

Book Review

Theorising the Angura Space: Avant-Garde Performance and Politics in Japan, 1960–2000
by Peter Eckersall (Leiden: Brill Academic, 2006)

MICHAEL COHEN

In 1991, I left Australia to go to Japan. I took with me a pair of stilts with which I planned to earn a living, the ability to count to ten in Japanese (that was the extent of my language skills) and the phone numbers for a couple of arts companies with whom I was hoping to train. I understood next to nothing about Japanese contemporary performance forms. A couple of years later I left Japan: as a well-travelled Japanese festival performer (I subsequently toured regularly to Japan for the ensuing ten years), with my language skills somewhat improved, and with a thick wad of contacts that I had made training with and observing a range of *butō* and contemporary theatre companies. While it is fair to say that I had achieved a reasonable level of physical competence in the training and an aesthetic/conceptual understanding of the contemporary performance milieu, it is also fair to say that I left Japan with a palpable sense of creative unease.

There was much I did not understand. There was much I felt I was in the wrong body to ever understand. And on top of my personal creative quandaries, there seemed to be a disorientation in the contemporary performing arts scene itself: several of the established avant-garde companies with whom I worked were still headed by charismatic male directors who governed with absolute autocracy, as they had done for over twenty years. Meanwhile my newfound peers, the companies' more junior members (many of whom had themselves worked with the companies for a long time) were languishing in creative neglect or leaving. I had the impression that the scene was falling – or perhaps it was about to rise? I put this ambiguity down to my own cultural ignorance and in the years that followed I attempted to piece together not only my own integration of the knowledge I had garnered with those Japanese companies, but also, an understanding of what was happening in that contemporary scene in broader cultural terms. I think I did both with only a modicum of success.

So it was with a great sense of illumination that I read Peter Eckersall's book *Theorizing the Angura Space. Avant-garde Performance and Politics in Japan, 1960 – 2000*. With the

benefit of the knowledge I have subsequently gained, my understanding of the contemporary performance scene in Japan is now much improved – not only from a practice-based perspective but also in a broader sense of the position that this field occupies in Japanese cultural and political history. Had I understood as well fifteen years ago, my sense of cultural anomie would have been much relieved. Eckersall's book is a terrific field-locator for the reader with some understanding of contemporary forms (even the reader with the slightest knowledge of internationally renowned companies such as Suzuki Company of Toga or dumb type will find their knowledge contextualized herein). For the reader new to the field of Japanese performance, the book also holds great promise because it is compiled in such a way that the cultural terrain is mapped out with general socio-cultural landmarks of the twentieth century while also pointing to key specific sites and details.

Broadly, the work is structured as a chronological analysis of avant-garde performance from the 1960s through to the late 1990s with reference to the socio-political landscape of Japan along the way. Starting with the historical genesis of the avant-garde, Eckersall positions the social and political unrest of the sixties as the prime catalyst for the movement: this was an epoch of 'critical breakdown' (26) where the general populace could not understand the cultural changes around them. An era of performance that Eckersall identifies as '*angura*' emerged as a reaction to this uncertainty. He examines some of the key players in this era (for example, Kara, Suzuki, Terayama), positions these artists within the field and illustrates his perspective with analyses of prominent works that defined the era. Essentially, he then traces the progression of the genre through the increasingly lost way of the seventies contemporary theatre movement, the euphoric commercialism of eighties performance and the dystopic vision of the nineties artists, following a similar process of analysis for each era. The chapters are accompanied by detailed studies of works from each from these eras: select works of feminist playwright Kishida Jimusho, media performance art group dumb type, as well as those of companies Daisan Erotica and Gekidan Kaitaisha are all given close and insightful analysis. Eckersall completes the book with an annotated translation of the play 'Hamletclone' by Kawamura Takeshi. Indeed, it is important to note that Eckersall's investigation is primarily focused on theatre; the playtext, he argues is central to the identity of the *angura* space. The *butō* form does get some mention but only in passing. As it was for me twenty years ago, the line between the oft-times spectacular *butō* dance form and other contemporary *theatre* forms may, for some readers be a blurry one. Eckersall elucidates this relation in his work and also comments on *butō's* creative roots but stops short of more in-depth analysis of the form because it falls beyond the bounds of *angura* and undoubtedly because it is a field that has been widely covered elsewhere (for example, Kurihara, Klein, Viala et al, Waguri).

