly due to the fact that Voltemand and Cornelius, who report on him as ambassadors to Norway, were omitted. He was first seen upstage left tottering with a walking stick, when Claudius referred to his poor health in Act 1, Scene 2. He was seen again when the Voltemand’s report on how the King of Norway had reprimanded young Fortinbras was enacted on stage in Act 2, Scene 2. On both occasions, his comical movements and puns evoked laughter from the audience.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were given new lines in Act 2, Scene 2, where they attempt in vain to find out “the very cause of Hamlet’s lunacy.” (2.2.49) When Hamlet’s replies did not satisfy them, they whispered to themselves: “He is talking nonsense. It is impossible for us to understand him. Don’t you think he’d better see a counsellor or a therapist?” (My translation) Eventually, they found the courage to suggest to him that he should see this kind of specialist. The whole stage business in this particular scene, with its anachronistic references to mental health professionals, entertained the audience. At the same time, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s helplessness and concern for Hamlet came across as genuine and convincing.

Yamasaki has been engaged in the series as an actor and a ventriloquist as well from the very beginning.<sup>8</sup> Uniquely in this

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<sup>7</sup> Seisuke Yamasaki’s personal interview with the author, 21 August 2001.

production, the role of what Yamasaki called “the Ghost of Young Hamlet,” a sort of alter ego of the prince, was given to the Shakespeare puppet manipulated by him.<sup>9</sup> Chikara Wakamatsu played a youthful Hamlet who squarely struggled with conflicting emotions and thoughts. His third soliloquy which begins with “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!” (2.2.502) was simplified and shared with the chorus and sometimes with the Ghost of Young Hamlet. Here again the soliloquy was followed by his “To be, or not to be” soliloquy and shared sometimes by the chorus and sometimes by the Shakespeare puppet. Hamlet and his Ghost, wearing the same tie and waistcoat, stood stage right and left respectively and delivered their lines. Hamlet’s reflections on his own lack of resolve and introspection on his own mind were most convincingly realized in this form of delivery.

Claudius as played by Kiichi Fukui was a real villain, with hardly any conscience or smile. In Act 5, Scene 2, in a departure from the original text, he stabbed the fatally wounded Laertes several times, in a desperate attempt to stop him from saying: “The king, the king’s to blame.” (5.2.300) Retrospectively, it seemed fitting that the director adapted the mouse trap scene in Act 3, Scene 2 so that the Ghost of Old Hamlet appeared to Claudius, because one might have wondered if a play was really the thing to catch the conscience of such a consummate villain. Only he saw the apparition sitting next to Gertrude, which made him crawl panic-stricken on the floor.

Akari Sato’s Gertrude, with her cold tone of voice and rigid facial expression, gave the impression that she was having difficulty in showing affection towards her son.

Ophelia’s drowning, which is only recounted by Gertrude in the original text, was symbolically enacted on stage. Ophelia was seen downstage being dragged with her face up by some stagehands while Gertrude was narrating her death. Unlike in his 2004 production, the gravediggers’ scene prior to her funeral was cut. Layers of black coats

<sup>8</sup> When he played the role of Juliet’s Nurse for the first production of the series in 1995, he also manipulated a “Shakespeare puppet” which played the role of Peter, simply because there were not enough actors to play all the roles. This Shakespeare puppet is 105 cm tall and has become a kind of mascot for the series that appears on the stage in every production, joining the actors by playing a character or commenting on the action for the audience.

<sup>9</sup> Yamasaki used the expression “Ghost of Young Hamlet” in an interview published on the theatre’s website (<http://www.kitakyushu-performingartscenter.or.jp/event/2014/0726/hamlet-repo.html>).

were piled one after another over the upper part of her body sticking out from behind a table, thus evoking her burial.

The ending of the play was cleverly managed. Hamlet's deathbed declaration of the country's successor, "I do prophesy th'election lights / On Fortinbras. He has my dying voice" (5.2.334-335), was shared with the Shakespeare puppet. Fortinbras entered and his "Where is this sight?" (5.2.341) returned the action where it had been at the opening of the production.<sup>10</sup> Horatio and Fortinbras joined the actors all clad in black and positioned stage-center. With Fortinbras' "Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage" (5.2.375), Yamasaki, who was carrying the Ghost of Young Hamlet, disappeared into the rest of the chorus. Since Yamasaki's face was not whitened as before, he could be perceived as a stagehand. However, the powerful image of his role as the Ghost of Old Hamlet lingered, so that another layer of meaning, in which the father was carrying his dead son, appeared inescapable.

At this point, the reason for Yamasaki's decision to open with Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" soliloquy became clearer. Death is, after all, one of the dominant themes of the play. The final suggestion that the Ghost carries his son is, again, bold, but not unprecedented. One is reminded of the 1992-1993 production directed by Adrian Noble in London and Stratford-upon-Avon, at the end of which the Ghost "could be seen with outstretched arms welcoming his most loving son."<sup>11</sup>

In evaluating the production as a whole, one must admit that it understandably did not explore as much of the entirety of the play with its layers of metaphysical implications as productions for adults try to do. In spite of that, Yamasaki's directorial philosophy allowed the production to convey much of the intricate feelings and emotions of the protagonist, and that is what made his production for children remarkable.

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<sup>10</sup> This stage business was reminiscent of the 1948 Laurence Olivier's film adaptation of the play, which begins and ends with the scene in which Horatio is standing still near Hamlet's body which is carried by four captains.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Holland, *English Shakespeares: Shakespeare on the English Stage in the 1990s* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), 148. Noble was the Artistic Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company between 1990 and 2003.