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Theater Review: Asian Delights from Yukio Mishima and Tennessee Williams

OCTOBER 1, 2019 — [4 COMMENTS](#)

By Robert Israel

Kudos for two short plays by Tennessee Williams and Yukio Mishima at this year's Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival.

The Lighthouse by Yukio Mishima. Directed by Benny Sato Ambush. Staged by the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, Provincetown, MA. Closed.

During the off-season the Outer Cape Cod feels open and exposed, which makes it an ironic location for an outdoor production of *The Lighthouse*, a one-act play by the Japanese novelist and playwright Yukio Mishima that examines five characters who are bedeviled by deeply repressed desires and anxieties.

The Lighthouse was given its English language premiere in Provincetown this past week at the 14th annual Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, under Benny Sato Ambush's strong direction. The staging had an all-Asian/Asian-American cast playing the text's Japanese characters. Presented alfresco, against the backdrop of Provincetown harbor, *The Lighthouse* was a stirring experience — one of the best shows this season.

It is risky to perform a live, dramatic work outdoors; weather forecasts are not dependable. Over the years the PTWTF — with its trademark derring-do — has taken on the elements and has often succeeded in beating the odds. But its luck ran out on September 26. David Kaplan, the Festival's curator, in a short speech before opening curtain, warned audience members that rain was expected. The hope was that the 75-minute production would beat the showers. No such luck. Sprinkles arrived mid-way: audience members opened their umbrellas and the actors continued performing. Then came a downpour, minutes before final curtain. Stagehands scrambled to fetch props and unplug the electrical equipment; soggy viewers hightailed it to nearby pubs.

The next night I caught the final few minutes of the play — it was well worth my return visit.

Mishima's plays, like those of Tennessee Williams, take us into the inner lives of their characters via the impression that we are eavesdropping on their everyday talk. There are clues in the conversation to turmoil in psychological depths. As Noboru, actor Sam Hamashima, familiar to Boston audiences for his work with Lyric Stage and other companies, plays a young man struggling with his sexual longings. We are left guessing, during the early scenes, if this character (we are told he is an economics major at a Tokyo university) is dealing with incestuous feelings for Masako (Haley Sakamoto), his 19-year-old sister. It turns out that his dangerous desires will only become clear when Noboru's stepmother, Isako (Lya Yanne), enters the picture. Mishima gives us the trio, alone in a room, facing a lighthouse.

As evening fell and the sky over Provincetown harbor became awash with pastel colors, the lighthouse past MacMillan Pier became increasingly visible, sending out a bright-lit Morse code to ghostly sailboats, their sails unfurled, as they rounded the breakwater. This was a sublime backdrop for the production. The characters spoke in low tones, moving toward and away from one another,

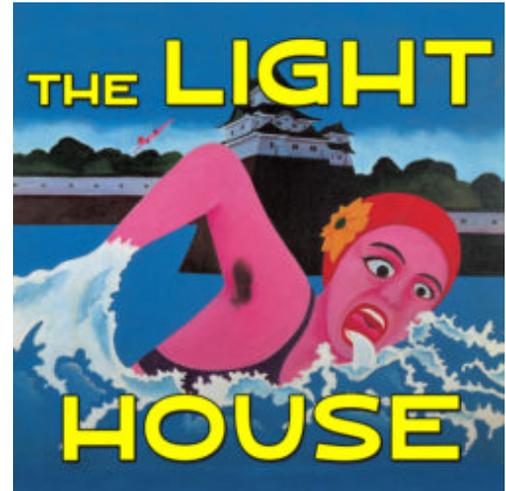


Image: Tadanori Yakoo.

embracing and repelling one another. As this probe of taboo desire continued, we met Yukichi (Yoshira Kana), Isako's second husband. The tension was ratcheted up to unbearable levels. Noboru is driven to confess his unfulfilled lust for his step-mother; he struggles against his fear of telling the disruptive truth. Meanwhile, Mishima supplies banter about alcohol consumption and sleeplessness. There are allusions to past flirtations as well as other distractions, all while the lighthouse beyond MacMillan Pier called to us (and Noboru) from afar.

The sound of the incoming tide at this point – along with the first spatter of raindrops – added more atmosphere to the production. It couldn't have been more effectively choreographed. Except, of course, for the show-stopping downpour.

Mishima's dramas have been largely ignored in America. *The Lighthouse* offers the perfect opportunity to reverse our grievous neglect of a world class playwright. This powerful and haunting work will no doubt win new converts. Benny Sato Ambush and the PTWTF need to proselytize by bringing this superb production to larger house in the Boston area.

The Lady from the Village of Falling Flowers by Tennessee Williams. Directed by Natsu Onodo Power. Staged by Spooky Action Theater, Washington, D.C., at the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, Provincetown, MA. Closed.



