



© Mayumi Hosokura

From Hiroshima to Fukushima: Dialogue that Starts from “H”

Nobuhiro Suwa in conversation with Masataka Matsuda

Interviewed and Text by Tokyo/Scene
Photo: Mayumi Hosokura

Two artists experimenting with fiction vs. documentary, and both deeply concerned with the legacy of the atomic bombs, meet to discuss their work. Nobuhiro Suwa is the director of Hiroshima-set docudrama film “H story” (2001), portraying the “making” of a remake of the famed Alain Renais film “Hiroshima, mon amour”. Masataka Matsuda, meanwhile, is the leader of marebito theater company, the theatre group which has depicted the two cities that suffered atomic bomb attacks in the “Hiroshima-Nagasaki” series.

Confronting the Great Enigma of “Hiroshima”

Tokyo / Scene: Nobuhiro Suwa, you hail from Hiroshima, the setting for your film, while Masataka Matsuda, you come from Nagasaki, which along with Hiroshima was the subject for your theatre series. Through the differing media of theatre and film, as artists you both seem to share this sense of “distance” towards Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Suwa: Around when I was a high school student I once went to film the August 6th Peace Memorial Day Ceremony with an 8mm camera. This is obvious to say but I never hit upon the internal necessity for filming Hiroshima. My grandmother was a victim of the bomb [hibakusha]. This is often the case in Hiroshima but passing by the Hiroshima Peace Memorial you don't develop any special thoughts towards the same old landscape. In the end, after that I never thought I would make a film in Hiroshima. Probably I felt guilty about turning Hiroshima into a subject matter.

However, when I met the American film director Robert Kramer

he just asked me directly, “What is Hiroshima to you?” I had no answer for him. He had experienced how his father had done a survey of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a member of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, and after returning home had become autistic and committed suicide. He spoke of this “great enigma of Hiroshima”. Hiroshima had no significance for me but for an American who had never lived there it was something special. I wondered if it was possible to turn that disparity into a film. I asked him if he would like to make a film together with me in Hiroshima.

TS: And the result was that it led to “H story”?

Suwa: Before we could go ahead Robert died suddenly. I wanted him to make the film for me; it was something we should have made together. I thought that I couldn't do it by myself. But in part as a eulogy for him, I received a request to make a film about Hiroshima and so, without any planning, I just took up my camera and made an improvisational film in the city. Actually, it was the first time since high school. And that became the prototype for “H story”.

Matsuda: I could sense the possibilities of cinema in the film. Regardless of how it starts with the rejection of telling a story from a setting, Beatrice Dalle and Ko Machida just play this relationship by the sea that is in a certain way very rare. And then there are the occasional inserts of documentary, creating this kind of very special space of time.

Suwa: I could see the humanity living in personal historical rareness as regards Hiroshima, the people who have only unusual relationships. I thought that could be one motif.

Nagasaki is likely the same but when in Hiroshima, there is this ambience: The hibakusha [atomic bomb victims] have the right to talk about “it”, while there are the people who never experienced it and have no qualification to talk about it. I was born in 1960 and don't know anything about being a hibakusha – so do I have no right to touch it? I thought, can we dismantle this dualism between experience and inexperience?

The Otherness that Emerges from Dialogue Rift

TS: “HIROSHIMA-HAPCHEON: Doubled Cities in Exhibition” was a unique work in which the actors were exhibited in various places in the space, reporting the dialogue in a matter-of-fact way. The audience could not listen to all of the actors' words, nor experience the entire piece. With the space itself as the city, the audience then became an analogy of the residents. Why did you use this methodology to portray “Hiroshima”?

Matsuda: Well, at first there was Nagasaki. While writing a few scripts about my hometown Nagasaki I disliked that a story came about which I had seemed to experience myself. There are possibilities with a narrative, such as a start and finish, but before that, I wanted to try to gauge the distance between myself and Nagasaki.

