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Yasuko Yokoshi

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# Yasuko Yokoshi in conversation with Tere O'Connor

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**Tere O'Connor:** I think I would go back to what I said in the elevator, about how forcefully selected what you're doing is. And I would start by asking you to talk about the selection. I think that's what artists do: they select from everything that there is on Earth to concentrate on.

**Yasuko Yokoshi:** I haven't completely selected yet. That's why I have people come in and watch.

**TO:** You've selected to have a thematic place, with Kabuki.

**YY:** Yes. I see what you mean. That selection. That's actually more accidental, I must say. That's why I find making work is always interesting. There is great effort and discipline and selection involved. And so much of it is also luck and accidents and mistakes and failing—that you have no control over, somehow. The reason for Kabuki was accidental. I went to Japan with my ex-boyfriend. He got a gig in Japan and the teaching job involved me accompanying him so he get used to life in Japan. So I decided to take sabbatical from New York City, artist life. When I decided [to go] I didn't know what I was going to do in Japan. I didn't want to take contemporary dance class. And I haven't lived there for what, 24 years? A long time. So, a friend of mine said, well do you want to learn traditional Japanese dance. She is an actress and she takes lessons from this teacher. I said, yeah!

**TO:** I would say though, about selection further, that even though it was an accident, you stepped on it. You didn't go to the next thing.

**YY:** what I'm saying is that I didn't go after it.

**TO:** You didn't decide it, yes. Here are some questions that I think about, things that go around in my mind: that it is Japanese and you're Japanese—really obvious things. But also that it's a historical moment. You selected a very fine gradation of the movement and a dynamic world of it. Because Kabuki can get much bigger than that too, right?

**YY:** Huge, yeah!

**TO:** So you've done all this selecting, and I found it really convincing to go into it. After a while, the structural and dynamic role of it is within this very small range, and like, okay, this is what there's going to be, fall into this world...



That's what's so forceful about it, is that it's a very precise place that you're in. So, those kinds of selections, that kind of stuff also, maybe...

**YY:** Well, I must say, if I say Kabuki dance, it's often mistaken. Because Kabuki is a spectacle, and it's a popular art form. It matters volume, instead of quality. Quantity instead of quality. My teacher is particular in the aesthetics because she is a direct apprentice of this guy whose name is Kanjyuro Fujima. He made a lot of Kabuki dances which are still performed to this date. His biggest contribution to art form, performing art form, is this form called *bare dance*, Su-odori, like naked dance. He is a bit postmodern.

**TO:** What does 'naked dance' mean?

**YY:** In Kabuki, you put a lot of intense costume, make up, and exaggerated gestures and all that. And when choreographers make, they make the bones of the choreography. So he basically stripped all those decorative parts, and emphasized the purity of the form, and made an art out of it. That's what she is taught from him. Her name is Masumi Seyama and she's been studying since she was six years old. Her father was a prominent doctor and a benefactor of major Kabuki actors. He's been taking care of all those major stars in the Showa era in Japan. So this Kabuki choreographer, Kanjyuro Fujima, was hired by one of these major Kabuki actors. That means my teacher's father consequently became a benefactor of his. And this choreographer was incredibly talented. He is like "oh my god!" So, he [the doctor] decided to let half his children be adopted by this guy and his oldest daughter married him and my teacher took over the name Seyama which is a very important name, as heavy as Fujima a name is.

**TO:** Does that [name] come down a Kabuki line?



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**Yasuko Yokoshi**

**YY:** Yes, it is a family name for Kabuki dance choreographer. She is given this very heavy name at age 14. Why she? Because her oldest brother was supposed to take after this name, but he died in WWII. And he left a will that said if I die, give it to Masumi. Now she is the head of the family and studied under Kanjyuro Fujima all her life, years and years... Anyway, where did I start all of this? The reason why I can do this—that she is giving me this repertoire, which is pretty much taboo and impossible to use in a different context... I am hacking the system.

**TO:** Is it all appropriation?

**YY:** It is. It's almost like I'm using *Swan Lake* in my work.

**TO:** really interesting.

**YY:** The head of the family; she's the owner of the dance.

**TO:** But she already comes out of someone who is kind of doing something different with the form.

**YY:** It's not different. Everybody has done the Su-odori dance. But Kanjyuro made an art out of it. He put such emphasis on it. He thought how beautiful this thing can be. So all his life he never danced in costume, he always danced in a hakama, and a black—not black necessarily—but very simple kimono, not the all “onna-gata” of female characters. I have a video of him performing as a female without all those decorative make up or costumes.

