

barbican

do something different

Musashi

Ninagawa Company

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A fitting tribute

By Nobuko Tanaka

Musashi premiered in 2009 to gales of laughter and thunderous applause at Yukio Ninagawa's base of operations, Saitama Arts Theater, in the northern suburbs of Tokyo. The Zen comedy-drama written by the leading playwright Hisashi Inoue and directed by Ninagawa posed some key questions in a post-9/11 world: What is a strong person? Who can be the winners in a never-ending cycle of revenge and retaliation?

In 2009 the young lead actors, Tatsuya Fujiwara (*Musashi*) and Shun Oguri (*Kojiro*), laid on a sparkling acting contest that had Japan's theatre world abuzz. For the London performances, Oguri has passed the *Kojiro* baton to Ryo Katsuji, who made his stage debut in Ninagawa's *Faraway from Shibuya* in 2004. Having since collected the Japan Academy Award for Newcomer of the Year for his film work in *Aegis*, and established himself as a small-screen idol, Katsuji is now set for his fourth role with the director Ninagawa who has described him as 'a genius actor'. Responding to the praise in modest fashion, the actor has joked: 'This is

Ninagawa's tactic to incite me to work better.' On a more serious note, though, Katsuji recently revealed how thrilled he was to take on the hot-blooded part of *Kojiro*, an opportunity that allows him to play opposite his long-admired role model, Tatsuya Fujiwara.

For Fujiwara, meanwhile, the return to the Barbican is especially significant because this is where, in 1997, he made his sensational stage debut at the age of 15 in the title role of Ninagawa's *Shintoku-Maru*. Competition for the sought-after part was tough but Fujiwara shone among the 5,537 greenhorns who auditioned. It was to be the start of a fruitful career that is going strong today. Barely a day goes by in Japan without the youthful actor appearing either on stage or screen. Busy as he is at home, Fujiwara has also found time to reside temporarily in London, studying both English and the theatre. Reflecting on those sojourns he has commented, 'Sometimes an actor feels a strong necessity to change himself intentionally, and those were such times for me.' The demanding role of *Musashi* represents a

fresh challenge and another chance to engage with London audiences.

Of course, the play's run in London also evokes a sense of reflection for Japanese theatre-lovers, who learnt that the treasured literary and dramatic writer Hisashi Inoue died at the age of 75 just last month. In reaction to Inoue's passing, Ninagawa said, 'We have only been working together for the past few years but both of us have been dedicated to Japanese theatre for almost the same length of time and I now feel robbed of an eminent comrade-in-arms. In great and meaningful ways, Inoue conveyed a fierce criticism against the wartime state of Japan, and he did so with a tremendous energy.'

Inoue, a former chairman of the Japan Pen Club and a regular recipient of literary and drama awards, unstintingly sought out the core of human nature and depicted the wonder of human beings. One of his favorite ways of creating plays was to channel big issues through individual characters, often permeating his epics with wonderful humour.

Musashi belongs to this category, as does *Shanghai Moon* (1991), themed around the wartime Chinese writer Lu Xun, 2003's *Ani Otouto*, based on the early-20th-century Japanese democratic campaigner Isakuzo Yoshino, and *Romance*, his 2007 tribute to Anton Chekhov.

Always deeply affected by Japan's aggressive 20th-century military behaviour, another of Inoue's unwavering concerns was his questioning of war – and his exploration of human sin. This theme can again be detected in *Musashi*, as well as in the powerful 1994 work, *The Face of Jizo*, which centres on a family of radiation victims in Hiroshima, and his recent *Tokyo Trials Trilogy*, in which he invites reflection on the country's past.

Famously, too, Inoue appeared to make light of deadlines and would typically not complete a play until the very last minute – sometimes even postponing the opening until he had finished. So it was with *Musashi*, a subject on which he dwelt for many years, that the entire team was left pacing around in front of a fax machine on the day of the premiere

before the last page came through six hours before curtain-up. Despite such eccentricities, though, Inoue was no prima donna. Indeed, as Ninagawa revealed in his tribute speech, the playwright would habitually join the queue to buy a ticket for his own show, ignoring the theatre staff who would beg him to walk in.

For this staging of *Musashi* at the Barbican, Ninagawa has pledged his earnest desire to show how Hisashi Inoue's work is at the forefront of international theatre. And to that end, he and his team will be doing everything they can to create their best performances possible for audiences – whether they are old Inoue fans or those encountering his marvellous spirit on stage for the first time.

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