Critical Acts

Mut zur Wahrheit
Ambiguous Alternatives in Oliver Frljić’s GORKI — Alternative für Deutschland?

Emily Goodling

In the transitional scene between the first and second part of Oliver Frljić’s GORKI — Alternative für Deutschland? (Gorki: Alternative for Germany?), a small child stands center stage. Speaking into an amped-up microphone, he chants “A-f-D!, A-f-D!, A-f-D!, A-f-D!” Behind him, dancers with the same letters printed on their backs gyrate and then exit, as the firewall of the theatre lifts. Backlit and surrounded by fog, a towering replica of Berlin’s Maxim Gorki Theatre slides slowly towards the front of the stage. The scene is calculated to unsettle: “AfD” is the acronym for Germany’s far-right party, Alternative für Deutschland, and the child’s clear voice penetrates to the heart of German fears about a new generation where right-wing extremism is a central part of the politico-cultural landscape.

Performed throughout the 2019/2020 season, Gorki: Alternative for Germany? seems ideally positioned to comment on current politico-cultural debates. In 2017, a turbulent general election allowed the AfD, a populist party platforming on nationalism, xenophobia, and euroscepticism, to enter parliament for the first time with a shocking 12.6% of German votes. In September of 2019, the AfD became the second highest-ranking political party in several German states, receiving nearly 30% of votes in Saxony. The Maxim Gorki Theatre itself has also come under the direct scrutiny of the AfD, which has called for a repeal of the state funding it receives, and has criticized its focus on an “ideology of multiculturalism” (Nioduschewski 2019).

1. All translations from German, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.
Langhoff took over as artistic director of the theatre in 2012. Originally self-styled as Germany’s first “postmigrant” main stage, the Gorki placed the stories and talents of individuals typically marginalized in German society front and center, particularly those with an immigrant background. In seeking to propose counternarratives to dominant discourses on race and migration, the Gorki has built up an intentionally diverse ensemble, performing a progressive, intersectional repertoire that contrasts with the more conservative fare of other German mainstream theatres.

Theatrical opposition to right-wing extremism is also familiar territory for Croatian director Oliver Frljić, house director at Gorki since 2019 and creator of Gorki: Alternative for Germany? His biography in the program notes characterizes him as a seasoned thorn in the side of extreme-right movements across Europe:

He already knows confrontations with right-wing populist and fascistoid parties from experiences in Croatia, Poland and Austria. His productions have been demonized, boycotted and disrupted by right-wing extremists, hooligans and other fanatics. Productions of his have been censored and banned in Bosnia, Croatia and Poland [...]. (Maxim Gorki Theatre 2019)

With this context in mind, audiences might thus expect the political message of Gorki: Alternative for Germany? to be a straightforward one: the perspective the Gorki represents is the true alternative for Germany, not the AfD’s fear-fueled, racist populism. Frljić’s conclusions, however, are more ambiguous. Instead of single-mindedly attacking the AfD, his piece also turns a critical gaze on the alleged other end of the spectrum — the Gorki itself. The production asks whether elements of the Gorki’s progressive ideology may be contributing to divides within Germany just as much as that of groups to the extreme right of the political spectrum, examining the ways in which both the Left and the Right are complicit in narratives of fear, silencing, and division. The graphic in the accompanying program reflects the uncomfortable, complicated kinship Frljić is gesturing towards: the theatre’s name is printed over the AfD’s party logo, a red arrow pointing upwards against a sky-blue background.

The opening sequence establishes the grounds for Frljić’s approach. Six actors, all well-established members of the Gorki ensemble, enter the stage under a banner bearing the words Mut zur Wahrheit (courage to speak truth), slamming the door of the firewall behind them. Facing the audience, they begin to spit out criticism of their theatre. First, we assume, and correctly according to the program notes, that they are quoting the theatre’s more conservative critics: actors with a “migration background” are preferred above those without; this is reverse racism. The Gorki’s ensemble is “more diverse” than the general population of Berlin and the ensemble of any other mainstage theatre; this is unfair to its audiences. The “authentic ethnic background” is more important than the talent of the actors, who cannot speak proper German anyway; the
Gorki is thus a second-rate theatre at best. Members of the audience chuckle; this is the sort of superficial criticism that the Gorki has dealt with for years.

