

The Japan Times weekend scene



English director teams up with kabuki star to retell Chikamatsu drama Heartbreak is timeless

Nobuko Tanaka
SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

English director David Leveaux has been a jewel in the crown of Japanese theater since 1988, when he first came here as a pinch-hitter after a compatriot pulled out of directing a Tokyo production of "Dangerous Liaisons." A 13-year stint as artistic director of the innovative Theatre Project Tokyo company followed from 1993, and as recently as 2014 he returned with an all-Japanese, non-influenced staging of Harold Pinter's "Old Times" that played to great acclaim in the capital and Osaka.

Now aged 58, Leveaux is back — this time to direct "Eternal Chikamatsu," a daring new play by Kenichi Tani that he's staging with an all-Japanese cast.

Based on "Shinju Ten no Amijima" ("The Love Suicide at Amijima") by the great bunraku and kabuki playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725), this collaborative work — since it incorporates a lot of ideas from Leveaux — features not one heroine like the original, but two from separate eras.

One of these is Haru (played by award-winning actress Eri Fukatsu), who is working as a prostitute after her husband's Lehman shock-related suicide, leaving her to pay off his company's debts. She falls in love with a married customer, Jiro (Ayumu Nakajima), but her happiness evaporates when Jiro's brother gives her money to pay off her debts on the condition she disappears from his family's life.

Later, in some kind of time slip while she's crossing a bridge, heartbroken Haru meets Koharu (Shichinosuke Nakamura), an indentured prostitute from the red-light district of 18th-century Osaka.

Just like Haru, Koharu has fallen in love with a customer, whose name is Jihee (also played by Nakajima). How-



Artistic pairing: David Leveaux and Shichinosuke Nakamura worked together on the play "Eternal Chikamatsu." NOBUKO TANAKA

ever, the pair plan to commit suicide together because society will never approve of the relationship.

All this is far from the kind of traditional kabuki play that Nakamura's father — famed actor Kanzaburo Nakamura XVIII, who died in 2012 — had often urged Leveaux to direct.

To discover how "Eternal Chikamatsu" came about, The Japan Times sat with Leveaux and the 32-year-old Shichinosuke, a kabuki *onnagata* (female-role actor) who has rarely had anything to do with contemporary theater.

"I was simply amazed by Tani's new story," Nakamura says straight off. "The connection between Chikamatsu's world and the world today was such an unexpected approach to me — but then I realized that the human approach to love has not changed much. Certainly, I will regard Chikamatsu's stories in new and different ways after this."

For his part, Leveaux says he felt honored to work with his great friend Kanzaburo's son.

"Shichinosuke has this very marvelous gift, which is to make a gesture as simple as pulling love notes from his pocket so emotionally full," he says. "This is something a modern actor finds very difficult to do. So in many ways, this production

is my love letter to kabuki theater.

"I first saw kabuki the first time I came to Japan, I had no idea what was going on, but I had a very strong impression that I was watching some kinds of ghosts from the past speaking to me — something from the very heart of Japanese culture."

"I knew it was very important for me to try and understand this if I wanted to understand something about this theater, and also the culture it was in, because I've never been interested in just bringing Western theater here."

Leveaux points out that though he read some of Chikamatsu's plays and was impressed with the complex stories and characters, he realized there was a danger that his work — like a lot of traditional theater — was at risk of being presented like a museum piece.

"So I suppose my central notion is to get the present tense to make a connection with the past, and that really has to do with the instinct I have about the importance of our history," Leveaux says. "When you are living in modern times and materialistic conditions break down, often you find yourself with no anchor. So if you try to live in the present without a connection with the past. It's like having a melody but no harmony."

For Nakamura, however — who normally plays self-effacing, well-behaved kabuki heroines — sharing the stage with ultra-modern Haru also revealed surprising connections.

"There are many differences between women's lives then and now, so Haru often can't understand Koharu's attitudes," he says. "Yet in the end I think we can see the strong similarities between two women's views of love. Fundamentally they have the same pureness and beauty in their hearts and they both put the same value on love. So they understand each other very well in the end."

