

The Effect of Translated Plays: Samuel Beckett and Japanese Theatre

TAKEBE Yoshiko

(Translator)

This essay examines how important and significant 'translated dramas' in Japan are, by contemplating the effectiveness which becomes apparent when certain English plays written by Samuel Beckett are translated and presented on the stage in the form of Japan's traditional performing art. First, I will focus on similarities between the comic qualities of Beckett's early drama and translated versions in Japanese Kyogen. The analysis focuses on discussion of 'kata,' a stylized pattern of acting in Kyogen theatre as well as elements of mimetic art. I will then investigate the mechanism of storytelling in Noh versions of Beckett's later drama to understand ritualism in both English and Japanese versions. Finally, I will analyze how Beckett's plays in the particular context of Noh theatre reveal their affinity to the metaphysical theory of the Zen spirit, the theory in which loss of egoism and aesthetics of silence are focused on. This theory in turn is a useful tool to understand the effect of ritualism in Beckett's later drama, thus reinforcing the significance of Noh Theatre outside of the Japanese culture and in the global landscape of contemporary theatre.

Introduction

Roman Jakobson describes in his 'On Linguistic Aspects of Translation' that 'Interlingual translation or *translation proper* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language' (Jakobson, 1959, p.113), and that 'Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems' (ibid.).

This essay is relevant to translation studies from both linguistic and nonverbal viewpoints of translating English plays into Japanese. By examining Beckett's dramaturgy through the translated plays in Kyogen and Noh versions, this essay searches for how appropriately and how ingenuously such English dramas have been and should be translated in the traditional form of Noh theatre, in order for Japanese audience to intuitively realize what the writer wanted to advocate and demand in his original texts. The translated plays enable Japanese audience to depart from the stereotyped image in Beckett's theatre of the absurd and to perceive his plays in a more familiar way. Likewise, by translating Beckett's plays into the world of Kyogen and Noh, the traditional Japanese theatre

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becomes more accessible to Western audience.

1. Comic Elements of Kyogen and Beckett's Early Drama

Beckett's plays have primarily been performed in the style of Noh theatre by a company called NOHO. Thus, I will explain who NOHO are and what their relationship to Beckett's texts has been.

The director of NOHO, Jonah Salz started with Japanese professional Kyogen actors in 'May, 1981 as a theatre group dedicated to using traditional Japanese theatre techniques to perform Western themes and plays. By using the "Ho" of "Noh", the Direction of Noh, in staging Western works, NOHO hopes that a vital fusion will emerge'(Salz, 1981, p.3). The literal translation of NOHO in English would be 'Method of Noh.' In other words, the NOHO tries to match western plays mainly by Beckett, Stoppard, and Shepard with the method of Noh. After NOHO performed Beckett's *Rough for Theatre I* at the Edinburgh Festival in 1982, NOHO sent a letter with a video of the production to Beckett and received permission from him to perform his plays in Kyogen style. Since then, NOHO has been performing Beckett's plays both in Japan and abroad.

Japanese productions of Beckett's *Act Without Words I* and *Act Without Words II* by NOHO which were first performed in 1982 at the Edinburgh Festival and revived in 2002, effectively utilized Kyogen 'kata,' a stylized pattern of acting, and reflected the features of mime and vaudeville in Kyogen theatre. Forced to survive in the solitude of a desert, a man in *Act Without Words I*, faces a desperate situation. In this play, Beckett called for stage props which descend from flies and disappear in flies. In the Kyogen version, kuroko, a stagehand dressed in black on the stage that the audience is meant to ignore in the convention of Kyogen, played an important role for performing the flow of the text smoothly. For example, in order to indicate the descent and ascent of a tree, the kuroko flips over a white card, which is hanging from the tree, saying 'tree' in Japanese. The opening of a tuft of palms on a tree is expressed by an opening of a parasol by the kuroko. A pair of scissors is also handed by the kuroko to a Kyogen actor, Akira Shigeyama from above. Supported by the kuroko, NOHO performed *Act Without Words I* as if Beckett had written it as a piece of Kyogen. Although *Act Without Words I* is a dark play in which a man repeatedly tries to kill himself and fails, when this is performed on a simple stage of Kyogen theatre, the play becomes more light and humorous.