The catalyst was when I made my Nagasaki-set “Voiceprints City – Letter to FATHER” in 2009 and my father became critically ill. It resurrected terrible memories of the anencephalic foetus display I saw when I would be taken to Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum as a child. My father is now ninety and someone who experienced the war, but without writing a script, I decided to do interviews and research – the anencephalic foetus, my father who was one of the Emperor's soldiers, memories of the bomb – and to present a report of that on stage. That then became my current style.

Suwa: You never write scripts?

Matsuda: There is a script with a structure but I don't write dialogue that forms characters. In a word, it's embarrassing. I came to feel this unease about someone performing what I wrote even though it wasn't something I had said myself.

Suwa: That's the same feeling as when I made “2/Duo” (1997). I have a resistance to recreating the world in its likeness. But on the other hand, most of cinema and theatre is being made like that.

Matsuda: Saying that, I think that film and theatre are actually

different. Against the intense “reality” of film, theatre is a more abstract medium. When one writes dialogue, you are staging the conversation between Person A and Person B, but it's like a kind of mental theatre, like a monologue. Person A and Person B can only be people within the ambit of what you comprehend. However, real dialogue must be the act of continuing to respond to speech that seems to flow from another person. In order to arrive at that, I took on the methodology of turning the story that I heard from another person into a text, and then have that spoken by an actor.

Calculating the Distance between the World and Oneself

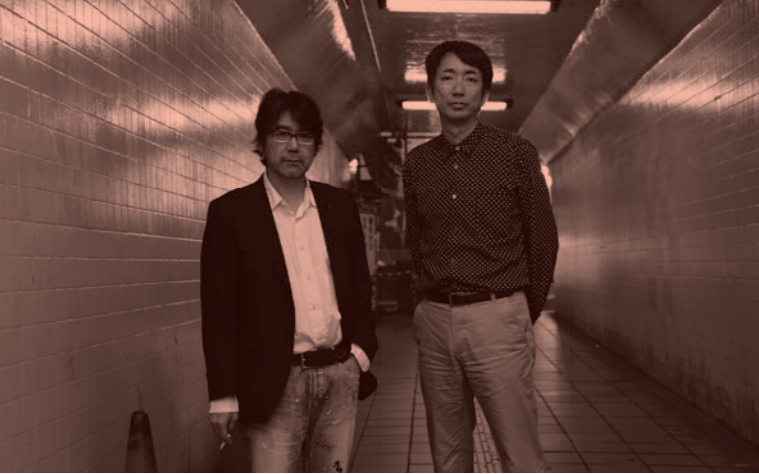
Suwa: That's true, film is a medium that can project that which you cannot yourself imagine. Then you are forced to confront the world. Going further, I think that making a film is something that comes from the craving to discover the world. Just writing what you know becomes a mere “re-enactment”. For “H story”, at one point I wanted to adapt “Hiroshima, mon amour” in a contemporary way. But if you do that, it becomes internalized within yourself. It was actually written by [Marguerite] Duras, so there are many things I do not understand. It was due to there being this area I could not comprehend that I thought I would gauge the distance.

TS: Actors play an important role in Suwa's films as a gap that is a medium for other people and the world unfolding out before us. In Matsuda's theatre work the actors talk on interminably. The relationship between the play and directing in theatre is similar to the relationship in cinema between the screenplay and film direction. Both of you do not write plays or scripts in the usual sense of the words, but how about directing?

Matsuda: At any rate, the actors should keep on talking to each other. Plus I also decide the location of where they stand in the space. But that's about it. In Suwa's films, when the speech of the actors goes beyond the extent of what's allowed, there are times when that is fine and others when it is then cut out. Is that considered at the final editing stage?

Suwa: Yes. Recently when I've been making films in France, well, it's improvised in French so I don't understand so clearly. It's during the editing that I then realize, “Oh, so that's what they were saying!” [laughs] But sometimes the play can really escalate and develop into something emotionally very intense on site. In those times film can re-compose things by editing, cut out a part, create a narrative line. For filming itself, fundamentally I just let it go on as far as it does. On the other hand, theatre doesn't have this “editing” process, so isn't it the case that in the rehearsal stage you have to control things to a certain extent?

