

SITI and SCOT—30 Years of Collaboration and Training

An Interview with Suzuki Tadashi

Motohashi Tetsuya



This interview was conducted in Japanese on 31 January 2023 in Tokyo and translated into English by Motohashi Tetsuya, the President of the Japan Section of the International Association of Theatre Critics.

MOTOHASHI TETSUYA: First of all, what do you think of the closing of SITI in 2023?

SUZUKI TADASHI: I think what made SITI so remarkable was the fact that the company was unique in relentlessly pursuing and realizing their artistic and philosophical goals for such a long time on the basis of ensemble acting, actor training, and international cultural exchange. They have magnificently created the collective bond of comradeship among the artists who were united in trust and belief, having broken the barriers of social traditions, languages, and bodily customs.

On reflection, maybe it was a kind of unprecedented miracle that in a capitalist and economically driven nation like the United States a theatre company such as SITI, inspired by the spirit and



Figure 2. Rehearsal of *Dionysus* by Suzuki Company of Toga and Purnati Indonesia, 30 September 2018, Yogyakarta. ArtsEquator, YouTube, 14 January 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=UhOpmzr7rfu. (Screenshot by TDR)

practice of collectivity and mutual trust, has been active and thriving for the past 30 years. I am simply moved by that fact and honored to be a part of that historic movement.

Looking back, I am happy that SITI as a theatrical institution has put an indelible mark on the contemporary history of American theatre in that its very presence is definite proof that drama possesses vast potential for social criticism and political change. Without SITI, I doubt that I would have had such a fruitful and collaborative relationship with people like Anne Bogart, Tom Hewitt, and Ellen Lauren, just to name a few.

MOTOHASHI: How did the collaboration between SCOT [Suzuki Company of Toga] and the Americans start? What led to the foundation of SITI in 1992?

SUZUKI: In the 1980s, I started to teach in American schools such as the University of Wisconsin, University of California San Diego, University of Delaware, University of Washington in Seattle, and the Juilliard School. The Suzuki Method of Actor Training inspired some theatre practitioners in the United States. As the Suzuki Method became better known throughout the country, various people and courses started to emerge teaching this method at schools and theatrical institutions. Excited by this trend, several theatre practitioners including Sarah O'Connor, Sanford Robbins, and Peter Zeisler, to name a few, proposed an international exchange program to train American theatre professionals in Toga that would lead to authorizing them to teach the Suzuki Method in the United States. During this time, I met Anne Bogart and other like-minded artists who were interested in

Figure 1. (facing page) Yoo-Jeong Byun as *Electra* in Suzuki Company of Toga's production of *Waiting for Orestes: Electra, at the King's Theatre as part of the Edinburgh International Festival, 2012*. (Photo by Andy Phillipson / Livewireimage.com)

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Figure 3. Suzuki Company of Toga's production of *Electra*, *Toga ADai-Sanbo Theatre*, 2021. (Photo courtesy of Suzuki Company of Toga)

revitalizing contemporary theatre in the United States through new actor training methods, the creation of new works, and international cultural collaboration.

MOTOHASHI: In her dedicatory essay to you when you received the Thalia Prize in 2020 by the International Association of Theatre Critics, Bogart recollects the first encounter with you in Toga 35 years ago. Let me quote her at length as it wonderfully conveys her excitement in meeting you.

“My relationship with Tadashi Suzuki began with a phone call in 1988. Peter Zeisler, then the director of the Theatre Communications Group (TCG), asked if I would like to travel to Toga-mura, a tiny village in the mountains of north-western Japan, where Suzuki and his SCOT Company host a theatre festival every August. Invited to attend in exchange for speaking at the festival, I accepted immediately. The journey to Toga is arduous. The long flight from New York to Tokyo is followed by yet another flight from a different airport to the city of Toyama. Then, there is the long car journey winding upwards into a dramatic mountain range, past precipitous ravines and dense forests. Finally, at the end of a long tunnel, the SCOT compound appears, sitting amidst fields of rice paddies and surrounded by round green hills. Nestled amidst the slopes are several theatres including a 900-seat outdoor Greek theatre affronting an emerald lake and a smaller charcoal grey thatched-roof A-frame indoor theatre, the Toga Sanbo, both designed by the great architect and friend of Suzuki, Arata Isozaki.