Act Without Words II is a play which depicts a contrast between a 'slow' (Beckett, 1986, p.209) man A and a 'brisk' (ibid.) man B. I was able to see a video of NOHO performed in 2002 at Oe Noh Theatre in Kyoto, Japan. This contrast was effectively performed by Shigeyama playing A and a British actor playing B. In order to produce a distinctive contrast between the two, Shigeyama was deprived of his familiar 'kata' of Kyogen while the British actor was asked to adopt 'kata' for his role. Shigeyama, who was deprived of 'kata' of Kyogen, performed this play in a contemporary way. The combination of a Kyogen actor and a British actor also effected a fusion of Eastern and Western elements within the context of Beckett's plays.

In this Kyogen version of *Act Without Words II*, the brisk man embodies the repetitious mechanism of humor by adopting Kyogen kata and expressing routines through this stylized pattern. Every movement, including the way he brushes his teeth, combs his hair, and looks at his watch, was formalized in a mechanical style. In contrast, the reluctant man played by the Kyogen actor, Akira Shigeyama, was caricatured in a rather exaggeratedly way, using facial expressions in slow motion to show his disgust of eating and spitting a carrot, thus emphasizing his presence as a comic character.

In July 2008, I had an opportunity to experience the basic movements of Kyogen at a workshop led by Akira Shigeyama in Kyoto. While we had to exaggerate our movements and let our feelings show comically to the audience, we also had to be precise about the timing, rhythm, angle, and tension of every movement. For example, such ordinary behaviors as laughing, crying or drinking are expressed with 'kata' in a dance-like movement. When a Kyogen actor laughs, he opens his arms gradually from his lap with a certain rhythm of his slow paced voice of 'Ha, ha, ha, ha.' On the other hand, when crying, he bends his body by putting his hands closer to his eyes with a constant speed of his slow paced voice of 'He, he, he, he.' Moreover, in a drinking scene, one of the two pours a drink by slanting his opened fan vertically saying 'O, o, o, o.' with a slow paced rhythm towards the other opened fan held horizontally by the drinker. After the drink is poured, the drinker slowly drinks by putting the fan closer to his mouth as he looks upward saying 'Gubi, gubi, gubi, gubi.' When he finishes drinking, he opens his arms wide with the sound of breathing out 'Fah.' In this way, the server is able to understand that the drinker is satisfied with his drink. When a door is opened on the stage, he slides an imaginary door with both his hands by hopping from left to right and making the sound of 'Zoro, zoro, zoro, zoro' in order to let the audience imagine an unseen door on the stage.

I had the opportunity to ask Shigeyama about his attitude toward performing Beckett's plays.

Certainly I consider Beckett's plays totally different from Kyogen. Therefore, when I play Beckett, I enjoy being an actor for Theatre of the Absurd rather than a traditional Kyogen actor. Kyogen techniques are effective 'tools' to perform Beckett's plays.

(Shigeyama, 2008)

As Shigeyama insists above, the method of Kyogen is applied efficiently to Beckett's drama by the performance of NOHO. Taking the example of *Act Without Words II*, Shigeyama combined Kyogen methods, including kata, Koken, and Nohkan with the original text of Beckett. For example, 'the goad right on wheeled support' (Beckett, 1986, p.210) in *Act Without Words II*, which pokes the sacks of man A and B, was made of Japanese bamboo and was controlled by the stage assistant called 'Koken'. While the reluctant man A was accompanied by ceremonious and mysterious tone of a bamboo flute called Nohkan, the brisk man B was supported by cheerful marches of a western flute.

Overall, as both Kyogen and Beckett's early plays depict ordinariness and routines of everyday life, the technique and method of 'kata' in Kyogen theatre is successfully adopted in the NOHO performances of Beckett's *Act Without Words I* and *Act Without Words II*.