It soon becomes clear, however, that conservative politicians and theatre reviewers are not the only ones to have taken a more critical stance towards the Gorki. The actors begin, with increasing fervor, to offer more personal criticism of the house they work for, questioning the efficacy and ethics of Gorki’s political platform in statements that dramaturge Aljoscha Begrich, during a postshow roundtable, stated were generated collaboratively during the rehearsal process (Begrich 2019). “This is a politically correct do-gooder’s theatre where everyone knows they are on the right side,” actress Mareike Beykirch proclaims: “Everyone is happy that they get to complain about the big bad world again, but that doesn’t lead to any real change in the system.” Mehmet Ateşçi continues, “We avoid any real engagement with criticism from outside; we’d rather just celebrate ourselves.” Till Wonka concludes, “The statements from our rage-monologues, in their robust black-and-white worldview, are often just as sophisticated as the slogans of a PEGIDA demonstration”—referencing the infamous far-right protest group Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West. Is the Gorki, the ensemble asks with increasing urgency, just as unable to engage in a nuanced, respectful conversation with the sociopolitical other as their alleged opponents? Is their progressive audience, instead of thinking critically about complex issues, simply solidifying a sense of self-righteousness during their visit to the theatre? The atmosphere is a confrontational one: the actors stand in a row at the front of the stage and speak, or shout, directly into the auditorium.

A series of quick scenes drives home the Gorki’s—and perhaps also its audience’s—own complicity in silencing the opposition, against the theatre’s alleged policy of openness.

5. All quotations from the play are taken from live performances viewed in December 2019 and January 2020, as well as from the archived video of the production accessed on 4 January 2020. Again, all translations are my own.
and inclusivity. In the role of a newcomer to the ensemble, Croatian actress Nika Mišković criticizes Langhoff’s focus on the personal biographies of her fellow ensemble members at the expense of their artistic development, and, despite her screams of “Don’t touch me!” is immediately bound and gagged by the other performers. Long-time Gorki member Falilou Seck reveals that his grandparents were Nazis, and is shouted off the stage with cries of “Raus, raus!” (Out, out!), echoing the slogan of extreme-right protest groups “Ausländer raus!” (Foreigners out!). “Why do you hate me more?” he asks, turning to the audience before he is drowned out by the rest of the ensemble, “Because I’m black or because I am the grandchild of Nazis?” It would seem, Seck concludes bitterly, that anyone who ventures outside of the politically correct battle lines the Gorki has drawn is simply excluded, forbidden to participate on the stage and in the audience.

In the above scenes, an underlying theme slowly emerges, one which has been particularly present in recent discussions about German theatre: the question of authenticity. The debate was kick-started after several main-stage productions came under international attack for their use of blackface in the 2012/13 season (Sieg 2015; Cornish 2014). During the aftermath, theatres such as the Gorki positioned themselves as positive counterexamples, seeking to produce theatre that not only directly addresses issues of racial and ethnic identity, but which also puts the individuals directly affected by these topics onstage — and only those individuals, as anyone attempting to play a role not backed by personal experience would commit the moral blunder of speaking over the voices of others about issues of immigration, racism, xenophobia) that have not personally affected them. In focusing on this sort of “authentic” storytelling, theatres sought to grant true agency to their performers. This contrasted directly with directors like Nicolas Stemann, for instance, who was attacked as an exploitative racist for illegally hiring Syrian refugees from the streets of Hamburg, some of whom allegedly spoke too poor German to fully understand what was going on, to play in a “Refugee Choir” in his 2015 production of Elfriede Jelinek’s Die Schutzbefohlenen (Charges) (Kaempf 2015).

An ensemble member at the Gorki since 2013, Seck complicates the above discussion from within, addressing the pitfalls of the Gorki’s drive to authenticity in an emotional monologue:

My start at the Gorki was magnificent. Finally, I could work with folks who said, we are going to put people onstage who until now had never had a chance to be seen. [...] For the first time in my life, I worked for a theatre that makes topics that previously were ignored or denied the heart of their work. Of course, I thought it was then justifiable to say, we work only with people who have an immigrant background — yes, of course. But then came the questions. Am I only here because I am black? Is this just all a reversal? Reverse racism? Am I in the end, again, just the quota-negro? Yes, the question marks become quite large — and especially when I see actors come onstage who always first have to narrate their migrant identity and only then begin to act.

If I can only ever play myself, only ever advertise my own background and biography, he continues, his voice cracking, where is the diversity in that?

Far more than pointing to the complications of both sides of the political spectrum, Gorki: Alternative for Germany? thus also gestures towards a sort of crisis in the nature of theatre itself, at this particular politico-cultural moment: How can theatres create art that reflects the diversity of contemporary Europe without recreating the structures of exoticism and sensationalism they wish to avoid? How can they reconcile a push for authentic representation with what has traditionally been theatre’s most foundational element, the performance of the lives and experiences of others? Frljić’s piece questions an approach that

6. Frljić is not alone in creating a metatheatrical performance that gestures towards this potential crisis in contemporary German theatre; another recent piece along those lines is Thomas Melle’s Ode, which premiered at the Deutsches Theater on 20 December 2019.
locates the solution to these questions in the simple showcasing of performers of color or with diverse backgrounds, pointing out the ways in which that gesture, unaccompanied by careful structural and artistic reflection, leaves room for the very problems the theatre wishes to avoid.

