



The 77-year-old Paris-based actor, director and author **YOSHI OIDA** has performed in numerous Peter Brook productions, including *Orghast*, *The Conference of the Birds*, *The Iks*, *The Mahabharata*, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* and *Tierno Bokar*. In October, Oida will perform his acclaimed solo work *Interrogations* at New York's Japan Society. In April 2011, Oida will perform at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., in *Fragments*, Brook's staging of five Samuel Beckett short works.
by Randy Gener

MAMORU SAKAMOTO

Growing up in Japan, you learned acting from Okura-San, a famous teacher of kyogen—in fact, one of the masters of the art. What important lesson did you learn from him?

Okura-San was a very serious person. One day he said, “You have too much ego, and that is why your acting is not good.” I said, “I’m sorry.” And I had to think about that.

What was Yukio Mishima like as a person?

He only once directed in the modern theatre. The text was Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*, and I played the young Syrian soldier. He falls in love with Salome, but Salome loves John the Baptist, so my character commits suicide. Mishima-San was a genius. But he was a very childish man. He treated his work like a joke. He would only show a serious face when talking about his clothes. He said theatre was his hobby. I don’t know if it’s true or not. But, yes, Mishima-San was a very open person, like a majestic young actor.

In *Interrogations*, you are accompanied by musician/sound-creator Wolf-Dieter Trustedt. You pose questions drawn from Zen Buddhism’s koans—paradoxes or conundrums used by Rinzai Zen masters to train their students.

The texts come from China’s 11th and 12th centuries. Normally in the Zen monastery, the master gives a koan to the student, and the student tries to think about it and write down a good answer. “Two hands clap and there is a sound; what is the sound of one hand clapping?” “Does a dog have a Buddha nature or not?” There are no right answers, because the koan

is not logical. You must understand not the question, but what is the meaning underneath the question. In the 1970s, Beckett and Ionesco were very fashionable. Their plays were not realistic—they were anti-theatre. I thought, yes, this koan is very good for this world of anti-theatre, because there is no logic in it. The Rinzai Zen masters had a lot of questions, which I chose for the performance. Instead of finding out the answer, I pose the questions to the public. I am like a master asking a koan, and the public answers.

You’ve written three books on acting: *An Actor Adrift* (1992), *The Invisible Actor* (1998) and *The Actor’s Tricks* (2008). How would you describe their evolution?

What I wanted to write down was how to end one’s life as an actor. On the stage you play Hamlet and the curtain goes down and Hamlet disappears, but you still exist. In the café I am still playing an actor; when I go home, the curtain goes down in front of the actor. Sitting in front of a mirror I see Yoshi Oida, but what I see is only the front of Yoshi Oida. I forget what happens next, because we are always acting some part. Right now, you’re playing a journalist.

Yes, right now I’m playing the role of a journalist.

When you put the curtain down in front of the journalist, what happens?

In *The Invisible Actor*, you tell actors to clean every corner of the rehearsal room. At La MaMa Umbria, friends have described to me how you would clean the rehearsal-room floor. You do not get on your knees; you wipe the floor by bending your body.

When you create something, you always depend on the past. First you have to show what you have done before, and then new things come. But already if you stay in something from your past, you can’t go further. We are always hypnotized by society, so it’s very difficult to clean up.

Often I feel like I’m just stuck in the cleaning.

It’s always the case that when people are not able to create, they are imitating somebody’s past or they are repeating something in their own life. In our work, we should go further. To do that, you have to throw away the past, but it’s very difficult to throw away. Cleaning up is a symbol of the dirt going somewhere else. We always experience anguish about going somewhere we don’t know. That’s why you stay stuck in the past.

How would you know that the ego has disappeared?

I can say perhaps: Less ego. Or better than yesterday. That’s the same thing. The ego is horrible. It’s very difficult to throw it away, don’t you think so?

Especially for an actor—the whole idea of it is putting your self on stage. It’s a paradoxical idea.

Yes, yes, yes. When you completely throw away your ego, maybe you have a paradise of spirituality. I dream of spiritual happiness. I am sure it is wonderful. But I’m not sure if I can throw away my ego before I die. I think artistic development is not about adding, but taking away. ☒