**TO:** questions come up, of gender, and the use of gender in Kabuki. And then in contemporary culture and contemporary theater, there's a lot of dialogue between those forms. How did you come to that decision?

**YY:** Because I've been always into character study. That's all I've done in my dancing career. I always switch genders. In my last piece, I wore this enormous penis,

dark color penis.

**TO:** maybe a way that the works look so different. It's because they come from character.

**YY:** It's different, but inside of me it's almost the same place in a way because it's a character study. One thing that is different [now] is the form comes first. You learn the dance and then you put the content later. Whereas, in my past work, when I create a character I start from zero and build up the character. I become that person, therefore I create the movement and text and gestures. So it's a completely opposite direction. And that was fascinating. She tells me, the teacher: here is a geisha, she is nineteen, and she is going to meet her lover, and she does this, that, that. So I learn the movement first. I don't know how this geisha is like. But while learning the dance, I become that geisha because I do the movement, so I articulate the outside first.

**TO:** But, I also wondered while I was watching it if you are layering it with a contemporary person to you.

**YY:** To me?

**TO:** you, or to the actors in the piece. I think of Wooster Group, and how they use sources and they layer different sources. And you can feel that in the actors. Sometimes they are editing what they are doing; they are present, and you can see. And sometimes they are immersed in it. And I wondered if there is anything like that going on. Where you feel like just by doing this thing I become it, or do I have to energize myself into the character. Or some kind of balance between those things.

**YY:** Because it's so detailed training, it's mind-bogglingly detailed, incredibly, there's no place to put my imagination in. I do exactly how I'm taught. And once I don't do that, I feel it. And I'm way off. Because I haven't

trained with her for quite a while, I know I'm way off. And I'm not trained all my life. This is only my third year. So I'm a complete beginner. I can't call myself traditional. Not even near. I'm some sort of faker. Because I'm a dancer and I'm trained, my body is trained, so I can pick faster than normal people. But the training is not in my system. So, when I do it, I try to do exactly how I'm taught. And I tell the dancers, don't put imagination in it. Do as you are told. And my teacher tells you so.

**TO:** But a lot of character comes out of that.

**YY:** Because you try to be a vessel in a way. But you can't help it either because the characters we created for the purpose of the piece. We improvised and created the characters. And then we imposed this vocabulary like a... mush. It's a funny balance.

**TO:** I'm wondering about, in the construction of the piece, you divorce it from its original source? The way that you put things together... It looks like the relationship is very choreographic, not very narrative to me. Is that the case? Is it like having little bits of film clips that you just chp, chp, chp?

**YY:** Mean in the repertoire?

**TO:** Way you put one thing next to the other, is not story-oriented, or is it?

**YY:** It is because it comes from Raymond Carver short story, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. So there is a distinctive narrative I come from. And we developed the characters from that.

**TO:** I forgot about that! That's a really important part. You've told me that.

**YY:** I'm a huge fan of Raymond Carver.



**TO:** So there are these two layers though.

**YY:** Yeah, yeah. The Raymond Carver story we read many, many times. We played the characters and developed them through improvisation. And created our Raymond Carver world with Japanese traditional dance in our bodies.

**TO:** I see. Will people know that in the program?

**YY:** I'm going to try to write a bit. It's always a difficult choice for choreographers who go from abstract dance aesthetics. How much you want to explain or give information and background. But this particular piece, it might be useful.

**TO:** It could be useful. Although I was really looking at it as though... I was looking at Ryutaro, and he starts to become "the man." You can either see that in the specifics of a Raymond Carver story, or you could see it in the world—that man. And you start to say: "these are the different parts. You're someone, she is someone. That other guy." It's so beautiful when the men become the women, and how seamless that is, and how much it doesn't matter. So, you could have a narrative, or not. That's what I think is really exciting about it.

**YY:** what I'm trying to be most careful about, in terms of selection. Narrative, but I'm trying to make it as ambiguous as possible. The more complex the emotions are, the more successful I am. So people don't go: "oh, this person does that, and that's why this is happening." They may do it anyway. But the more variety there is, the more interesting. I'm interested in choreographing drama, not necessarily narrative.

