

SIGNS OF  
RACE

# WEYWARD MACBETH

INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND PERFORMANCE



"*Weyward Macbeth* deserves reading—and re-reading.... With over one hundred cross-racial productions recorded here, you are bound to ask: *why have so many Americans been repeatedly drawn to this particular play in the context of racial discourses?* Read this penetrating study to find out—it's an intellectual delight."

—**JAMES V. HATCH**, Professor Emeritus, The Graduate Theatre Program at the City University of New York and co-author of *A History of African American Theatre*

"From Frederick Douglass to Roman Polanski, Middleton to minstrelsy, Aldridge to Ellington, Verdi to hip-hop, the Scottish-Shogun-Voodoo-Tlingit play has sustained a surprising range of only apparently 'weyward' efforts to occupy the intersection of race and power through performance. This is a provocative collection, certain to animate discussion of *Macbeth*, and much more, for some time to come."

—**W. B. WORTHEN**, Alice Brady Pels Professor in the Arts, Barnard College, Columbia University

**T**his volume of entirely new essays provides innovative, interdisciplinary approaches to the various ways Shakespeare's *Macbeth* has been adapted and appropriated within the context of American racial constructions. Comprehensive in its scope, this collection addresses the enduringly fraught history of *Macbeth* in the United States, from its appearance as the first Shakespearean play documented in the American colonies to a proposed Hollywood film version with a black diasporic cast. Over two dozen contributions explore *Macbeth's* haunting presence in American drama, poetry, film, music, history, politics, acting, and directing—all through the intersections of race and performance.

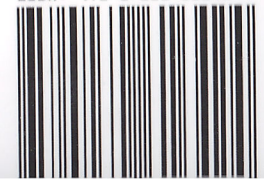
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ASIAN-AMERICAN THEATRE  
 REIMAGINED: *SHOGUN MACBETH* IN  
 NEW YORK

*Alexander C. Y. Huang*

*Macbeth* has a long and varied history of Asian-style enactments in the United States. Among the best known performances are Akira Kurosawa's film *Throne of Blood* (1957), Yukio Ninagawa's *kabuki*-style *Macbeth* (1985), Wu Hsing-kuo's Peking opera *The Kingdom of Desire* (1987), Tadashi Suzuki's all-male *The Chronicle of Macbeth* (1988; English and Japanese versions), Shozo Sato's *Kabuki Macbeth* (1997), Sato and Karen Sunde's *Kabuki Lady Macbeth* (2005), and Charles Fee's *kabuki*-inflected *Macbeth* (2008) (these last three in English), all screened or staged multiple times in North America. These works either map the English imaginary of Scottish incivility onto what is perceived to be equivalent Asian contexts (as Kurosawa's film does), or create a new performance idiom from amalgamated elements from various traditional Asian theatre styles (as Sato's production does). It is not uncommon for artists to combine unfamiliar styles of presentation with English and even Shakespeare's lines, of which the American audience tend to assume ownership.

John R. Briggs<sup>1</sup> combines both approaches when he brings the Scottish play, Kurosawa, and Asian America together in his *Shogun Macbeth* (1985), a play in English (interspersed with a great number of Shakespearean lines) set on the island of Honshu in Kamakura Japan (1192–1333). Japanese titles or forms of address replace Shakespeare's originals: the Maruyama [Birnam] Wood moves to Higashiyama [Dunsinane]; Thane of Cawdor becomes Ryoshu of Akita; bottom-lit *bunraku* puppets as ghosts are summoned by the witches; "the best of the *ninja*" are the Murderers; and the Porter scene morphs into a *kyôgen* comic interlude performed by a pair of drunken gatekeepers. The emergence of a work such as *Shogun Macbeth* coincided with Japan's rising economic influence in the United States in the 1980s and American theatre's continued interest in select Japanese cultural tokens in the new millennium. Briggs notes with enthusiasm the "world-wide rebirth"

of Japanese culture that fed into American fascination with “all things Japanese, especially things samurai” (J. R. Briggs 2009). As a “samurai” film, *Throne of Blood* has been so successful that it has been cited as inspiration for new works beyond Asia, including Briggs’s play, Alwin Bully’s Jamaican adaptation (1998), Arne Zaslove’s stage production (1990), and Aleta Chappelle’s proposed Caribbean film *Macbeth* (2010) (see Appendix). In contrast to *The Throne of Blood*, which uses *Macbeth* as a launching pad for cinematic experiments, *Shogun Macbeth*, as an American play, deploys fragmented Japanese performance culture to rescue Shakespeare from what Peter Brook has called “cold, correct, literary, untheatrical” interpretations that make “no emotional impact on the average spectator” in a time when “far too large a proportion of intelligent playgoers know their Shakespeare too well [to be willing to] suspend disbelief which any naïve spectator can bring” (quoted in J. R. Briggs 1988, 8–9).

