Review: Hanjo at Japan Society

Molly Grogan reviews SITI Company’s interpretation of Yukio Mishima’s modern noh play.

The rule of three says that everything is better when two things add one more. That would be news to anyone caught in a love triangle, but Japanese modernist Yukio Mishima (1925-1970) ruthlessly explored the (im)possibilities of three or even two in
Hanjo, his adaptation of the noh play by the same name. The original relates the story of lovers who, when forced to separate, exchange fans as a pledge of their love, and are eventually reunited, but not before the young woman goes mad with waiting, proving once again that two is company and one is the loneliest number. Frustrated perhaps with this happy ending (rare in noh), Mishima threw a wrench into the works by putting a third person in the lovers’ paths. The result isn’t so much a love triangle but a dissolving of two into three inconsolable ones.

SITI Company’s staging of Hanjo, featured in the NOH-NOW series at the Japan Society last week, also follows the rule of three: director Leon Ingulsrud has created a triptych of Hanjo’s, where the play is performed three times in a single sitting by a trio of actors (Akiko Aizawa, Gian-Murray Gianino and Stephen Duff Webber) who trade roles each time. They alternate as Hanako, the young woman, Yoshio, her errant lover, and Jitsuko – Mishima’s invention – a middle aged painter who is fascinated by the younger woman’s tragic beauty and madness, and whose intention to keep Hanako drives the play’s action.

The story, here in a new translation by Ingulsrud, is structured equally in three parts: Jutsiko’s description of Hanako and her tireless wait (earning her a story in the local paper as the “mad girl at the train station,” where she inspects every man arriving in town), Hanako’s declaration of fidelity to the absent Yoshio, which makes her rebuff Jutsiko’s advances and Yoshio’s final, failed plea to win Hanako back. Why? Her wait has consumed her to the point that it has supplanted Yoshio himself as her reason for being. In sum, everyone loses.

Aizawa, Gianino and Webber form an unremarkable trio at first, Gianino playing Jutsiko, Aizawa as Hanako and Webber in the role of Yoshio, except for two things. First, Aizawa performs in Japanese without surtitles – an impediment to understanding her arguments until the story’s second and third iterations, when Hanako’s role is delivered in English by first Webber and then Gianino (by the same token, when Aizawa plays the other roles, we have already heard her character’s lines in English). Is language necessary in love or anger? So thick is the tension between these characters, we read their intentions plainly in their physical cues and tone. Second, Jutsiko is first played by Gianino, and the character’s dialogue, describing the desire aroused by the sight of Hanako’s naked body, reenforces the interpretation that the painter is a man. However, Mishima’s Jutsiko is a woman, and the nature of her relationship with the young Hanako – whose mysteries are never fully revealed by Mishima – is allowed to retain its ambiguities by way of the double casting.
Under Ingulsrud’s direction, the trio performs these roles with an economy of movement, punctuated by hints of the stylized conventions of the noh genre, such as a fan dance performed by Hanako. Similarly, a bare black stage with only three chairs and a violinist (Christian Frederickson) for musical accompaniment is both an evocation and a minimalist interpretation of the noh stage and its hayashi ensemble. Here also, a precise detail or gesture, such as a pair of scissors slicing the empty air while paper scraps flutter like snow to the ground can evoke three things at once: Jitsuko’s rage upon reading the newspaper article that will undoubtedly bring Yoshio to Hanako, the winter scene on the fan that he gave her as a pledge of his love and the moon night flower on the fan that Hanako gave Yoshio. Poetry in motion.

Mishima’s Hanjo is a perfectly balanced tale of desire and loss, reality and illusion, set in post-war Japan. However, Mishima’s modernizations of noh were inspired by the genre’s universal themes, not its conventions. Ingulsrud, on the other hand, seems more concerned with the latter, giving us a timeless story rather than a story for its times, as Mishima imagined it. Everything that comes in threes is perfection, or so a Latin maxim goes, and SITI Company’s Hanjo, developed over ten years, is like a perfectly cut jewel, precisely proportioned and polished. But like Hanako and her idealized image of a long-ago lover, it reveals more about the artist who created it than the living, breathing person who wears it.

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