**TO:** I'm going to ask a question that I think someone might ask, which is why do you want to be ambiguous?

**YY:** Because Kanjyuro Fujima's dance, I think the biggest attribute of his dance form is that magnificent ambiguity, is the source of the beauty. The more ambiguous it is, the better.

**TO:** I can totally relate to it. Sometimes I hear what I say about my work, and I think why do I want to do that? So it's interesting to ask an artist why is that what you're going for.

**YY:** It's so beautiful, because humans are so ambiguous. It's complex, never this or that. It's always in the margin of this gray area that is so fascinating, especially the human psychology. And dance is something where you don't have to necessarily go with "cause and effect" that develops into narrative. Dance is a very interesting medium. You can play with narrative, but you can completely deconstruct it and people go with it because it's dance.

**TO:** And they read it on different levels. I was interested in watching this dance because one thing about watching it is you feel "oh! I'm learning something. I feel like I'm learning something by watching this." What is it in the culture that makes things slowly, and there's almost like a line up for some things. And there's all these kind of knowledges in the body that I don't necessarily know and they either... sometimes they look like I can see their source, and other times, it's just a different way to navigate the moving through space, that might have ramifications in the culture at the level of architecture or nature. And I wonder somehow about that, and also about you being Japanese, and what does it mean to you? Does it matter for you that you're Japanese making this?

**YY:** It's a loaded question.

**TO:** It's not loaded. I just wonder, maybe it doesn't.



**YY:** Yes, definitely, of course. But, the twist is, the reason why I had access to this is because I live in the United States. I think my teacher originally thought of me as American artist. Because this is exclusive art form. If I lived in Japan, I couldn't get into the school, no way. I just don't have access to it. But because I'm in the States for so many years, I guess she sees me as American in some way.

**TO:** You are validated somehow?

**YY:** I guess it's a distance thing so, she knows I'm Japanese, of course, but the distance made her excited, and when I danced, she was like, "oh, you're so pure," because I've never seen Kabuki dance at all until I met her. I know nothing about it. I actually used to put it down, despised it, because it's all for men. So I went there with zero information, but my body is trained. She was so excited. "You are not tainted." I can be neutral because that's from my training.

**TO:** And you've been away for a long time and you've gone through other trainings.

**YY:** And in American training, you add Martha Graham, Cunningham, Trisha, you name it, whatever, but you always decode it in order to be in zero. You add this information but you try to have a range by being at zero, so you can be neutral. Because I'm trained in American system, that put a lot of attribute for me to get access to this Japanese traditional art form. So, yes, I'm Japanese and that's why I chose it, but because I'm American-trained, I understand it and have access to it. It's very complex in this kind of Japanese living abroad...

**TO:** And how you found it, being an accident...

**YY:**...and so removed from your own heritage. Because Japanese don't teach traditionally in school at all. And Japanese culture itself is a combination of Western culture. The identity itself is a combination of America, Europe and Asia.

**TO:** But Kabuki is pre-westernization, its source, isn't it?

**YY:** but I am a part of contemporary Japanese culture. The funny thing is that when I went there, the students were amazed that I pick up so fast. So they said something like: "oh, you can learn because you're true Japanese. You're true, true Japanese."

**TO:** Maybe because you don't have too much respect, where they have too much respect for it.

**YY:** And I say, it's probably 'cause I'm not true Japanese, that's why I can. So I'm very interested, say, if I give this to non-Japanese, don't know nothing about the culture, how they take this form. I'm very curious.

**TO:** Another thing I wondered about was the dance language, the style of the language and its size, the size of the style. Did that do anything to how you constructed the piece? Did you use that information to edit the piece at all?

**YY:** Size? What do you mean when you say size?

**TO:** You know, everything is pretty minute. There's never anything "Pah!(!)" There's never anything really big.

**YY:** Except the male dance.

**TO:** That's true. But sometimes I feel that the qualities that I'm working with are a kind of a virus and they infect me and I make decisions out of that. And I'm wondering if

anything like that happens. Because today you said you cut a whole big thing. Was it based on something like the size of the dynamic world?

**YY:** No, I don't think. I think cutting the piece is not about that. Though I have to tell you traditional Japanese dance can be done in a very small area, in close proximity. When Geisha dances, it can be done on one tatami mat. That's why dissecting the stage is such an important thing. So that influenced me to construct the work. But duration-wise. No. I wanted to have more like a water running image. But the problem was as soon as I put distinctive narrative-ish scenes in...