As if in response to the ambiguities raised by Seck’s monologue, the scene that closes the first half of the evening drives the focus on certain identities and backgrounds to the absurd. In the voice of a game-show host, Ateşçi proclaims: “We have a problem here at Gorki: we hired too many white German women, and we noticed that not all of them have interesting enough backgrounds!” As a result, he announces cheerily, Mareike Beykirch and Svenja Liesau will tell their stories, and the audience will decide by vote whose background is most suited for the Gorki stage, and which actress is thus allowed to keep her job. And so Mareike chokes down tears while talking about her underprivileged childhood (“Wow, Mareike — you poor Germans!” comments Ateşçi), while Svenja narrates her rape at the hands of her Syrian ex—in language drawn straight from 120db, a German-based anti-immigration parallel to #metoo, targeting specifically nonwhite men for their ostensible abuse of white German women—and as “proof” drags onto the stage what the audience must assume is her child, perhaps five or six years old. If this is a theatre that privileges “interesting backgrounds” above all else, they say, even we Germans can provide that.

When Ateşçi then asks the audience to vote by applause-o-meter, they do—tentatively at first, then more self-assuredly. Shocked, he breaks out of character for half a beat to stare into the auditorium. “You’d all better spend some time thinking long and hard about what exactly you just clapped for and why, instead of blindly applauding everything set in front of you,” he says, apparently off-script.7 Silence. And cut: he passes the microphone to Liesau’s son, who steps to the center of the stage and begins to chant “AfD, AfD, AfD...”

The second half of the evening opens with the arrival and subsequent destruction of the Gorki itself. As the fog settles, the massive model of the theatre building, a neoclassical structure built in the early 19th century, is pushed up almost to the edge of the stage. Till Wonka opens one of the front doors of the model and appears to vomit violently, repeatedly. This sparks a flurry of movements: the rest of the ensemble emerges and begins to disassemble the boards and columns that make up the façade of the theatre, until only a steel framework of stacked boxes, around which the replica was constructed, remains. As the lights dim, we notice that the boxes are arranged like bourgeois German sitting rooms. Then, slowly, lamps are switched on, and voices are heard from the dark interiors. “I’m afraid sometimes,” says one performer, and then another, and then another. “I’m afraid of losing my job. I’m afraid of losing my freedom. I’m afraid of other people. I’m afraid of the truth. I’m afraid of not mattering. I’m afraid of my fear. I’m afraid of the future. I’m afraid for Germany. I’m afraid for Germany. I’m afraid for Germany.” In a piece that has complicated the separation between the progressive Left and the extreme Right, this is a moment of a different sort of unity, as the performers speak words that could come from anywhere on the political spectrum. Underneath the slogans of the AfD, underneath Gorki’s glossy messages of inclusivity and progressivism, Frljic suggests, is fear: this is the true common denominator, perhaps the most fundamental unifying factor in a country increasingly divided about its position in the present and its course in the future.

After this quiet ellipsis, the evening picks up pace again in a hectic series of sequences that fill the final half hour of the production. The steel frame of the Gorki replica slowly rotates to reveal Seck, who masterfully delivers extended quotations from the AfD’s party platform as well as Nazi official Joseph Goebbels. Cutouts of the letters that make up Germany’s major political parties—SPD, CDU, FDP—are brought onstage, and scrambled to form

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7. It is unclear whether this episode was indeed off-script; it does not, however, appear in a very early archived performance video (Frljic 2018). At a postshow roundtable (Begrich 2019), it was mentioned that Ateşçi was increasingly shocked at the applause of the audience; I assume he at some point began responding directly in this manner, which in the production clearly breaks with his established character. However, it is unclear whether he says the same lines every time, or if the audience indeed applauds at every show.
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and engagement of the contemporary political actors who sit in its seats. It questions the efficacy of attending progressive theatre events as political activism, at the same time as it seeks without success to draw up any plan for an effective response to rising extremism on both sides of the political spectrum. The ensemble members gesture towards this sense of political (and theatrical) futility throughout the evening: towards the end of the piece, for instance, we discover that self-described “gay-turkish-muslim” Mehmet Atesçi is himself a member of the AfD party, having joined after his sister was killed in the 2018 terrorist attack on a Berlin Christmas market. He turns to the audience and says bitterly: “If you’re all really so opposed to the AfD, then take to the streets and mow down a few of them! Put on your explosive belts and blow up a few headquarters! Do something!!” Svenja Liesau responds to his hyperbole with a more tempered perspective, but one that also gestures towards a lack of constructive political action on the part of the audience: “I actually don’t think you all are so opposed to the AfD, or you wouldn’t be just sitting around here— and you know where that led us.”