While it is easy to take measure of the book's shape, there are a number of distinguishing features to the book that position it as a seminal work in this field. Firstly, it locates *angura* performance with relation to contemporaneous cultural and political forces and locates these forces within an historical context. Secondly, it critiques the work of artists during this era as dynamic processes – not static artefacts. Lastly, it states a position of advocacy for the *angura* movement that is clear and sustained. Before launching into these details,

let us take a moment to examine the general character of the '*angura space*' that Eckersall investigates because these are the cultural characteristics that define the era.

Eckersall is careful not to limit his discussion of *angura* to the specifics of genre definition. Rather, he discusses it in dynamic terms: as an era, or perhaps even more obliquely as a 'space' that has been repeatedly occupied by performance practitioners in Japan since the sixties. Nonetheless, this is a space inhabited by some recurring characteristics in terms of performance styles. Historically, the *angura* movement emerged from the universities that were the hotbed of radical student activism in the sixties. Consequently, alternative venues and innovative use of theatrical space were a recurring characteristic for *angura* – demanding an active participation from its audiences. It often sought to combine the traditional Japanese theatre and folklore with stylistic devices of the transnational avant-garde (such as the styles employed by Beckett and Artaud). To the present day, the work repudiates psychological realism and structural narrative. *Angura* works engage with play texts but are not directed by them – often the emphasis of text is more the sound and speed of delivery rather than any dominant semantic meaning. There is an expressive physicality that unifies much *angura* work: the body is often explored as a site of radicalism and transgressive potential. The net effect of these characteristics is the creation of a system of theatrics that stresses 'the imaginary, transhistorical and experiential' (66).

The discussion of Kara Juro's 1965 play 'John Silver The Beggar of Love' illustrates this well:

The question – as it always is in *angura* – is not so much about the past, but what to do with the past in the present. The opening scenes of *John Silver* are set in a public toilet amid the partially reconstructed landscape of Japan. The scene soon transforms into a Korean cabaret patronized by soldiers, and later, a dock in Manchuria. As is typical of *angura*, the characters in *John Silver* exist in multiple historical dimensions and shifts between remembered events and present events although the latter has a sense that it is no more real than the memory of the former (74).

This is an era of performance that seeks constantly to raise questions about Japanese identity and subjectivity: a recurring theme that Eckersall identifies as the '*shutaisei* (selfhood) effect' – which he maintains is the 'key to understanding the interpretive dimensions of *angura* in political terms' (16). A trademark characteristic of the sixties protest events, Eckersall argues that *shutaisei* is also an identifying mood of *angura* performance – a spontaneous flowing space of harshly embodied resistance, participatory fighting spirit and a visceral, almost erotic experience. The problematics of Japanese self-identity are complex and far ranging: for example, theories of Japanese uniqueness (*nihonjinron*) and Japan's relations with the foreign/exotic (*kokusaika*) are two very productive fields of analysis in this area. Eckersall stops short of exploring Japanese concepts of selfhood along these lines in his book. Although the *shutaisei* discussion begs for further analysis along such identity-politic lines, his resistance to such a route of enquiry is probably a judicious one given the mandate he has set himself. The crux of his discussion is about an artistic movement and its socio-political impetus: he is concerned to understand how, through *angura*, 'radical culture

came to challenge and undermine vested political and economic ruling forces in Japan' (22). His concerns with manipulations of subjectivity are therefore primarily driven by how cultural/political readings of *angura* are located within historical frameworks. It is exactly this approach to historicity that is core to the book's importance.