Matsuda: Yes, of course in rehearsal I do but for “HIROSHIMA-HAPCHEON”, it felt complete at the point when the audience arrived. Where is the criterion for measuring a single controlled frame, a work of art? Rather, that can only be measured by the relationship with the audience at the time of the performance. I want to resist hastily trying to measure that. That's where I think there's something interesting to see.



© Mayumi Hosokura

The Power of Fiction Against an Overwhelming

TS: Please tell us about your 2012 project, “Record of a Journey to Antigone, and Its Performance” (Festival/Tokyo 2012)?

Matsuda: I wanted to make a story about a theatre company staging the Greek tragedy “Antigone”. The first idea stemmed from having a blind person living in Fukushima watch “Antigone”. The theatre company members and director make a trip from Tokyo to Fukushima to do this, and publish the process of it online on blogs and Twitter.

TS: And ultimately, as a report of that journey, the play is staged in Tokyo.

Matsuda: Yes, I am interested in how the audience, who has already seen and read the information published in advance by the actors, would think about and see the characters. As with both Hiroshima and the video footage of the Fukushima disaster, we hold pre-conceptions due to history and video. Through being shown that intense tsunami footage, contrarily do we not then become unable to see something? That’s why in this production I wanted to see if through the staging, I could discover critically how we are in touch with events themselves.

TS: When artists consider how to confront reality, has something now changed after the disaster in the context of film?

Suwa: Like 9/11, when I first saw the footage I was speechless. In short, I didn’t understand what it meant. But after time, more and more we try to make it into something we understand.

Matsuda: We join things together.

Suwa: Yes, by joining things together in a form, we forget that overwhelming video experience. And so, rather, I was considering a method that does not join up the world like that, dismantling the world, a methodology that listens.

However, the year before the disaster I made a short film called “Kurokami” [Black Hair]. A man and a woman meet secretly at a hotel, but the woman’s hair suddenly comes out. It deals with the inconceivable fear of radiation. Watching it now, the significance of the film has totally changed. “Fiction” perhaps can always be thought of as just lying, but then I came to

wonder if on the other hand there was a reality that fictional films possess. This was a big discovery for me.

Matsuda: I see. Something like the power of fiction. I consider “Record of a Journey to Antigone, and Its Performance” like the work of processing hope. Sophocles’s “Antigone” tells us about wanting to separate love, not hate. Antigone says that this is how the country of the dead has become. Why does she try to bury [her brother] knowing she will be killed? Through this journey I wanted to see if I could uncover something like “words together with the dead”, the words that try to weave this madness logically.

Originally published in Japanese in Tokyo / Scene Issue 1, August 2012

Translation: William Andrews

Nobuhiro Suwa (film director)

Born in Hiroshima in 1960. He has been involved in independent filmmaking since his university days. After graduating he worked as an assistant director and as director of television documentaries. His films include “2/Duo” (1997), “M/Other” (1999), “H story” (2001), “A Perfect Couple” (2005) and “Yuki & Nina” (2009). Since 2008 he has been head of Tokyo Zokei University.

Masataka Matsuda (leader of marebito theater company)

Born in Nagasaki in 1962. He won the Kishida Kunio Drama Award in 1997 for “Sea and Parasol” and the Yomiuri Theater Grand Prix Drama Award for “Tsuki no misaki” in 1997. He formed experimental performing arts unit, marebito theater company, in August 2003. Its output includes “cryptograph” (2007), “Voiceprints City – Letters to FATHER” (2009), “Park City” (2009) and “HIROSHIMA-HAPCHEON: Doubled Cities in Exhibition” (F/T10). He currently teaches at Rikkyo University’s College of Contemporary Psychology (Body Expression and Cinematic Arts course).