In the end, Gorki: Alternative for Germany? does not offer a solution to any of the issues it draws attention to, but rather a diagnosis of the ambiguities and pitfalls of a particular politico-cultural moment in Germany, and of theatre’s fraught position within it. Frlijić’s production questions the efficacy of theatre itself in 2020, its ability to participate in contemporary debates in any meaningful way at all: What can art do in a time of rising extremism on both sides of the political spectrum? How can theatre and its audiences oppose the AfD without engaging in behaviors or tacitly supporting structures that are equally problematic, from the other side?

Frlijić does not leave these conjectures to the realm of the theoretical, however: Gorki: Alternative for Germany? is also a piece about its own audience, about the responsibilities and engagement of the contemporary political actors who sit in its seats. It questions the efficacy of attending progressive theatre events as political activism, at the same time as it seeks without success to draw up any plan for an effective response to rising extremism on both sides of the political spectrum. The ensemble members gesture towards this sense of political (and theatrical) futility throughout the evening: towards the end of the piece, for instance, we discover that self-described “gay-turkish-muslim” Mehmet Atesçi is himself a member of the AfD party, having joined after his sister was killed in the 2018 terrorist attack on a Berlin Christmas market. He turns to the audience and says bitterly: “If you’re all really so opposed to the AfD, then take to the streets and mow down a few of them! Put on your explosive belts and blow up a few headquarters! Do something!!” Svenja Liesau responds to his hyperbole with a more tempered perspective, but one that also gestures towards a lack of constructive political action on the part of the audience: “I actually don’t think you all are so opposed to the AfD, or you wouldn’t be just sitting around here. Or is that your form of protest? Going to the theatre? Really?”

On this topic, Nika Mišković has the last, inflammatory word, before she is bound and gagged by the other performers: “I fucking hate this theatre, Maxim Gorki, this whole shit is fake!” she says, and then turns to the audience, “And you, you are the worst audience in the world! You are so dumb, you’re fucking
dumb, you’ll clap for all the shit they serve you even before the show even starts.” Her words implicate both the audience and the Gorki in participating in a solipsistic cycle of mutual self-aggrandizement, whereby works are put onstage that solidify the existing politico-cultural worldviews of their audiences instead of engaging more critically with opposing viewpoints. From this perspective, Gorki: Alternative for Germany is about the correct ways to take political action, both on and off the stage. Spending the evening in a theatre applauding one’s own attempt at self-criticism, Frljic seems to suggest, isn’t enough.

References


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The Legacy of the Mountain Witch

Yasuko Yokoshi’s shuffleyamamba

Rebecca Copeland

Creating frees me from being one place, one person, and one time.

—Yasuko Yokoshi (2007)

And then there is Yamamba [...] Certainly she cannot be human.
With shifting form, like drifting clouds, temporarily transforming self, by attachment transfigured, a she-demon [...]—Zeami (trans. Bethe and Brazell 1998:221)

A kaleidoscope of images and sounds, shuffleyamamba offers an erratic engagement with ancient ritual and contemporary media that leads viewers to dark places in their own experiences with creativity, gender, and survival. Created by Japanese dancer and filmmaker Yasuko Yokoshi in collaboration with American sound artist Gelsey Bell, shuffleyamamba is a work about travel, transgression, and ultimately transition.1 Ostensibly derived from the earlier noh drama Yamamba (Mountain Crone) attributed to Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443), shuffleyamamba is much more than a contemporary reprisal of a Japanese classic. Wedding her relatively recent studies of Nihon buyō, Japanese traditional concert dance forms, particularly the su-odori or recital form of kabuki, with movement indebted to postmodern choreographer David Gordon’s structural principles and style (notably the incorporation of spoken word and the inclusion of repetitive movement), Yokoshi crafts a pastiche of nonlinear vignettes that contravene the boundaries of genre, gender, time, and space. The dancers in her production, all Japanese nationals, are trained in Western forms, primarily ballet and contemporary. For many this marks their first foray into traditional Japanese dance.

Travel

I arrive early and stand outside the theatre in a light autumn rain waiting for the doors to open. It is Sunday, 6 October 2019 and the performance, sponsored by the Kinosaki International Arts Center, the Kyoto Art

Figure 1. The Eirakukan Theatre in Toyooka City, Hyogo Prefecture. Built in 1901, this is the oldest kabuki theatre in the Kansai region. (Courtesy of Toyooka City)

1. Gelsey Bell is TDR Critical Acts section coeditor; she had no role in writing or editing this article, which came to TDR unsolicited. —Ed.

