

Art Borreca
Iowa Playwrights Workshop

Many years ago, I served as dramaturg on a production of Neil LaBute's *Bash* at theatre project Tokyo (tpt), a company devoted to the translation and presentation of contemporary Western plays in Japanese. (The play consists of a series of three monologues by, in its original version, Mormon characters who have committed crimes of child murder, sexual abuse, and gay bashing.) My link to the production was the British director David Gothard, who was working through a translator, Atsuro Hirota, in rehearsals. I started my work by answering questions that they e-mailed me before I was officially designated as the production dramaturg, in which capacity the degree of my online research and consultation increased, culminating in attendance at final rehearsals and the production itself. The questions usually sought clarification of words, phrases, and references in their original American context, as well as research on the social and religious contexts of Mormonism.

What a strange and strangely invigorating experience this was - answering questions from across the Pacific and then going to Japan to see the production, not being able to understand the language yet still seeming to understand the play; and realizing that the director himself could not have understood much of what was being said and how it was being said, in either rehearsals or the production, other than through the process of translation. I couldn't really appreciate the quality of the performance, left only to interpret from signs of its reception by the audience, as well as by members of the theatre staff and the translator, to whom I was also able to speak in English about the rehearsal process.

In the conversation around Dramaturging the Phoenix, I've often heard (or found implicit in the conversation) the question of what theatrical experiences we'd want to revive, and how

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those experiences might inform our working during and after the pandemic. I am struck by the fact that the ones that sprang to mind involved dramaturgy or directing projects that did not result in what I would consider the most fulfilling productions or plays. In the two that came close, there was a mysterious connection between the method and dynamics of collaboration and the results, suggesting that you need special working conditions and structures to create good work. And yet, for the third - my experience with *Bash* - there were aspects of the collaborative process I would want to revive precisely because of *missed* collaborative and creative opportunities. Reflecting on these opportunities seems relevant to the social and theatrical worlds we find ourselves in today, because they involve the encounter of cultural identities.

There was something extraordinary about that experience, which I find myself coming back to again and again, thinking about what I could have done better or differently. I think I could have more fully embraced the modes of cultural difference in the process, and the many uncertainties they provoked, rather than tried to negotiate and resolve them. When asked, what does this *mean*, and coming up with an answer that seemed to *resolve* the question, I could have explored what the question of translation provoked, in terms of what could and could not be rendered from the language and context of one culture into that of another. Instead of focusing, in conversations with the translator, on what *sense* the language of the play and the contexts of Mormonism made to the actors, I could have explored what didn't and perhaps ultimately couldn't make sense, what cultural distinctions they brought forth.

The world of the pandemic, along with the extraordinary social upheavals and bizarre political events of the last year, has made cultural difference more a part of our awareness (or a lack of awareness) than they have ever been. As we negotiate the future of our theatres, our

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departments, and our society at large, we have a special and perhaps unique opportunity to engage in *new* negotiations of those modes. We will want to resolve them, to cultivate a comfortable sense of “returning to normal,” where “normal” eschews difference and constructs a false concept of universal community. However, having been isolated in our family units, and faced in an unprecedented manner the facts of our cultural misunderstanding of one another, we are in a position to remake our relationships – to one another, to the social groups we most closely identify with, *and* to those with which we empathize and align. This we might do through a gradual, deliberate process of restructuring how we collaborate, create, teach, and express ourselves, both in our art and our ways of making it. It strikes me as a process to be approached boldly but gently - with full awareness of our fears and discomforts. I, for one, hope I am able to listen more and better - to my colleagues, collaborators, and students, and to the groups we are trying to engage, especially to those we seek to better understand through our work.

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