**TO:** ...it stops the flow...

**YY:** It becomes an arc of the piece, and people think that's the whole reason the piece exists.

**TO:** I think it's not doing that, and that's great about it.

**YY:** But, on Wednesday version I think I had a problem. So that's why I said, take it away, change the scenes, and try to subvert any concrete place that the audience settles on. So it's always moving forwards. There's something moving. You get involved, but you don't know what the heck is going on. That's what I like about it.

**TO:** There is this one really complicated, beautiful moment, when you are sitting down with Ryutaro, and the other great guy [Kazu] and the woman [Hiromi] are doing that beautiful dance coming downstage. And it's just so beautifully complicated to look through all that, and they are the continuum of it, they are like the bass note or something, somehow going through it. I don't know, there's something about that moment where everything comes together and you feel like you're not going to do what you just said. You're not going to make an apex happen. It does become connected to an ideology that

maybe could be born of some other culture that is not American. So it starts to say something to you like “don’t wait for the big moment, Western people, it’s not coming.” And that has a metaphor in it. It becomes, you’re thinking, maybe that’s the reason she is working with this now. It’s this other political intuition. A different way of speaking.

**YY:** I see. But I think I’m intrinsically like that.

**TO:** Well, that penis... a huge black penis is not the same kind of thing, you know.

**YY:** Yeah, but that piece is also kind of narrative and mushy at the same time. It was called Shuffle, you know. Yes, I wore a black penis, but...

**TO:** guess what I’m saying is, I think there is something intrinsically political in the process that people use. The process you use kind of reaches out and says something to the world. Almost more importantly than images. So this process of saying I’m not going to make anything emphatic, it would be a great way for politician to deal with things. It’s not just that and just that.

**YY:** I see what you mean. That’s probably because living in the States as a foreigner for this long, and contemplating this completely different value system constantly, everyday, it forces me to come to a place where I can’t make any generalizations or judgments or value system, one better than the other. You are to learn to be so inclusive and embracing and forgiving and appreciative, as much as you can. Because you get pissed off all the time. And that struggle of being “other” in one culture. America is multicultural, already, but... That’s probably my, I don’t know, my philosophy of life almost. That’s reflected in my work maybe.

**TO:** I would say so, definitely.

**YY:** But that's what you are too, to me. You being an artist, you know, gay, all these play mainstream and marginal. Constantly in flux. How much you have wide angle or perspective to take a look at what's so fucked up.

**TO:** From marginalization, yes definitely, I agree.

**YY:** That why you tend to make work that is...

**TO:** That shows, it's reflective of...

**YY:** Yes.

**TO:** I'm going to try to think of some things that I think people might ask here. How did the other dancers, how was their experience with it? Was it difficult for them to come to it? They must have had different ways of coming to it.

**YY:** Oh yeah, Jesus, we went through a lot of bumps. Each one in a different way. We fought, you know, push and pull. Because it deals with a power system that there's authentic, real master, and we just had to believe in it. And in contemporary dance training, you question and you take information but you put value and you devalue at the same time. And that makes you unique. And here, I'm suddenly coming and saying hey guys, this way is supposed to be the best way, and I have to impose on them. And I'm not the owner but I've been told like that by somebody else. And in the rehearsal: "no, no, do this." It's such a...

**TO:** You can always say they told me to say that.

**YY:** That's what I do. I say that's how I'm told.

**TO:** I can see that there's this kind of authoritarian on the body, you must do it this way. You know when you get up, and you go into two and then one leg forward a little bit to

come up and then the guy/woman does the same exact thing? It's not a personal weight shift. It's a cultural weight shift.

**YY:** Yes, and you impose that cultural body onto yourself. Even though you are from that culture, you don't practice it, at all, it's from old times.

**TO:** The culture is history, is not even Japan.

**YY:** Yes, it's a lot to be force onto their body and mind. And going through so many... months after months after months. They've been working with me for two years, some people three years. It's a long time. And you had to learn the repertoire first, before making material. So the first year all I did was to transfer this repertoire I learned to their body as close as I could. That's all we did. And I go back to Japan and get checked. Always my dance gets pretty bad if I don't practice with my teacher watching me. In traditional Japanese dance, teacher that watches you determines everything. Who touches you is who you become. So you don't change teachers from one person to another just because you don't like her or him. The person who touches you first is imprinted in your body, and that's what you are.