*“Upon arrival, completely exhausted from the long journey and ready for sleep, I was informed that a car would arrive in 20 minutes to bring me to the Sanbo to watch a run-through of Suzuki’s *The Tale of Lear*, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Even though seeing a play was the last thing that I wanted to do at that moment, I knew that it would be impolite to refuse. The car arrived, and I was driven the short journey to the theatre. Isozaki had remodeled the Toga Sanbo from a gassho-zukuri, an immense mountain farmhouse, into one of the most beautiful small theatres I had ever seen. The interior is modeled after a Japanese Nob stage and constructed from cedar and charcoal-colored wood, which gives an overall feeling and fragrance of rich darkness. I sat down on the tatami mats laid across the audience area, fretting a little bit about staying awake. Suddenly, a cart carrying a male actor playing *Lear* appeared in silence onstage, pushed by another male actor dressed as a female nurse. The nurse then turned slowly and sat down with his back against the cart and took out a book. As he opened the book, eight sliding shoji doors onstage abruptly cracked open revealing eight actors in richly colored kimonos to the loud accompaniment of Handel’s *Largo* from the opera *Xerxes*. The eight actors began to move regally downstage directly towards the audience. That was it! I was wide awake and continued to be alert for the remainder of this remarkable production. The images and moments from *The Tale of Lear* remain in my memory to this day. As the play began, I knew that I would travel any distance, to anywhere in the world, to find myself in the hands of a great theatre director” (Bogart 2021).*

SUZUKI: Peter Zeisler was one of the prominent driving forces behind the collaboration between Japanese actors and the American counterparts that culminated in the foundation of SIT1. Regarding my involvement with the American theatre, he wrote:

“The most important fact about Suzuki’s relationship with the American theatre has been his desire to work with—and exchange ideas with American actors. Not content simply to limit his imagination by working solely with Japanese artists, he has constantly pursued and developed his aesthetic by fostering relationships with leading artists from other countries. [...] His explorations in working with American actors resulted in one of the most important artistic events in recent years when he developed his adaptation of King Lear using American actors from four of the major [regional] theatres in the country. The production, which toured in the United States and Japan, demonstrated how theatre transcends language and how a master teacher and director can create a complex work based on Shakespeare’s Lear with actors from a different theatre tradition. That production serves as a landmark to all those trying to expand their artistic horizons and— one hopes—leads us to a new era of international exchange” (Zeisler 1992:78).



Figure 4. Suzuki Company of Toga’s production of King Lear (with Ellen Lauren of SITI as Goneril), Theatre Olympics, Toga, 2019. (Photo courtesy of Suzuki Company of Toga)

One of the main reasons I chose Anne Bogart as my main collaborator in the United States was because she was influenced by Mary Overlie’s Viewpoints work, which, as I saw it, offered an alternative to the conventional acting methods derived from Stanislavsky’s realism. I believed that founding a theatrical company like SITI would be a vital step towards innovation of US theatres in general, and the 30-year-long successful collaborations between SITI and SCOT are definite proof that my conviction then was right. On reflection, I am delighted and honored to be a part in founding SITI and to continuously support SITI’s work and teaching.

MOTOHASHI: From your point of view, how do you reckon the relationship between SITI and SCOT benefited Toga?

SUZUKI: Although I myself had been invited and directed in foreign countries since 1972, it was not common at all for Japanese theatre artists to collaborate regularly with artists from other countries. When I moved my theatrical base to Toga in 1976, it was my intention to make Toga an ideal international center where like-minded artists from all over the world could convene to live and work together. SCOT’s collaboration with these American artists culminating in the foundation of SITI did offer us a great opportunity to realize our goal.

In the 1992 Toga Festival, I directed *Dionysus*, my adaptation of Euripides’s *The Bacchae*, with a mixed cast of SCOT and American actors, including Tom Hewitt as Pentheus and Ellen Lauren as Agave. At the same festival, Anne Bogart presented *Orestes*, her own adaptation of Orestes’s saga, also with a mixed cast of American and Japanese actors. To mark the foundation of SITI, these two productions were brought to Saratoga in September 1992 for the tremendously successful inaugural season.

Since her first visit to Toga, Anne Bogart made many return trips, and in 1992, I proposed that we should launch the SITI Company together. I had a very clear idea what kind of theatre institution SITI would be, and for the first four years of SITI’s existence, from 1993 to ’96, SITI’s members split their summers between Saratoga Springs and Toga. SITI’s initial three

productions [*Orestes, Dionysus, Medea*] were hatched and performed at the festival in Toga. Ever since then, I have remained faithful and supportive of SITI's trajectory. And most recently, in the summer of 2019, SITI returned to Toga and performed Anne's production of *Radio Macbeth* at the festival.