'Monomane,' a form of mimicry which forms the basic movement of Kyogen theatre coincides with the pantomime of the characters. That is to say, in a simple stage where Shigeyama is not surrounded by sand and a palm tree, mimicry is employed to make the movement smooth. For example, in *Act Without Words I*, Shigeyama slowly taps both sides of his kimono to indicate that he is trying to dust himself off in a desert. When the whistle is heard and a pair of scissors is handed overhead by kuroko, Shigeyama is able to see it as if it descends from the flies by employing the mimic movement of Kyogen theatre. The audience is encouraged to pretend along with the actor that the descent and ascent of stage props supported by kuroko is natural. The lack of facial expression as well as the simplicity of the stage also heightens the intent of mimicry.

2. Ritualism of Noh Incarnated in Beckett's Later Drama

Before moving on to the discussion of the NOHO performances of Beckett's plays, I will refer to the conventions of Shite and Waki. In Noh drama, the primary role called Shite comes from another world while the secondary role called Waki lives in this world and guides the audience. Although Waki asks Shite who he or she is, Shite does not identify himself or herself immediately. Instead, Shite asks Waki to read Buddhist scriptures. According to the rhythms of the song, Shite arrives on the stage with her true self and dances to express her real emotions. At the end, Shite is able to be purified with the aid of Waki's prayers. This is the primary category of Noh called 'fantasy Noh' (mugen Noh). 'Fantasy Noh' illustrates the process of purifying the agonies of a ghostlike figure, Shite. It is this style that produces surrealistic essence on the stage, which is also expressed in Beckett's later drama. As opposed to 'fantasy Noh', there is a category called 'realistic Noh' (genzai Noh) that depicts a character who lives in the same world as the audience.

Rockaby performed by NOHO in 2002, which is available on video, was a collaboration of a reader of the text, a person who rocked the chair, and silent masked performers. As the stage is lit dimly, the audience is able to see a rocking chair on a wooden platform upstage. Behind the chair, Akira Shigeyama sits quietly to support the rocking of the chair. From the hashigakari, a corridor on the left, a woman in a black dress appears and comes to the center of the stage to put her black stole on the back of a rocking chair. As soon as she descends from the platform and starts to read the lines of Voice in *Rockaby* from the text, the chair begins to move back and forth controlled by Shigeyama. The woman continues to read the lines walking to the left corner of the downstage and sits on a stool to play the role of Waki. As the play nears the end of the first section, a masked performer in a kimono appears on the hashigakari and slowly walks to the centre of the stage to play the role of Shite. At the centre of the stage, Shite mimes elegantly according to the lines of Waki. For example, at the line 'time she went and sat at her window' is read, Shite goes downstage right to look outside

through a window and then sits there. In the final section, there is a Noh style dance where frustration, anger and resignation are gracefully expressed. Toward the end of the play, Shite steps on to the platform for the first time to sit down on the rocking chair assisted by Shigeyama from behind. As the unmasked Waki on the stool finishes reading the lines of Voice, the masked Shite on the rocking chair slants her neck, which implies that her life is over.

I was able to see another Noh production of *Rockaby* at Tessenkai Noh Theatre in Tokyo on November 5, 2006 billed as 'A Beckett Evening'. The piece was performed and directed by actress Rieko Suzuki, who graduated from the Lecoq School in Paris and trained in Noh theatre under Akeo Kanze as well as in Noh orchestral music under Osamu Kitamura. Rieko Suzuki, who premiered Beckett's later works in Japan including *Not I*, *Footfalls* and *Come and Go*, contributes to the introduction of Beckett's plays to the Japanese audience.

As the play began, lights faded in Suzuki, who was dressed in a lacy, black, long dress with a black veil and was sitting on a rocking chair positioned off centre. The mechanical movement of a rocking chair going back and forth along with the slow speed of the recorded Voice in the darkness of Noh theatre created a melancholic, drowsy atmosphere in the space.