Regarded as a “Kurosawa-lite adaptation,” in both the positive and negative senses of the phrase (Gussow), *Shogun Macbeth* was first staged at the Shakespeare Festival of Dallas in 1985 and then by the Pan Asian Repertory Theatre in New York in 1986 (also directed by J. R. Briggs). The play has also been performed by non-Asian groups, including a San Francisco State University production directed by Yukihiro Goto in 1992 and a Woodlands High School production directed by Carlen Gilseth at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2003 (see Muto and Mire). It was revived in New York in November 2008, again by the Pan Asian Repertory (directed by Ernest Abuba, who had played the title role in 1986) with a cast of white and Asian-American performers.

The curtain opened to reveal a minimalist set cast in ominous green light. All of the action took place in front of an eight-foot statue of Buddha behind a Torii gate (a traditional gate commonly found at the entry to a Shinto shrine), a statue that seemed to look down at the dramatic events with a sense of aloofness, a transcendental indifference; this Buddhist reference informed the framework of narrative. Biwa Hoshi (Tom Matsusaka), an itinerant blind priest and narrator, opened the production with a powerful delivery of lines from the *Sutra* that echoed the ideas of fourteenth-century *noh* playwright Zeami (*Atsumori*) and anticipated some of Macbeth’s later lines:

BIWA: Life is a lying dream, he only wakes who casts the world aside. The bell of the Gion Temple tolls into every man’s heart to warn him that all is vanity and evanescence. (J. R. Briggs 1988, 11)

MACBETH: Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more.

It is a tale told by an idiot; full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.  
(J. R. Briggs 1988, 64; compare *Macbeth* 5.5.23–27)

Fujin Macbeth (Lady Macbeth; Rosanne Ma) walked the stage in a *kimono*, while most characters carry a *katana*. The three white-faced *yojos* (weird

sisters) in Day-Glo wigs and *kabuki* makeup played a major role throughout the performance, as they manipulated and channeled events and news. Briggs intended “all horrible events or negativity” to spring from the *yojos* (J. R. Briggs 2009). They manipulated the *shoto* (dagger) to which Macbeth reacted (“Is this a *shoto* I see before me, the handle toward my hand?” [see *Macbeth* 2.1.33–34]). Their appearance marked as androgynously “Japanese” through *kabuki* makeup, movements, and chants, the three *yojos* were played by both male and female performers (Claro Austria, Shigeko Suga, and Emi F. Jones, who doubled as *isha*, the doctor). The *yojos*’ cultivation and channeling of various characters’ desires and behaviors were enacted by the kinetic energy of their presence in many scenes—seen or unseen by the characters. They delivered armor and a helmet to an agitated Macbeth (Kaipo Schwab) in the final battle scene, and remained on stage as enchantresses and indifferent observers of the end of his story.

Unseen by Fujin Macbeth in the sleepwalking scene but exerting a felt presence, the *yojos* followed her every step of the way, creating the impression that these creatures were both the cause and result of her nightmarish imaginations. Fujin Macbeth’s *suri-ashi* (“slide her feet and shuffle along”) gait articulated well with the *yojos*’ presence in this dreamscape. The doubling of the enchantress (witch) and the healer (doctor), facilitated by a *noh* mask, exemplifies Briggs’s investment in the capacity of Japanese signs to generate new meanings from this famous scene (5.1):

ISHA / YOJO ONE: When was it last she walked?

[The lights come up to reveal Yojo One wearing a *noh* mask.]

GENTLE WOMAN: Since Shogun [Macbeth] went into the field...

ISHA / YOJO ONE: In this slumbry agitation, besides her walking and other actual performances, what, at any time, have you heard her say?

GENTLE WOMAN: That sir, which I will not report after her.

ISHA / YOJO ONE: You may to me, and ’tis most right you should.

(J. R. Briggs 1988, 58; compare *Macbeth* 5.1.2–13)

The otherwise benign diagnostic conversation between the doctor and the gentle woman bears a more malignant undertone as the *yojo* (Shigeko Suga) speaks from behind her mask. The very reference to Hell by Fujin Macbeth brings forth the other two *yojos* as she washes her hands:

FUJIN MACBETH: Yet here’s a spot. Out damned spot! Out, I say! One; two; why, then ’tis time to do’t. Hell is murky!

YOJO TWO: Fujin Macbeth!

YOJO THREE: Fujin Macbeth!

FUJIN MACBETH: [She does not see or hear the *yojos*] What, will these hands ne’er be clean?!

YOJO THREE: Fujin Macbeth!

FUJIN MACBETH: No more o’ that, my lord, no more o’ that!

YOJO TWO: Fujin Macbeth!

FUJIN MACBETH: You mar all this with starting.