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Center, and the Japan Foundation, is scheduled to start at 2:00. Reaching the theatre, 80 miles outside Kyoto, was a logistical challenge of matching trains to busses. The Eirakukan (literally Theatre of Eternal Entertainment) is the pride of Izushi, an ancient castle town in the greater Toyooka City. The oldest kabuki theatre still operating in the Kyoto area, the Eirakukan was built in 1901 and in its prime offered two performances a day. But times changed, interests shifted, and the Eirakukan was shuttered in 1964. The theatre reopened 44 years later after a careful restoration that retained the lustrous wooden stage, the tatami-matted audience booths, and the white-paper lanterns. Along the corridors are posters and prints of advertisements for bygone products and old movie stills. Whereas during the theatre’s heyday it was itinerant troupes who traveled to perform there, now audience members make their way from far-flung places to luxuriate in the creative wellspring of the past.

The stage maintains its original kabuki features, with the hanamichi ramp along the left-hand side. But for today’s production, an additional stage has been built out into the audience seating area, somewhat smaller than the width of the main performance area, to which it is connected by a narrow platform. The additional stage brings the performance deeper into the audience area, enhancing the intimacy. It is in this space that past and present commingle.

shuffleyamamba shuffles between Yokoshi’s past works while sampling a variety of performance traditions, both Japanese and Western, in its pursuit of the Japanese yamamba, or mountain witch. An archetypal traveler, the yamamba is an amalgam of centuries of fearsome mountain beings from Japanese folklore, myth, and legend. Although the earliest word to describe this creature was simply oni, or demon, and had no particular gender, once the word “yamamba” (literally mountain hag) emerged in literary texts in the 14th century, this spirit became identified as female. The yamamba, therefore, is the layered result of centuries of misogynistic myth, the manifestation of fear of the single woman, as well as of older women. Some portray the yamamba as a cannibal who preys on men and newly born infants, whereas others depict her as a benevolent force (Copeland 2005:20–21; Reider 2010:62).

Over the years the potency of the yamamba image has appealed to artists as an icon of disruption and pathos. Noh playwright Zeami turned to this figure in his 14th-century drama, 20th-century Japanese women writers have used the yamamba to challenge normative gender roles, and when the media applied the term “yamamba” to shame 21st-century Japanese teenage girls for their practice of bleaching their hair platinum blond and accentuating their deep-brown tans with garish makeup, the girls made the taunt their own, “often in the cheeky form mamba” (Miller 2004:240).

Yokoshi joins the list, creating a complex yamamba character whose gender-defying power, alignment with nature, and ability to transcend time speak to her own movement between the US and Japan and between traditional and contemporary forms. The yamamba’s outsider position allows Yokoshi to examine her own marginalization and question the unreasonable expectations under which female performers have long labored.

Antecedents

Zeami’s Yamamba is the ur-text for Yokoshi’s work. Most noh plays that feature women focus on their emotional attachment to men and the tragedies that ensue. In contrast, Yamamba deals with the encounter between two women; its female-centric focus is rare. In the play, a popular itinerant dancer known as Hyakuma Yamamba, whose fame rests on her portrayal of Yamamba the mountain witch, journeys across a dense mountain pass. On her way she encounters a haggard crone who had once been a beautiful entertainer. As the noontime sky eerily darkens, the elder enjoins the younger to perform the Yamamba dance. When she does, the old woman reveals that she is in fact Yamamba, the subject of Hyakuma Yamamba’s dance.

shuffleyamamba crystallizes this moment of encounter between the itinerant dancer and Yamamba in a series of multimedia montages using film clips of Yokoshi’s past performances, and recorded voices alongside live dance. Yokoshi explores the archetypal passage of all women who step beyond the security and moral certainty of the family structure and into the unknown.

Yokoshi uniquely represents this doubling of identities, voices, and experiences by insert-
ing her own past dance pieces into *shuffleyamamba*. The piece’s title recalls her solo work *Shuffle* (2003), which earned her a New York Bessie Award. This earlier dance “shuffled” between Yokoshi’s inherited memories of maternal relatives lost at sea and the Japanese mythic underworld, Yomi. Izanami, the central character, is the mother of the Japanese archipelago. Because she spoke her desire for her consort first during the courtship ritual, their subsequent offspring were sickly, and the primal couple were forced to reenact the ritual, with the male appropriating Izanami’s words. When Izanami later dies, her consort pursues her to the underworld, and ignoring her request not to look at her, sees her putrefying corpse. Horrified, he flees her chamber, rolling a mighty boulder into the opening, sealing her forever in her realm of death. Yokoshi dances the goddess back to life by imagining her communication with her consort. In Yokoshi’s incarnation of Izanami, the goddess transcends the limits of her physicality and gender by becoming one body, both female and male (with the help of a giant strap-on penis), life and death, future and past. Like most female goddesses the world over, she is scripted as death and birth in one, and the dual identity is extended into the current embodiment of the yamamba.