(l to r) Dylan Arrendondo, Melissa Carter, and Jared H. Graham in “The Lady from the Village of Falling Flowers.” Photo: lovetophotograph.com.

According to research conducted by PTWTF curator David Kaplan, Williams wrote 30 full-length plays and more than 35 one-act scripts during his lifetime. He also left behind a trove of unpublished and unproduced dramatic works, now housed at the University of Texas and other repositories. Since his death, 36 of these works have been performed, 12 of them at the PTWTF. While a few of these have been stellar, like last year’s *Talisman Roses* — several of them, while interesting experiments, should have remained buried in Williams’s archives.

Kaplan discovered *The Lady from the Village of Falling Flowers*, a one-act written in 1935, at the Williams archive in Texas. It had never been published or produced. Happily, this world premiere is not one of those aforementioned awkward exercises. On the contrary: this text is a bittersweet, silly, radiant parable that not only gives us a glimpse of Williams’s genius at an early stage, it also showcases his wicked sense of humor.

Spooky Action Theater, who tried out the production at their home base in Washington, D.C. earlier this year before trucking it up to Provincetown, breathes vigorous life into this work. It doesn't take much of stretch to envisage this production traveling the Rialto: it is that good.

Under Natsu Onoda Power's lively direction, (she is known to Boston audiences for her work with Company One on *Astro Boy and the God of Comics* a few years ago), a talented ensemble cast shines, thanks, in large part, to Power's and cast member Melissa Carter's work assembling a cadre of charming puppets and other props.

The use of finger puppets awakens the child in all of us. It takes us back to a time when, as youngsters, we decorated thimbles or wooden spools, found hanks of colorful yarn or string to serve as mops of tousled hair, and used remnants of cloth to serve as suits or dresses to create 'characters.' By making our voices rise or fall, from low and deep to falsetto, we could give these curious creations life – a cardboard box served as our stage.

This return to tot-hood is the approach Spooky Action Theater takes with *The Lady from the Village of Falling Flowers* – and the result is an amusing, imaginative romp.

The story revolves around Emperor Nijo (Dylan Arrendondo), who is searching far and wide for a bride, one who will please him in many ways, particularly with a knack for writing verse. He is assisted on the quest by his faithful Prime Minister Kamo (Jared H. Graham). The talented Melissa Carter, her hair a wildfire of ringlets crowned with a garland of flowers, is The Lady, the Princess Musaki.

The start of each scene features narration, the pace is madcap, placards are hung on the makeshift cardboard stage to propel the action, there is dancing and prancing. As for the level of humor, a cardboard cutout of a light bulb, tinted yellow, pops up when one the characters gets a bright idea. The arrival of moonlight? One of the players takes a cardboard orb and plasters it on his or her forehead. It all makes for deliriously good fun.

Williams would go on to become a far more polished dramatist, but his early strength as a storyteller who treasured an innocent heart is evident in the warmhearted zaniness of this production.

Robert Israel writes about theater, travel, and the arts, and is a former member of Independent Reviewers of New England (IRNE). He can be reached at risrael_97@yahoo.com.

BY: **ROBERT ISRAEL**

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Comments

Bill Marx says

OCTOBER 1, 2019 AT 9:07 PM

Those interested the plays of Yukio Mishima should get a hold of *My Friend Hitler and Other Plays*, translated by Hiroaki Sato (Columbia University Press, 2002). Four of the five scripts were written during the last three years of the writer's life. (He authored over 60 plays over the course of his career.)

The volume contains lots of illuminating explanatory material, and two essays by Mishima on the theater. The title script is particularly interesting – Mishima played Hitler in a production!

[Reply](#)

Ian Thal says

OCTOBER 1, 2019 AT 11:25 PM

Mishima's politics, of course, were fascistic -- and led directly to his death.

I did have the good fortune to speak to both Kaplan and Onoda Power about the discovery and staging of *The Lady from the Village of Falling Flowers from my new beat in Washington DC*:

Spooky Action Theater Prepares to Premiere a Never-Before-Seen Tennessee Williams Play

Reply

Bill Marx says

OCTOBER 2, 2019 AT 12:28 PM

Hi Ian:

Mishima's plays should be produced despite his 'fascistic' tendencies. His was a peculiar form of fascism — more like a grotesque form of glorified self-immobilization, albeit surrounded by a private army. His final testament — *Sun & Steel* — is a fascinating document that details the reasons behind his suicide in November, 1970.

Reply

Ian Thal says

OCTOBER 2, 2019 AT 7:15 PM

Hi Bill,

My note that Mishima had fascistic tendencies was only to follow up your comment that he had played the part of Hitler in one of his plays. I am certainly open to exploring his work; many of the artists we admire have politics we do not.

Reply

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