**TO:** So then you're playing that role with the dancers too.

**YY:** But it's imprinted by my master, so when I am off, I feel danger that I'm not articulating to my dancers, so I have to go back to Japan to be checked by my master, and then come back.

**TO:** It's really interesting. In a way it's like not taking the responsibility for being the choreographer.

**YY:** That's right! Absolutely....

**TO:** "Don't get mad at me"

**YY:** But then when I create the work it's my work, what we when we is my piece, it's reflective of who I am as a person. So I play this super-individualistic American role — which is uniqueness and freedom and expression matters—and all the form is Japanese—don't do anything, but this.

**TO:** I think maybe because I know you, but I think maybe for other people too, it will come up: this is a very contemporary artist, you, and she's doing this thing and that gives a whole bunch of energy. I think during it, "is she going to switch into something that's another part of it?" And then when it stays really verbatim... I think there's this painter, what is this guy's name, from the 80s, David Deutsch, I think. He does this egg tempura paintings on wood that are like replicas, I don't even know the time period, but from another century. This way of using this pre-existing thing to filter some part of yourself through it. But to also have this doubleness, a two-sidedness to it. What do you feel about that kind of immersion? Did you immerse yourself in this for reasons of exiting, or blending, or finding, or any other thoughts? I'm not even suggesting anything. But to immerse yourself, that is intense.

**YY:** It was a bit strange because I was convinced Raymond Carver and Kanjyuro Fuyima are same place in my mind, 'cause aesthetically, same: understatedness, minimalist, essential, ambiguous, emotional, gender—man and woman, kind of thing. The same place but approaches are totally different. So only determination... It's there, but how to go at it, it was almost impossible.

**TO:** How to find the relationship?

**YY:** Yeah, it was almost like, I'm doing something completely impossible.



**TO:** I think this is something that is great for people to hear. That you felt, no matter how you explained it or not, that those two things existed in the same place in your mind. And that's poetics. And certainly dance is the place where you can bring those things together. I don't want to see a kabuki movie with language about the Raymond Carver story. I don't want to see that. But here they can swim together in this other kind of world.

**YY:** I don't know how I made this piece even. That's the funny thing. It just happened because it was so impossible.

**TO:** It feels very made, you know.

**YY:** It's absolutely made. I've selected, every day, every week, every six months, I'm selecting. But the how I'm selecting, I only know I'm hoping this should be this way. Because I don't know any model.

**TO:** It's just so intuitive. You are an artist, you are finding your... every piece you make you're getting closer and closer. This moment where the two men are there, the part where he pushes that one guy's body down. The first time they touch and do something. It was in a context that you're thinking, "oh, in this tradition men play women," but also this is kind of gay, but also, now I'm forgetting all of that, and I'm just getting into that movement that was beautiful, and all of my thoughts or references are gone and I have that gorgeous movement, and that keeps happening to me. So I go in these different planes of looking at it as a Westerner and being like "what's Japan?" And then being like "what is it to use something [pre-existing] in the contemporary culture." And then pure movement, at the level of pure movement, too.

**YY:** This is something I should probably say. Conceptually I always had the idea that I could really gender blend, meaning that I can be a man. I tried and then realized, after some point, that it's impossible, I can't. That this is impossible, I am not able to play a man in this kind of form. Even though conceptually it works. It just doesn't look right. Stuff like that, how to choose music. And many times I tried to change the movement even.

**TO:** To not do it traditionally?

**YY:** Right. Form stays the same, but I tried to change an order, where this section [goes], like that. Tried many, many ways. Oh my god, the experiments I did! It's crazy. But it was impossible.

**TO:** I'm still not understanding and I would like to know there more about. I mean, this isn't in the state you learned it? You choreographed it, right? So that's what I wonder about. How you decide this goes here, this here. I'm cutting that, I'm doing that. If you know. I really wonder about that in the mind of choreographers because, like I say, it's really well considered. It doesn't look accidental.

**YY:** I would say not accident for the sake of accident. The material I made is ten times more than you saw. I threw away so much. So what stayed is essential, so that without this I cannot live, kind of thing. So then it is a matter of to construct it. It is like editing a movie. The solo you saw in the end, that used to come in the very early, at the top of the piece. Then the drinking of the four of us, that used to be second instead of the third. So everyday I'm juggling the order, and the piece flows in a very different way. But the essence stays the same. I want to see the most efficient, interesting way for me to see.