The performance space at Tessenkai Noh Theatre created a formal and distant relationship between actor and audience. The actress on a higher level of the stage appeared to be pompous and lordly especially when she ordered the Voice hearing through a tape to speak 'More.' Instead of sympathizing with the actress on the stage at the same level, the audience was rather invited to play an obedient role of passively looking up to the stage. The audience was restricted to enter the world on the stage and forced to observe from a distance. This restriction might have been valid for the audience to watch the actress as an artistic object in the space. In fact, Suzuki, who was trained in Noh theatre, merged with the rocking chair by incorporating 'kata' into her performance. Moreover, according to Zeami's book on Noh theatre entitled *Fushikaden*, the secret of successful art is concealment. Thus, an expressionless, invariable pattern produced on the stage in this production of *Rockaby* was true to the principles of Noh theatre. The production was valid in proving that the structure of *Rockaby* is in line with the principles of Noh. The synchronicity between Voice and Woman was expressed through the convention of Shite and Waki without a departure from Beckett's text.

In discussion about the difficulty of playing Beckett's plays, Rieko Suzuki mentioned the physical requirements, which can be inferred from the original text. If she acts strictly according to the stage directions of the text, she has to be deprived of movement. She called this impact upon her body 'device,' (Suzuki, 2004) which became 'another new body' (ibid.) of hers. That is to say, an immobile body became an essential tool to perform *Rockaby*. Eventually, I was convinced that *Rockaby* is the most appropriate piece among Beckett's plays for Noh theatre where the restriction of body suggests the surrealistic existence of Shite, who looks back at this world from the afterworld. The Voice heard through a tape as well as the Woman on the stage created the same kind of phantom

atmosphere as Noh drama. Just as Noh drama expresses the profound beauty and pathos of the past, the unseen Voice and the actual figure of Woman on the stage commemorated her own life.

Both the NOHO and the Suzuki versions of *Rockaby* expressed Beckett's original text thoroughly by presenting it as a co-existence of Voice, Woman and Chair on the stage. That is to say, it comprises elements of both acoustics and material objects on stage.

The empty space in the Noh theatre version required the audience to imagine whether it connoted ambiguity or holiness for their individual interpretations. It could either be experienced as a lullaby where the audience is cradled with the movement of the rocking chair on the stage, or as a commemoration of the past which the audience associates with Shite of Noh drama. In spite of the mechanical, expressionless acting of Rieko Suzuki on the stage, the empty space of Noh theatre had a great impact upon the actor-audience relationships in two ways. First, the sharing of the restriction affected the relationship between the actor and the audience as well as the relationship between spectators. The audience had to be aware of the existence of a threshold which embodied the empty space. As Rieko Suzuki mentioned about the emergence of another new body when acting in *Rockaby*, the audience is also urged to search for 'another living soul' (Beckett, 1986, p.436) in the darkness of Noh theatre by looking around at the other spectators who surrounded the empty space. Thus, this wariness which prevailed in the theatre potentially enhanced the phantom essence of *Rockaby* and bemused the audience as if they were trapped by an invisible figure. Moreover, the drowsiness produced by this piece together with the rocking of the chair in the empty space connoted the womb of a woman where an embryo is floating in the darkness.

The actor as well as the audience had to share the same kind of feeling as being in limbo in terms of being patient in the darkness of Noh theatre while listening to the repeated voice and experiencing the floating atmosphere of ambiguity. In the end, as the light faded out on the Woman and the rocking chair faded out, I, as an audience member of Noh theatre, rested my gaze on hashigakari, a corridor extending on the left to the backstage through which the Noh actor usually leaves the stage, where I found nothing but darkness.

The convention of Noh theatre was also efficiently adapted to Beckett's *Rockaby* through the stage design in the 2006 version at Tessenkai Noh Theatre mentioned above. It was performed on an empty stage, with the backboard painting of a Japanese pine tree, surrounded by the audience on three sides. Along hashigakari, three small pine trees were situated where the actor usually enters, leaves or delivers speech. This architectural design of the empty stage exposed the depth of the performance space and enhanced the remoteness between the actor and the audience. Acoustically, the recorded Voice echoed surrealistically throughout the empty stage whereas the actual voice of the Woman on the stage ordering 'More' was true to the convention of Noh theatre where voice is surged up from the pit of stomach by pushing the throat. Furthermore, as I mentioned earlier, Noh drama consists of a stylized patterned technique called 'kata,' which puts stress on minimization of expression. Compared to the colorful settings of Kabuki theatre, Noh theatre reduces everything on

the stage, something it shares with the principal image of Beckett's later plays, which is the surreal.