ISHA / YOJO ONE: You have known what you should not.

GENTLE WOMAN: She has spoke what she should not, I am sure of that.

...

YOJO TWO AND THREE: Oh! Oh! [echo]

ISHA / YOJO ONE: What a sigh is there!

(J. R. Briggs 1988, 59–60; compare *Macbeth* 5.1.26–44)

Even though Fujin Macbeth did not interact directly with the *yojos*, the way her lines coincide with those of the *yojos* creates a suggestive layer of intertextuality, as she unconsciously danced to the rhythmic hissing and growling of the *yojos* toward the end of this scene. Briggs envisioned an aesthetic structure and “solipsistic” philosophical framework that allowed violence to “scream its horrors beneath the fragrant cherry blossoms” (J. R. Briggs 1988, 8). As both observers and instigators, the witches are given substantially more agency than they have in Shakespeare’s play.

The artistic and critical focus of *Shogun Macbeth* has thus far rested upon the production’s capacity to test Shakespeare’s universality and liberate *Macbeth* from variously defined traditionalist interpretations; as one critic wrote in 1986, “Though language and character are altered, the soliloquies remain and... at its bloody heart, the play is still *Macbeth*, albeit an exotic one, with a universality transcending time, place and performance style” (Gussow). And yet as a unique English-language adaptation exploiting Japanese sensibilities, *Shogun Macbeth*, as director Abuba points out, also provides an opportunity for exploring what it means to be Asian American: “One of the major intents of re-visioning *Shogun Macbeth* is to demonstrate the exceptional talent of the new generation of Asian American actors” (Abuba). This vision is in line with the Pan Asian Repertory Theatre’s stated mission to “bring Asian American Theatre to the general theatre-going public and deepen their appreciation and understanding of the Asian American cultural heritage” (Pan Asian).

Yet is performing in the style of a culture (*kabuki*, for example) actually embodying the culture itself—“not just visiting or importing [it] but actually doing [it]” (Schechner 4)? Despite its popularity, *Macbeth* is not typically associated with racial questions for Asian-American theatre, a racially-defined theatre that was established in 1965 with the founding of the East West Players. *Shogun Macbeth* negotiates challenging cultural terrains as it deploys various elements of Japanese culture to interpret *Macbeth* and expand the Pan Asian Repertory’s repertory of otherwise Asian or Asian-American plays. The founder of the group, Tisa Chang, has been criticized for commercializing “Asianness” as foreign and exotic. Plays such as *Shogun Macbeth* address the younger generation of performers’ resistance to her request to “keep focusing on their Asian identity,” which, they believe, limit the creative possibilities even as it promotes Asian American solidarity (E. Lee 91).

Chang herself seems to be resisting the same concept: “I was so tired of Westerners using Asian-ness as an exotic characteristic” (quoted in Griboff). The identity of *Shogun Macbeth* remains unclear, as the blending of different cultures does not necessarily lead to a hybrid one, though the identity of the lead actor, Kaipo Schwab (Macbeth) embodies this ideal: born in Honolulu, he is of Hawai‘ian-Chinese-German-Irish ancestry. Critics such as Leonard Pronko consider *Shogun Macbeth* a “non-Shakespearean play,” albeit with “many of the famous speeches [from *Macbeth*],” but Briggs maintains that the play is still “a Shakespearean play, in the best traditions of what that means” (Pronko 29; J. R. Briggs 1988, 9). One may wonder whether *Shogun Macbeth*, despite its repackaged Asian cultures and Asian bodies, might not harbor an investment in the notion of “a self-consciously white expression of minority empowerment” (Hsu 52).

Briggs sought to produce a work that rediscovers Shakespeare’s insights by “displacing the audience, forcing involvement in his language, creating an atmosphere that is new and different and capable of spontaneous surprise” (J. R. Briggs 1988, 8). Perhaps his displacement succeeded too well; I attended a Sunday matinee performance in the 2008 revival, where more than half of the seats were empty, and quite a few audience members did not sit through the entire performance. Despite their respectable effort, a number of performers appeared to be lost in both the Japanese *mise-en-scène* and the Shakespearean lines, making for an atmospheric but uneven performance. Perhaps the playwright’s “white” identity and the racially-mixed cast distracted audience and critics; the reception history of Asian productions of Shakespeare in North America and Europe suggests that reviewers are often more tolerant of cultural differences and artistic innovations when these works are written and directed by artists from Asia (Huang). As much as the company, Abuba, and Briggs wanted to break out of the stereotypical association of Asian-American theatre with a necessarily Asian-American repertory which is defined by plays such as David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*, Shakespeare—however Asian—is always “white.” However, *Shogun Macbeth* has successfully constructed a contact zone that remains open for future inscription.

## NOTE

1. Note that playwright John R. Briggs is no relation to my fellow contributor John C. Briggs.