**TO:** And to keep the water feeling, maybe.

**YY:** Yes. I used to have more blackouts and awkward transitions. We worked hard on not to use blackouts, and really let the piece flow as much as possible, without any stops.

**TO:** I wanted to ask you little things like, you know when they come out with the umbrellas and they do like a little shaking of the umbrella. Those are the places that I love all the ways I try to read it. Again, one movement, just as movement it's so gorgeous, so little. I'm thinking there's a meaning there. It's a metaphor for how people misunderstand dance always, trying to find what it means. It plays on that line a little bit more violently almost, in this context, if you're not from that culture.

**YY:** Interesting. It's true.

**TO:** But in an abstraction, there's so many beautiful things. What he does with that piece of material. When he goes here [demonstration of movement] and then turns it over. There's no function to that. But it looks really important.

**YY:** But those, you see, I didn't make it. It was made by somebody else.

**TO:** Right, but even that, when that comes and just placing it in this context. It's like saying what if you took a Shakespeare play and cut it up and didn't worry about the narrative, and you didn't know that there was a fight going on but someone came out with a sword thing and only did this much of it [movement], and you don't see that ever [movement]. It's like that. Is this a junction or is this a fullness? So I think it's really interesting on that level. How it invites you in to name things and then...

**YY:** I see, that's probably why, I suppose, I felt [it was] very important to do this piece in the United States. If I lived in Japan, I probably [would] not even think about. I'm

probably not allow to show this piece in Japan.

**TO:** You think so?

**YY:** I can't imagine. Imagine, it's like George Balanchine's whatever concerto by joe shmo.

**TO:** I bet some people in Japan would be very interested to see it like that.

**YY:** But in the traditional world code, it's bad. I don't know.

**TO:** That's interesting because in the Western context you don't feel how illicit it is, what you're doing.

**YY:** Because I do it with full respect. It's not abrasive [or intended] to destroy or anything like that. But the traditional art form is so exclusive. [It] cannot be touched by someone who doesn't own it.

**TO:** Sometimes I think about all the different ways that humans have used the fact that our spine is erect—in dance, in ballet—and what the spine can do, and I was starting to see some relationships with social codes from ballet to this. Almost at the level of what would be called *epaulement*, you know, the turning of the head. And how slightly different it is because the ballet one comes from the land of aristocracy, and this one comes from a different relationship, with geisha involved in it, this kind of, most of it is down below a little bit. I just think it's interesting all the really small differences you can create with head on spine, both in abstraction and in social codes.

**YY:** And then the shoulder blades. The reason why you think [of] spine is because this part has to be always down. So that when you play female, this is normal and then *this* [pulling shoulder blades in and down] makes a feminine tone.

**TO:** Wow!

**YY:** So when men [play women], they have to use their backs like crazy.

**TO:** They did a good job.

**YY:** They are great. They put so much effort and discipline.

**TO:** And it was really so disciplined that they're never [look like they are] playing a woman. You just don't think about it.

**YY:** Because that's the biggest taboo in the aesthetic, this master tells you. She would say "don't cheapen it" if you try to play female. And if you are woman, the person learning female dance you have to almost reduce as much as possible because you're already a woman, so you have to do much less than men doing female. When it becomes sexy in a way, the sexual tone, ooh, she gets totally despised by it.

**TO:** I could see that, because it doesn't do that ever.

**YY:** She is very strict about it. It's true. I have to tell them also. Don't make it cheap, meaning sexual. Everything is sexual innuendo, of course, but because of that you have to do as little as possible. It makes it more sensual because you don't do it.

**TO:** You know one thing that is beautiful about it, structurally, is that you do one thing where you sit down with the pillows—if you're front and you're facing this way. And then you do another thing over here, then another thing here. And then when you do that thing when you and he sit on a diagonal, somewhere in the body of the viewer they're thinking, "oh they've got to do something up here." Maybe in a really subtle way. So when you do that thing and you look up there, you're so engaged with it

because you are like, "that's not really right." There's something about expectations that get set up there. Then it's the one time where we have to read faces just from here [quarter profile]. It's beautiful, it's very sculptural, because you've set this up and you've trained us to get three dimensional somehow. It's a really great moment.