Thus, the importance of Noh drama is in a word 'ritualism'. By framing the characters in a ceremonial restriction, the audience is able to perceive poetic sentiment of the play more imminently and more dynamically. When we reconsider Beckett's later dramaturgy, there are some Noh-important factors. For example, the limited movements of Beckett's characters on the stage can be seen as similar to the stylized 'kata' patterns in Noh drama. Repeated lines in Beckett's later plays must be spoken rhythmically with some pauses. 'The Beckett actor can also learn something from the no performer's use of the voice, so central to the chants that characterize no plays. In Beckett these no chants become the slowed-down speech patterns, the repeated refrains, and the evocative sentence fragments that his characters so frequently intone' (Cima, 1993, p.202). Moreover, by placing the unseen voice in *Rockaby*, the plays are framed as if in a musical box which reminisces about the past. 'Complicated storytelling strategies allow Beckett, like Zeami, to interweave the narrative past and the dramatic present' (Cima, 1993, p.193). Beckett neither admitted formally a relationship with Noh drama nor referred to an actual Noh play in his dramaturgy.

'Beckett imposes an eternal stasis in the empty space by keeping the energy of the combatants in equilibrium and never letting them meet, so that the function of the *yohaku* is never really consummated' (Matoba, 2003, p.153). In other words, if Beckett 'unconsciously' utilized Noh drama, it was through its concept, aesthetics, and spirit. Beckett was not interested in the content of the story represented by Noh drama. He was the kind of playwright who puts more stress on the form of drama rather than the content of the play.

'Both Beckett and Zeami suggest, through their reliance on carefully controlled stage movement, the centrality of the body as well as the mind in the search for truth through will-lessness' (Cima, 1993, p.190). This 'will-lessness' seen in Beckett's later plays is the loss of egoism incarnated in the Zen spirit. The characters in his later drama attain the spiritual enlightenment where silence is dominant over worldly desires. Here, Beckett's motif of 'less is more' artistically vibrates on the stage as minimal art in the theatre.

3. The Effect of Translated Plays

Through analyzing Beckett's dramaturgy from the perspectives of Kyogen and Noh theatre, I was able to demonstrate that the methodologies of Kyogen and Noh Theatre can serve to illuminate western text written by the playwright, as well as its own indigenous narratives.

The consistent motif of repetition and ambivalence is evident throughout Beckett's dramaturgy. It is merely a style difference in expressing the content. While Beckett emphasized comics to express his dramatic theme at his early stage, his style later shifted towards minimalism, where comic elements are reduced and a heartrending atmosphere is emphasized. Although Beckett's dramaturgy progressed over his working career, throughout his magnum opus, the same kind of tone, which is 'tragicomedy', does exist. Beckett has always incorporated both tragic and comic features in a play.

It was simply a difference of how he represented these outwardly and visibly on the stage. In his early plays, which can be called ‘tragicomedies’, the comic elements are much stronger compared to his later plays. On the other hand, his later plays are what I think should be called ‘comic tragedies’ with a stronger tragic aspect.

Just like Kyogen and Noh seem to be different on the surface, they both share the identical root of Sarugaku, which consisted of pantomime, dance, songs, acrobatics, juggling, circus, and comic dialogues. While Kyogen puts more stress on humor and cheerful mood, Noh focuses more on yugen, aesthetics of quiet elegance and kusemai, a dance which is expressed with the rhythms of a drum. Similarly, although both early and later dramaturgies of Beckett share the same kind of motif and stylized pattern, while Beckett accentuated comic elements in his early drama, he emphasized silence and refinement in his later years.

Thus, translated plays are effective and valuable for the deeper understanding of the original texts. This essay not only reveals affinities between English and Japanese plays but also illuminates the significance of translating languages and cultures. The blend of comic and tragic essence of Beckett’s dramaturgy may similarly be perceived through the fusion of western and eastern philosophy.

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【著者紹介】 武部好子 (TAKEBE Yoshiko) ロンドン大学大学院演劇学修士号。聖心女子大学大学院英文学修士号。現在、東京にて翻訳通訳業に従事。

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