During one of my trips to Japan in the 1990s I performed in a small theatre in a port district of Hiroshima prefecture. After the matinee performance I found myself compelled to buy an antique Japanese scroll in a second-hand store. Depicted on its silk-lined parchment above an inscription of faded calligraphy was a reprint of a portrait of Emperor Taishō from a time close to his coronation (Taishō ruled from 1912-1926). The new Emperor stands face to camera attired in full European-style Imperial Army dress: all brocades, white gloves, medals and sporting a hearty black moustache. A military pillbox hat resplendent with flowing plumage rests neatly on the side table. My friends and loved ones often questioned my attraction to this seemingly kitsch memorabilia and I was never fully capable of explaining what compelled me – except that I felt in some way it was a bridge across the anomie I often experienced when considering contemporary cultural forms in Japan. Eckersall's book takes me many steps closer to a more cogent explanation.

He goes to considerable length to locate the *angura* space in historical context and this is one of the work's defining strengths. Much well-intentioned appraisal of contemporary Japanese performance glosses over the historicity of the respective forms: for example many scholars and practitioners alike, drawn to the world of *butō*, have rushed headlong to seize on the form with scant regard to the roots that determine its core nature. Eckersall affirms that the *angura* space is nothing if not a testament to history, a reaction to the Euro-centrism of its predecessor theatre form, *shingeki*, and a reinvention of tradition. The radicalism of *angura* is shown as a product of its historical roots. A prime concern of *angura* is the attempt to resolve contradictions of Japanese modernity and the *shingeki* movement was a key cultural icon of the Japanese modernist era. *Shingeki* was a theatre form that fully emerged in the early twentieth century and like Emperor Taishō, dressed up in European clothes. Eckersall observes that while the movement did have some redeeming strengths (including its embrace of agit prop and Brechtian theatrical values) *shingeki* theatre was viewed disparagingly for its naturalism, apoliticism and lack of engagement with local artists. Indeed, *angura* artists galvanized in the sixties around their rejection of *shingeki*: it was 'too comfortable ... too western, not involved with Japanese aesthetic, too removed from the people ... too intellectual' (14). Many of the emergent characteristics of *angura* were therefore contrary to this theatrical forerunner: dynamic political radicalism embodied on stage, a repudiation of realism and an embrace of traditional folkloric forms. As a foreigner training in contemporary theatre with companies such as Suzuki Company of Toga (founded by key *angura* director Suzuki Tadashi), I often found this neo-nationalism hard to understand.

Suzuki's productions recall the rural origins of Japanese folklore and traditional theatre forms while also embracing cornerstones of the Western canon: Chekhov and Shakespeare sit alongside guttural *noh*-style utterance, farmers' turnips, woven baskets, Groucho Marx and sixties pop songs.

Eckersall explains thus:

it might be argued that while Suzuki's theatre is concerned with the interrogation of cultural history, it is not concerned with the creative expression of individual actors and their personal histories, motivations that might be seen in the psychological drama of *shingeki* (60).

His unpinning of this historical precedent illuminates not only the emergence of *angura* but also a key to its demise. While the *angura* of the sixties cast aside much of what *shingeki* embraced, many of the key figures from this era still clung to old political structures of power within their respective groups' formations. For example even in the 1990s, the Suzuki company, like many of the other companies with which I trained, was driven by the guru-like status of its leader and maintained strict hierarchical relations among its members. While still obliged to pay full tuition fees, aspiring recruits to the company were expected to undertake servile roles: mopping stages, preparing meals, fetching and carrying for the older members and for the director; similarly, experienced women actors fought hard to gain exposure or artistic parity alongside their male counterparts.

In identifying this characteristic of many *angura* artists Eckersall steps up to a disarming critique of theatre practice that is often eschewed by scholars – especially in the Japanese context. His perspective is informed by a solid understanding of theatre-making ecologies and in this way his approach is both fresh and unveiling. Importantly the book pushes analysis beyond theatrical forms and public outcomes as cultural artefacts: Eckersall is concerned with the practices and politics of the companies as dynamic processes and this approach adds an important dimension to the publication. His critique tracks the development of company power structures from these founding artists of the sixties through to more recent *angura* companies such as Gekidan Kaitaisha and Daisan Erotica and he observes this development in political terms:

Like Kawamura Takeshi [from Daisan Erotica] Shimizu [Shinjin of Gekidan Kataisha] has been critical of leadership issues in *angura*. His criticism stems from his belief that one should view theatre as a microcosm of social reality and notes that: 'a sense of coercion has not been made clear to group members; it's the way Japanese society has worked until now' (163).