**YY:** That's a rip from Yasujiro Ozu's film.

**TO:** Which one?

**YY:** "*Tokyo Story*." There's a lot of rip from film scenes, a lot. Scenes like that, and juxtaposing things.

**TO:** Is the tea party from a movie?

**YY:** Which one is that?

**TO:** The four people drinking...

**YY:** That one is not; that's totally original.

**TO:** That's beautiful. That's another place where I keep thinking of the Western filter and you think, "well are they're going to be double duets, or how are they going to..." but it doesn't. It's almost similar, but it's not musicalized, and you start to separate out the coupleness of it somehow, but it starts out kind of with symmetry.

**YY:** Yeah. They're supposed to be drinking sake first of all, not tea, alcohol. I made it like this [demonstration] to communicate this way. But very few people notice these people are communicating. They think there's somebody else out there.

**TO:** I saw that. I could see that definitely, but mostly what I see is that it ultimately doesn't matter.

**YY:** No, it's just two dynamics of two couples.

**TO:** And you also feel this logic. There's a logic behind it that you don't care about identifying where it came from.

**YY:** That section took me forever.

**TO:** Yeah, that look like it had a lot of work behind it.

**YY:** That was so hard. It was probably where I had the most difficult time. That was a big challenge. I had to constantly apologize because it is so small and so detailed, and I had to make them go over it, and over and over, and it's not a dancey thing, and they get tired easy.

**TO:** I think viewers will recognize the work that is in this. It's just so compelling. I was wondering what do you think this is going to bring you to next. Because I always think that what I did before really affects what I do next. And I am wondering if you are thinking about that.

**YY:** Well as a next thing I really want to teach repertoire as is—I don't touch nothing, to... how do I say... brilliant American dancers.

**TO:** You mean you want to continue with the Kabuki?

**YY:** Just up until the next level. I really want to see [if] culture is transferable as much as technique. The reason why I chose these Japanese dancers—they are all contemporary dancers, of course—is because I thought it would be easier.

**TO:** Because they were Japanese?

**YY:** Yeah, but then in some sense it was harder because they have preconceived notions so they interpret their own way. Whereas if I work with non Japanese, they know nothing. So it might come up something interesting.

**TO:** It's definitely an interesting thing. But when the form was born, I'm sure people's bodies were much more imprisoned in social ideas and this people, again, it's



contemporary people being forced into... like if you had to put on a samurai... When I was out at the National Museum I saw those crazy outfits they wear and it's so restrictive. And the dance can be a restrictive clothing in a way. And their bodies are used to being free.

**YY:** That's true. Other than that, where I go on from here, my dream is when I reach and finish my menopause and I'm totally old woman like 60 or 70 years old, I want to do this very cute female dance. I'm not able to do right now because I'm too woman. So it's uninteresting. I can do it but when I'm an old lady I want to dance that as a 15-year-old girl. Because I'm not a man, I cannot do kabuki. So not matter how much I try I'll never attain what I want to. But at least I could get rid of "woman" by getting old, so that I have distance from my woman-ness. I want to know what's it like to play this girl dance as an old woman. I'm very, very curious. But I want to practice for the next, what? 20 or 30 years.

**TO:** So you feel that you're going to stay in this world?

**YY:** As a practitioner, but I would never be traditional artist; I will be always a contemporary artist.

**TO:** But you feel like it's going to be a flavor in the next thing you do.

**YY:** I don't think so. My next piece, I can't talk about it, but it will be completely different.

**TO:** You have to talk about it.

**YY:** No, nothing to do with this piece probably. As a performer I will learn, and I'm sure this influences me a lot as a maker, but not necessarily go more into traditional. I probably get bored some time, I'm sure.

**TO:** Are there other things you want to talk about or say about it, that would be interesting for people to hear? That is not guided by my questions.

**YY:** I never know if the more information there is, the better it is, or... This piece is very particular because it has got so much background. When you apply for grants, you want money... And it's perfect piece in many ways, but it's very difficult in other ways because I always feel I'm lying.

**TO:** And you can only talk about the Kabuki aspect of the dance?

**YY:** Yes, or when I want to bring up the Raymond Carver, and [that] it's a cultural exchange. Sometimes I'm like, "it has nothing to do with cultural exchange, it's very personal."

**TO:** Totally personal. There's a poetics in it.

**YY:** But when I want to get certain grants I have to say, there's certain language...

**TO:** I think that we starting to talk like this is so important for that. Because everyone has a good heart; they want to give you money. But these limited ways of talking about it. When we just talked about a whole bunch of different directions and that is how complicated it is. It's good to put this out in the world and say "this is how it is. Maybe you should just give me the money."