Yokoshi continues her interrogation of transcendence in *shuffleyamamba* by returning *Shuffle*’s Izanami to the stage, first as a film clip of the earlier performance projected on the back of the stage and later in a live performance sequence by Sawami Fukuoka. Fukuoka wears the same costume Yokoshi wore in *Shuffle*, which consists of a short waistcloth barely covering a long exaggerated merkin of dark matted hair, suggesting her wild, innate sexuality. From time to time she raises her waistcloth to dip her fingers into the tangled mass. Her chest is bare but for two bright red circles that cup her nipples. Izanami’s wig is the same dark color and texture as the hair between her legs. Her face bears little discernable emotion. Masklike, it seems frozen in an expression of uncertainty and wonder. With one foot planted on the stage, her hips lowered and angled back, her other foot extended sometimes in front of her, sometimes behind, her arms stretched out before her — she appears to have been caught mid-step, frozen in her march forward. Is she reaching for the object of her desire? Or is she being thrown backwards? Coming or going? Her pose presents a question, the dilemma confronting women caught in the meshes of patriarchal societies, trying to act on their desires yet pulled back by social expectations, and by the gods who reprimand them, just as they reprimanded Izanami for enunciating her desire. Yokoshi emphasizes this dilemma by referencing the pull of her earlier piece, even as she strives to move forward.

**Transgression**

As the Eirakukan fades to dark, a hissing sound fills the auditorium and a gray half-light from four separate footlights slowly suffuses the stage. A dancer comes into view, pounding her fist on her hip. She leaps to the left, lands lightly, bounces, and spins in the air before landing flat-footed in a plié. Rolling up on the toes of alternating feet she draws circles with her hips before bending forward with rounded back to lightly brush the floor of the stage with her hands. Heel-toeing her feet together, she draws herself to a stand and again beats
her fist on her hip. As this dancer repeats her movements, a second enters, and then a third, each moving in accordance with her own motivations. One draws circles on the floor with her toe before sweeping her leg into an arabesque, arms above her head in a gentle arc. She suddenly stamps her foot on the floor of the stage, her graceful arms now tensely thrusting at her sides. The third curls her arms above her head, her left leg raised, foot flexed. The light makes a pattern of ghostly leaves across the floor and the soft, sporadic thud of the dancers’ feet and pounding of the fist are met by the recorded sound of wind chimes, shimmery and bright. Gelsey Bell, who has been making the hissing noise while traversing the balcony, now enters the main theatre, traveling down the aisle before taking her seat in the audience to the right of the stage. She accompanies the movement of the dancers with eerie vocalizations—part banshee, part rusty door.

The dancers, Narumi Ueno, Haruna Shibuya, and Juri Nishioka, wear ordinary practice gear, form-fitting pants and short T-shirts; their hair is pulled into tight buns and covered with dark netting. Their faces, free of makeup and glistening slightly, remain expressionless. Each dancer wears speakers strapped to her waist so that the recorded sounds created by Bell (a mixture of bells, percussion, and vocalization) follow them about the stage. The tempo of the movement quickens as the background sound grows louder—the shrieks become shriller and the tinkling of the bells more insistent. All at once the three dancers drop to their right knees, their left feet flat on the floor. As they bend at the waist, they snap their left arms down in front of them, their hands clenched in fists as if to strike. The sound of chimes and the striking gestures remind me of Yokoshi’s earlier piece BELL (2013), which offered a contemporary reimagining of both the ballet Giselle and the 18th-century kabuki dance Kyoganoko Musume-Dōjōji (A Woman and a Bell at the Dōjōji Temple), based on another well-known 14th-century noh drama. At its heart Dōjōji is the story of a young woman so madly in love with a priest that she turns into a vengeful serpent when he rebuffs her. Untoward female desire, once again, is as dangerous as a fiery serpent. This message of unbounded female desire also runs through shuffleyamamba. As Bell’s vocalizations subtly gravitate from eerie shrills to ethereal chords, the film of Izanami in Shuffle slowly grows to prominence on the backstage wall. Her image seems to float onto the stage from the past, displaying her familiar steps. The three dancers, now seated on the stage, lean forward as if bowing in obeisance to the image, rising in unison to clap, pull their hands to their heart momentarily, and exit the stage in slow, stylized lunges and sweeping arm movements. The projected image of Izanami fades to black.