It is not only in his analysis of power structures that Eckersall's practical understanding of theatre ecologies is visible. His observations on the work of Gekidan Kaitaisha demonstrate his strong working knowledge of the company, its key artists and practices. These insights and the close analysis of the company's work are some of the strongest elements of the book. By tracking the progression from sixties creative radicalism through to companies like Kaitaisha that still employ strategies that clearly draw from this heritage in the present day, he demonstrates that *angura* provides a useful lens through which to view Japan's radical cultural history.

Throughout his analysis Eckersall is quite candid in the position he adopts of advocacy for cultural radicalism and this clarity is of benefit to the reader. Like the *angura* space itself, his analysis is subjective and wears its radicalism on its sleeve. 'Exploring resistance to dominating cultural and political formations through theatre and the arts is a primary concern of this book' (220). He engages the perspective of theorist Fredric Jameson and cultural critic John Clammer as a means to explore these sites of resistance within the broader capitalist project. For example in his analysis of the 1980s economy and its effect on the *angura* space, Eckersall pursues a postmodern critique in line with Clammer. He suggests that during the eighties the bubble economy invoked consumption as the new play space for Japanese subjectivity and in this sense it occupied the *shutaisei* spirit of *angura*.

Happily, the dystopic visions of nineties artists such as Kawamura and Shimizu go some way to remounting the *angura* potential for cultural radicalism and in this way they maintain Eckersall's optimism. These are artists who, having ridden the fall of the *angura* movement in the eighties, have subsequently been architects of hope for a second rise in *angura's* relevance. Sites of resistance now occur within the socio-cultural sphere in a way much progressed from the protests of the sixties. Furthermore, the contemporary *angura* space has seemingly emerged from the disorientation I observed in the early nineties. In spite of Jameson's pessimism about the capacity of the human spirit to invoke the breakdown of late capitalism, Eckersall views this re-emergence of *angura* positively. Invoking the spirit of key *angura* director Terayama Shuji, he closes his book with a voice of hope and faith in the theatre:

We witness in the present day an intense patterning of neo-liberalism, cultural exceptionalism, fundamentalism, and rising authoritarian forms of nationalism in Japan and elsewhere. Yet these forces are failures of the imagination to create something better. It is precisely the arts that observe and critically analyze these trends. The avant-garde sustains imagination towards realizing ideas for progressive global change... Through theatre one might rethink politics and society and 'take power with imagination' (221).

References

- Klein, Susan Blakely, *Ankoku Buto: the Premodern and Postmodern Influences on the Dance of Utter Darkness* (Ithaca N.Y.: Cornell University, 1988).
- Kurihara, Nanako, *The Most Remote Thing in the Universe: Critical Analysis of Hijikata Tatsumi's Butoh* (New York: University of New York, 1997).
- Viala, Jean & Nourit Masson-Sekine, *Butoh: Shades of Darkness* (Shufunotomo, 1988)
- Waguri, Yukio, *Butoh Kaden* (Kohzensha/Justsystem, 1998).

Michael Cohen's PhD thesis (2002) investigated cultural representation in major public events. He received a postgraduate award at the Olympic Studies Centre in Lausanne, Switzerland (2002) and has written about physical theatre, (Australasian Drama Studies, #41), the Sydney Olympics Opening Ceremony (Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance 2008) and site-based

performance (About Performance #7, 2007, *Back to the City*, 2008). Cohen is also a theatre and event director of twenty years' experience. He was Co-artistic Director with Theatre Kantanka (Sydney), Programme Director of Live Sites (Newcastle NSW) and is currently Events Manager at Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority.

Editorial Note

Performance Paradigm issues 1 to 9 were reformatted and repaginated as part of the journal's upgrade in 2018. Earlier versions are viewable via Wayback Machine:

http://web.archive.org/web/*/performanceparadigm.net

© 2009 Michael Cohen



Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons AttributionNonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-ncsa/4.0/>