[Laughs]

**TO:** Because when I start a new work I don't have any idea in my head. That's my politics. I start from nothing. But you can't write a grant like that way. So it becomes this other work.

**YY:** I wanted to make a film. This was a film. I wanted to make a Raymond Carver story into dance in film before even learn traditional dance.

**TO:** Aha!

**YY:** And I wanted to shoot this film at this tiny house on an island my grandmother owns and nobody lives in anymore. It's a beautiful house and it has these beautiful glass doors and you see the light changes and the change of the shadow moves through this glass door. So I wanted to shoot this *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* in this house, make a dance film out of it. That was the very original idea.

**TO:** You think that's still in the video you're talking about?

**YY:** Yeah, the image is in there. I don't know if after this, I go on to make a film, from this piece.

**TO:** I think you should go live on that island. Sounds nice; see what happens there.

**YY:** We went there, Ryutaro and I went there to shoot the video and stayed for four days. He bring great images out of this.

**TO:** That's where you shot the video?

**YY:** Yes, on this island. So, you'll see what I'm talking about. It is multimedia. The teacher didn't want me to use video though.

**TO:** Oh she didn't? Just tell her "I didn't."

**YY:** No. She knows. [segue]

**YY:** I a lot owed to my teacher, because it's a collaboration with the teacher. So when I go back, we talk, and she influences me quite a deal. Because when I'm here, in

New York City, because I'm a contemporary artist, I tend to go wild.

**TO:** Will she see this?

**YY:** She saw a version. We went to Tokyo, the whole company went there, and she trained us.

**TO:** Did you show her the construction that you made?

**YY:** Yes, she looked at the piece. She really liked the work. She was very fascinated by it. She was most impressed because I really kept the repertoire as it is; I really didn't touch it. She was a little bit afraid, I think. She thought I was going to deconstruct and fuck with it. She thought it was pretty brave because the tendency is for people to go and change it around.

**TO:** I wonder if there's something that she ever thought in her head, like I would like to change it a little bit, and then you do it. It would give her a sense of freedom to watch it.

**YY:** She's never seen anything like in this context ever.

**TO:** when I was there I was thinking that the whole idea of an individual as an artist is already hard for them, for the dance people especially.

**YY:** She really wanted me to preserve the vocabulary, the dance itself as close to her sense as possible. Composition may be o.k. [to change], but she's really strict. So she was quite disappointed when we went there because the dancing was not up to her level. She give us very intense training.

**TO:** It's so beautiful how much she cares.

**YY:** She sent one of her pupils, a real Kabuki actor. He took a time off from his Kabuki gig in Tokyo. Sent him to Florida and he stayed with us for three weeks. She paid the airfare. So he stayed with us.

**TO:** He was like the police.

**YY:** Yes, he was. And he watched every detail.

**TO:** Wow. That's amazing. Was it helpful?

**YY:** Oh yes, but it put a lot of pressure on us.

**TO:** You go down there, [the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography] and it's supposed to be the "research" center, and you're like you have to do it like this.

**YY:** Authority comes in so strongly. And then I become the authority. Until then I'm one of them, when we're making material. But [when I] bring this kabuki actor, and also when the teacher is involved, I'm on this side. And I'm sure the dancers hated me.

**TO:** The other thing that I'm thinking about is nostalgia and why people hold on. She sounds like she really does not want this tradition to be in any way forgotten. And I mean, I can think of that too with even buildings in New York that are going away, one after the other, and it's sad and I can see how people can become like "no! no more change!"

**YY:** But the funny thing is she chose me to carry on this tradition.

**TO:** She must trust you.

**YY:** But at the same time I think she really believes in spirit. Because I cannot do the way she dances. I haven't studied with her long enough. She has pupils studying with her for 20-40 years. I think she's very progressive.

**TO:** I would say so because you're really taken it to this other place. It's interesting what you say about the spirit. You're very serious as an artist, she probably senses that.

**YY:** And she believes in what I believe in because a certain aesthetic that I'm going for is what she believes in. There we're connected. But the actual preservation of the dance, I cannot be the carrier because I'm not trained. Thank you for asking all the questions. It's always good to hear from another artist.

**TO:** Anybody out there who is a presenter, bring this piece because it's very compelling. It's a really great piece.

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