Leveaux suggests that another core theme in the play, besides tackling what

Relationship blues: Eri Fukatsu and Shichinosuke Nakamura play Haru and Koharu, two women from different eras who have similar problems when it comes to love.

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it means to be a woman, is an argument against suicide.

"*Shinju* (love suicide) is not seen as romantic by Westerners and I don't think it is very romantic for Japanese people either, to be honest, but it's sometimes treated like that," he says. "So the argument in the play is a serious debate about how to find a way to live —

not how to find a way to die.

"Though I don't think the theater is here to preach, I think it's important to address the fact that suicide is a problem in Japan. So when you look at kabuki and you look at modern theater, they're about how we tell stories that connect us in time to the dead and the living."

"That's the miracle of this play: It

can heal and make us more human."

"*Eternal Chikamatsu*" runs from Feb. 29 to March 6 at Umeda Arts Theater in Kita-ku, Osaka, and from March 10 to 27 at Bunkamura's Theatre Cocoon in Shibuya-ku, Tokyo. For details, visit www.umegei.com or www.bunkamura.co.jp.

Cultural differences over suicide made for an interesting creative process



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SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

In 2014, rising playwright and director Kenichi Tani translated Harold Pinter's "Old Times" for an all-Japanese production by top English director David Leveaux staged that year in Tokyo and Osaka. After that, Leveaux asked Tani, 33, to write a new contemporary play for him based on "Shinju Ten no Amijima" ("The Love Suicide at Amijima"), a famous *shinju* (love suicide) drama from 1720 by the renowned playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725).

To find out about the thrills — and spills — that followed, The Japan Times sat down for a chat with Tani.

How did your collaboration project work out?

At the beginning, David only had a very vague image of the play — just the idea of two women from the past and present meeting on a bridge. Then we exchanged emails again and again until I'd nearly finished — but then David suddenly wanted to start it all again from the beginning. That was because he'd come up with a new idea to cut out the main theme of Chikamatsu's original play, the *shinju*.

I, of course, said that was impossible in a *shinju* play — but he insisted that living was much more beautiful than death.

So I explained to him about society and the cultural situation in Chikamatsu's time, and tried to convince him that love suicide would probably have been the couple's choice — but he persisted, saying, "Let's find the best solution for today's audiences together."

Finally, when I flew to London last

December, we agreed on this upcoming final version of "Eternal Chikamatsu." I'm not going to tell you our decision, but please come to the theater to find out. (Laughs)

That process sounds harsh, but it will be very interesting to see the fruit of your debate.

Well, without exaggerating at all, I have to say that it has involved a collision between Japanese and Western values.

Many Japanese still have an image of romanticism and purity about love suicide. Even now, if a philandering politician commits suicide, public opinion tends to sympathize as if he'd taken a noble course. Back in those days, there would have been no other recourse for a couple like that.

Actually, even though I think of myself as a modern person with more

Western views than old Japanese values, I surprisingly found myself on the side of the love suicide in this writing process. So I was made to rediscover my Japanese-ness. (Laughs)

David said it's a totally extraordinary thing how many suicides there are in Japan [according to the National Police Agency there were 24,025 confirmed suicides in 2015], and he firmly declared that it's not right to romanticize suicide so much.

He has worked in Japan for ages, and he knows Japanese culture well, so he understands the spirit of love suicide, but he still wants to urge Japanese people to get over such old ideas.

What's the relationship between the two women? Are they the same person in different times?

I took them to be mirror figures. In the real

world, people often have a friend with a really opposite nature, but they get on well. Also, both women share the same anguish about love, so they can relate deeply about that.

Overall, what did you learn from making a contemporary Chikamatsu play?

I've often heard Chikamatsu referred to as "Japan's Shakespeare," but this project made me realize for the first time that the two great playwrights, really do have common traits. For instance, neither ever made a moral judgment about the characters in their works, and nor do their plays promote their own doctrines — they just show what humans are. So in "Shinju Ten no Amijima," Chikamatsu wrote about the fuss between men and women without being judgmental. He just described each character's nature with sensitivity.

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