



madama butterfly



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Tine Milz

For your new production, you have reworked Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*: A young Japanese geisha is married to an American officer. He impregnates her – and disappears soon after. Later, the geisha learns that he's married again and commits suicide. To you, this is an «orientalist» fantasy of the exotic and the foreign. Your adaptation reverses this perspective and puts a young woman into the center. When did you encounter this Opera and what was your motivation to rewrite this story?

Satoko Ichihara

All started when I was in Roppongi [a district in Tokyo with a popular night club scene] drinking and I saw these «Gaijin hunters» – young girls hunting for foreign men. Around the same time, I started to show my theater productions outside of Japan. I started to think about «the gaze» I get from Western culture and specifically from White people. When I'm in Japan, I'm protected by this very strong framework of Japanese culture. I'm only aware of being Japanese when I'm outside of Japan. Then I feel that I have to live up to the expectations that Western people have of me. I felt like a lot of power

and stereotypes were imposed on me by White people. I've always felt tested. That I'm not good enough. So, when I saw the «Gaijin hunters», I didn't feel that they're very different from me. That's why I wanted to pick up on exactly that in my new piece.

TM

You're turning the tables and telling the story from the perspective of the single mother. The White man is the one being hunted. Hunted for his sperm, so she can have a «Hafu baby». «Hafu» [from engl. «half»] means biracial and is considered more beautiful. Which also means to look more Western. So, with this turn, you're mirroring the superiority of Western beauty standards that are still present in Japan nowadays.

SI

Even before we met White people, they were always everywhere in front of us: in movies, advertisements, fashion magazines, etc. From childhood, the Western look is what is presented to us as beautiful. The protagonists of stories or movies are White. Even Sailor Moon [a famous anime character] is White! Blue eyes, long hair, long legs. None of the things

I have! But when we watched it, we didn't even wonder if she was Japanese. Our beauty standard is the White person.

TM

You don't end where Puccini ended the story. You're also describing how hard it is to be a single mum in Japan. And on top, you're talking about the consequences for her son. Her son is Hafu. Being a Hafu in Japan is difficult. To put it in one sentence: the mother's dream is the son's nightmare.

SI

When I saw the original piece, I immediately felt that the son was a special figure. I thought that with the child's position, I'd be able to portray the complexity of our society even better. As a child, I witnessed a Hafu classmate being bullied just because he stands out. Another point is the increasing discussion about young carers in Japan. They have to learn to take care of their families from an early age. Children of single mothers have a hard time, and a lot is projected onto them. And this tension is growing even more during Covid.

TM

The original subtitle of the play is *A Japanese Tragedy*.

Your work has a sharp sense of humor. Would a potential subtitle for your play be *A Japanese Tragic Comedy*? Is humor for you a weapon to portray the complexity of society?

SI

Humor is very important for me. Not only in theatre but to survive in this world. I often feel that society is very rigid, and that can be very hard for me. Sometimes I think things are immutable, and I feel powerless and trapped. There's this feeling of despair that you can't change anything. To fight against these feelings, humor can be a way to break through all these walls that are in front of you. Humor is a way to survive this life. For me, humor is when a powerless person who has no weapons to fight with can still be very sharp. You may not have the power to change much, but at least you can use humor to cut into the wounds of society. And open up a new dimension.

Das Gespräch führten Tine Milz, Dramaturgin, und Satoko Ichihara, Regisseurin des Stücks «Madama Butterfly» am 15.08.2021.

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