shuffleyamamba is not performed exclusively by women. The female dancers return to the stage, shifting to synchronistic movements timed by the clicking of a metronome, simulating a practice session with robotic precision—a combination of ballet, modern dance, and eventually Japanese classical movement. Another figure takes the stage. Wiggling and jiggling, back to the audience, the dancer does a mighty booty shake. The wig the dancer wears is fluffy and recalls Izanami’s from the earlier work. Is it she? The dancer enters the light and we see he is male. Terunobu Osaki wears a multicolored splash-spotted outfit that according to the program “Dictionary” is modeled on the Merce Cunningham leotards in Summerspace (1958) (Yokoshi 2019:7). The costume is not as tight as Cunningham’s unitards, and Osaki’s physique is not as trim. His gyrations across the stage draw muted laughter from the audience. He is clearly out of place among the gracefully pirouetting women dancing in perfect unison.

A fifth dancer enters. Long-limbed, black-clad, and high-heeled, she steps boldly before the audience, microphone in hand, and announces that she is “Yamamba.” However, given her contrived presentation, she is more likely the modern version of Hyakuma, the itinerant dancer from the earlier noh drama. The role is performed by Norico Sunayama, a well-known member of Kyoto’s artistic collective Dumb Type, and in her monologue this “contemporary yamamba” alludes to the way female dancers are charged with overlapping roles: performer of sacred dance and provider of profane entertainment. This references and perpetuates the noh play’s suggestion that
mountain ogresses like Yamamba were originally itinerant female performers. Although many were ostensibly affiliated with either religious institutions or the court, they were regarded as prostitutes by dint of being publicly available to the male gaze as well as by circulating beyond the family structure.

The three dancers on the Eirakukan stage morph from ballet to the slow steps of noh — arms stiffly bowed at their sides, fingers curled tightly into their palms, and feet sliding across the floor. Shortly after they exit Ueno returns, now swathed in white fishnet stockings — the quintessential accessory of the floozy — and a red silken top with dangling kimono sleeves. She mimes lascivious laughter and gazes about the audience with exaggerated come-hither looks as she slides sensually along the hanamachi, hips swaying, shoulders rolling. She makes her way to the stage proper in complete silence, accompanied only by the soft padding of her feet and the swish of silk sleeves. Yet once on the stage, a chorus of women’s high-pitched voices intoning “like, like, like” in lilting singsong swells up from the wings.

Shibuya and Nishioka then return to the stage dressed in tight black leather pants and fitted tops with dangling kimono sleeves. The chorus of “like, like, like” gives way to Bob Fosse’s “Rich Man’s Frug” from Sweet Charity, which blares through the theatre as the dancers shimmy across the stage, slope-shouldered, knees turned-in. One pantomimes boxing, the other flashes jazz hands. Ueno, the dancer in white fishnets, talks excitedly about masturbating for a customer while softly a recorded voice — ostensibly from a phone call — says exactly the same thing, a few beats too slow to be in perfect unison. Voice is layered upon voice as one woman’s experience is magnified and multiplied, creating a multilayered history of the yamamba as both iconic and contemporary, eager to please and easily exploited. The sex worker masturbates for money. The original yamamba, tugging at her tangled bush, does so out of instinct. Both become objects of social suspicion.

Transitions

When Bell at last enters the stage from her seat in the audience, we have reached the climax of the piece. An accomplished performer of experimental vocalization, Bell drives the pulse of the piece, not unlike the bayashi, the noh “orchestra” of flute and drums.

BELL: It’s hard work
Hearing my name in yours
It’s hard work
Hearing my na-ma-e [Japanese for “name”].

Her voice is high and ethereal, her register pure and chilling, though the song she sings soon slips into a bouncy, pop melody. Projected on the wall behind Bell is the image of the yamamba, this time embodied by Norico, wearing a platinum blond wig and goggles and riding through green rice fields on a bicycle. Simultaneously, in the foreground the flesh-and-blood Norico performs a burlesque dance with pink fans, her thin body teasing and titillating. Alongside her the male dancer, Osaki, entertains himself with red tassels attached to his nipples, making them twirl. The young

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2. Field notes, shuffleyamamba, 2:00 pm performance, Eirakukan, Toyooka, 6 October 2019.
female dancers return to the stage in various kinds of red trousers: one in sweat pants, the other in silk pajamas. The garments reference the trailing red hakama trousers of the shrine maidens of old, the miko, the shirabyoshi, the kugutsume, and other itinerant performers who served ritual functions and fired the male sexual imagination. Their long white kimono sleeves are imprinted with the triangular pattern suggestive of the serpent or demon in traditional performances of female jealousy and madness, such as “Dōjōji.” We are once again reminded of the evil ascribed to a woman who dares to name her desire, a woman who pushes past the safe enclosures of the family—a woman like the yamamba.