I can summarize in two points in particular the benefits SCOT as a company of Japanese actors has received through the relationship with SITI. Firstly, the Japanese in general have been and still are a homogenous nation and theatre professionals are no exception, largely because of the country's self-closed history and culture. Since I worked with the American actors, I was struck by their cultural diversities apparent within a multiethnic nation like the United States, and SCOT actors obviously benefited from those diversities in rehearsals as well as in daily training sessions. We became more aware of not only the peculiarities but also universalities of our performances and training methods.

Secondly, Japanese art including theatre has a long and stable history and well-established traditions, which sometimes present psychological as well as physical obstacles to innovative and revolutionary ideas and attitudes. On the other hand, I found the American artists, particularly those in a theatrical institution such as SITI, were so flexible and open to outside influences that they were full of a challenging spirit and energy. That was one of the reasons why I always felt enormous pleasure in working with the American actors. Our relationship with them made us more self-critical of what we had been doing and more vigorously open to the theatrical practices of our American counterparts. I myself have benefited from these ventures, and without SCOT's collaborative relationship with SITI, I doubt that a place like Toga would have become such a universally welcoming place for diverse theatrical practices and traditions, as it is now.

MOTOHASHI: What kind of artistic results were produced through the collaboration between Japanese and American performances? Do you think the relationship had any effect on acting and performances?

SUZUKI: First of all, SCOT does not represent "Japanese" acting or performances, much in the same way SITI does not represent "American" acting or performances. Both SCOT and SITI are made up of unique and specific groups of actors and directors who were particularly sensitive to ensemble acting and an innovative approach to actor training. So if you want to talk about the mutual effect, one could say that through the 30-year collaboration between SCOT and SITI, SITI gradually developed into one of the international centers for theatrical and cultural exchange, which was indeed a unique and remarkable achievement in its own right. I personally regret that SITI has ceased to operate as a theatrical company, but its legacies of collaborations with SCOT can still be seen in the current works of SCOT in Toga at professional as well as personal levels, as the past members of SITI are still regular visitors to Toga to teach and perform.

Perhaps, one of the most fruitful artistic results through the many years of collaboration between SITI and SCOT was that both groups became more conscious of what we had been doing and trying to achieve through our own innovative dramaturgies. Whereas the American actors, most of whom came from the regional theatre in the United States, were astonished and inspired by the performances, training methods, and work ethics of SCOT, the Japanese actors and practitioners, including myself, felt the need to verbalize the basics of the training methods and dramaturgies behind them in more consciously logical terms, so that they could become understandable to any ambitious actors in the world, regardless of their respective cultural and ethnic backgrounds. As Ellen Lauren succinctly puts it trying to explain the "stillness" right at the center of the Suzuki Method of Actor Training:



Figure 5. Rehearsal of Dionysus by Suzuki Company of Toga and Purnati Indonesia, 30 September 2018, Yogyakarta. ArtsEquator, YouTube, 14 January 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=UhOpmzr7rfu. (Screenshot by TDR)

What happens to the body and voice when placed in the demanding situation of being watched while trying to convince someone of something? What happens to us when we are placed in this relationship of being seen and of showing? What kinds of sensations occur? What kind of concentration is created? What kind of excitement is generated within us? [...] How can we become more sensitive and monitor these affects that stand between our desire to communicate and our actual execution? By practicing stillness, which is the art of seduction. By making clear decisions in the body, the actor's concentration excites the space, and the audience experiences something beyond daily life. What is moving inside you, is made manifest. It is a deeply personal and intimate revelation of the self. Stillness allows the strength of your conviction to be visible. (Lauren 2011)

Lauren's reflections beautifully and magnificently exemplify the philosophy behind the practices of both SITI and SCOT. These were and still are part of the enduring legacies of this unprecedented collaboration between the two companies.

On reflection, I particularly admire the efforts and insights of Peter Zeisler, Anne Bogart, Ellen Lauren, and the like-minded artists who created SITI. They tirelessly raised the bar higher and asked more from American actors and American audiences alike. These actors and audiences were able, through their collaborations with us, to seriously question the standard American populist and commercial inclination towards accessible and pure entertainment, and as a result to become more discriminating and exacting in their approaches to making genuine theatre.

SITI's long existence on American soil and its enduring legacies testify to my own belief that the theatre is rooted in spirituality and that a play can digest and use its own history, as long as companies like SITI and SCOT are founded by a likeminded group of artists who share the common responsibility for every aspect of each theatrical venture.

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