Bell’s lively pop song, now sung with backup by the other performers, gives way to ominous percussion, resembling rolling thunder. Fukuoka takes center stage and behind her Yokoshi’s Izanami performance is again projected on the screen. In the film, Yokoshi assumes her earlier movement motif, balancing precariously on one foot with her arms reaching into the emptiness before her, and the live dancers in red once again stand before the montage. They carefully copy Fukuoka’s yamamba movements like one would when practicing traditional Japanese dance with a teacher. Fukuoka faces the group, her back to the screen, replicating the exact movements of Yokoshi’s projected image. Again we sense the continuum of time as the past extends into the present. To the side Ueno, now performing in the role of a traditional dancer, her fishnets replaced by loose white trousers resembling hakama, kneels on the stage and, speaking into a microphone, describes her experience as an apprentice to a Japanese master. “When I entered the school, the sensei told me, ‘You don’t possess time for yourself. All the time you have is given to me. Taking a bath and going to the bathroom is yours. Everything else is mine.’” This section challenges conventional distinctions between traditional Japanese dance, which strives to eliminate individuality, and Western modern/contemporary dance, which often encourages autonomy and self-expression. However, this reductive view ignores the creativity gained through maturity in classic Japanese performance and misrepresents the differing technical requirements of Western concert dance. The perceived passivity of the former has led some critics to describe it as “feminine,” while the assertiveness of the latter has been called “masculine,” binaries that Yokoshi questions throughout her piece (Iwaki 2020:76).

shuffleyamamba concludes in the darkness of the mountain, represented by Bell who returns to the stage cloaked in a bear skin, signaling her identification with nature. She sings a portion of the original medieval noh Yamamba, draping her voice in the mannerisms and tonality of a Japanese male utai singer. Even so her Western-trained woman’s voice slips through, providing a double-voiced tonality. As with so much else in this performance, sacred dance crosses into the profane. Even

3. Her words are a verbatim record of Kayo Seyama, eldest disciple of dance master Masumi Seyama. Kayo Seyama worked with Yokoshi on her earlier dance Tyler Tyler (2010) (see Kourlas 2010).
the theatre building itself suggests transgressions of time and space since originally this kabuki stage would only have been accessible to male performers. Now we have Norico crossing its finely lustered floorboards in sharp (Western) high heels. We have the aristocratic noh utai, which in the past would never have mingled with the plebian kabuki sounds, and we have Bell with her operatic poise and tall body striding barefoot into a Japanese space.

Behind Bell a figure writhes on the stage struggling to find release from the brown shroud that encases it. We do not know if the figure is human or beast. The recorded music grows loud and discordant, so loud it vibrates within the bodies of the audience members. With throat-rending screams, the creature rips free of its shroud or embryonic sac and emerges, naked except for the wild, unkempt pubic hair wig covering its loins and creeping toward the knees. This creature is sex incarnate: uncontrolled desire, creativity, art unbounded.

The sounds the emergent one makes are echoed by Bell, draped in the bear skin. There is a cacophony of cries, harsh and primeval, and it is impossible to know if they voice pain or pleasure. It is also difficult to tell if the emergent figure is male or female. Performed skilfully by Fukuoka, the body is strong, sinewy, and nearly flat chested; the bush of pubic hair conceals any noticeable genitals. We have moved beyond duality into a realm where past and present, East and West, and male and female have lost their meaning. As Bell, now in the darkness of the wings, chants the word “yamamba” with a haunting ethereality, the dancer crawls, belly dragging, across the stage, struggling to stand. When at last they have found their footing, slowly, uncertainly the dancer rises and transitions into the familiar stance, balancing on one foot. The pose connects the dancer to all those who came before and all those who will follow — reaching back in time to an origin while trying to step forward, arms outstretched in desire yet held in stasis, unable to progress. The dancer wobbles, the supporting leg gives way, and they collapse as the stage falls dark. Bell’s chants of “yamamba” give way to the faint tinkling of the wind chime, and finally a chorus of night insects.

By the performance’s conclusion we have traveled beyond binary paradigms of male/female, good/bad, traditional/contemporary, nature/artifice, free/confined. In the process we have brushed up against the power of art and particularly of dance to challenge the status quo and speak for the marginal. We are left with questions that nag at us long after we have exited the theatre, questions that in many respects are unanswerable. _shuffleyamamba_ does not end. The dancers simply leave the stage.

References


