

Naoko Maeshiba, dancing on the edge of theatre

May 24, 2012 by [John Barry](#)

Dancer/Choreographer/Director Naoko Maeshiba, at least to me, was one of Baltimore's hidden artistic treasures until I had the chance to see in 2009. Her journey began in Japan, where she was born and trained, before she headed to Hawaii, DC, and, ultimately, Charm City, where she is now in the Department of Theatre Arts at Towson University.

She has slowly been weaving herself into the city's theatre scene, collaborating with local companies and doing her best to constructively blur the lines between what we call theatre and dance. She did that last week when she worked with director Yury Urnov for ACME theatre in *THR3E ZISTERS*, which flipped into several time zones.

But of course, she does plenty of her own work. More on [her website](#). This weekend, she'll be performing solo in her piece, *Kawatokawa*, at [Baltimore's Theatre Project](#).



Naoko Maeshiba from an earlier production

Something about her work t has always made me want to — metaphorically, of course — open the top of her skull, and figure out where she came up with her ideas. This discussion (once again, the Bohemian Coffee House!) was about as close as I could get.

She began by expressing her regrets about something she'd said in our last interview, done several years ago, for a now-defunct webzine. So I began by trying to reassure her.

John: Yeah, well, one thing about being interviewed by me, it's not going to go viral.

Naoko: Then I'll relax.

And you've got tenure at Towson anyway. You can say anything you want.

Well...you know.

When did you get tenure?

Two years ago.

When did you come to Baltimore?

Eight years. And I was in DC before that for three years. I came to DC because I had a job at Arena Stage. I got a fellowship in directing. Meanwhile, in DC, I was getting involved in an Asian American Theatre Company, known as Tsunami Theatre. Then I became their co-artistic director. There was a period when I was really focusing on theatre direction. I was directing scripted plays in DC. But I hadn't been really focusing on my own dance.

About 2002, I was starting to do some more workshops wjocj explore body and environment, which is basically my foundation. And, because of this grant, I wanted to create something with the people in my workshop, and that was the inception of my company, my original dance theatre works. That was ten years ago.

In 2003, I created another full evening length's piece. And I made the third piece, called *Trace*, in 2005, The next piece I worked on was a duet, a full evening's length work, called *Remains of Shadow*, which toured in San Francisco and Amherst, and other places. Then I made another duet piece that I did in Poland. Then, in 2006 I did this piece called *Improbable Encounter*, and it was a structured improvisation of about an hour's length. That was the first time I did a full evening length's solo dance piece. That was a structured improvisation. So I came back and started doing more solo and short pieces.

And then you headed back to Japan for a performance.

That was an interesting time. In 1993 I trained with Min Tanaka, a dancer from Japan. He was working in Tokyo in the early 70's, but then he moved to a farm, a commune, where dancers came and his company toured around the world. This work was the foundation of where I create my work. So I went back there in 2008. I was there for three months. Completely in an immersed situation. I also was performing a solo piece in a festival at Hakushu.

Did it go well?

No. And this was a devastating experience for me. My relationship with this place was still stuck in 1993. So, when I was first exposed to this environment, and how they work, connecting life and art, I was much younger, and, perhaps, more receptive to things. This time, when I went back there, I was more grown up. So this is 2009. 16 years later. And I was going through the same training. With the same teacher, in the same environment.

Where was this located?

In Hakushu. But I was a different person now. That's when I realized what had been stored in my body and mind up to this point. I was still trying to do the same thing, be the same person I was many years ago. There was a big conflict. And because of this conflict, the big solo piece that I presented at the festival was a complete failure.

What does it mean when a solo piece is a complete failure?

I was trying to do the piece in order to follow...there was a decision making process of 'this is right, this is wrong'. In my subconscious, I think I was trying to follow that. And that conflicted with what I had been building on my own. Somehow this is a very interesting thing that can happen between living in Japan and here. In Japan there is a certain sense of conformity, so I feel that my body and mind are always slowly conforming, so three days after I arrive in 2009, and I'm acting as though I've always lived there. But I've actually spent twenty years in the U.S.! I think I was trying to conform to the way they approach the world, the way they approach the body, which is my foundation. But there was a collision.

It's like a band having its 25th reunion. They play the songs they used to, but something's missing.

Uh huh.



from Paraffin

In a sense, I can do more now. This is something I'm going through personally. There's some acceptance. Really getting to face my body and mind. This is actually freeing me in a sense. So in terms of the muscular work, perhaps, I don't really care so much about that now. The deeper, exploratory process is much richer now as I get older. When I returned to the farm, I was going through this releasing process, but when I returned to the farm, in Japan, and partly because this person had such a big influence on me, I really felt that I had to follow. So I did that, and it didn't work out too well, and then I came back to the States.

When I returned in 2009, I had no motivation. I wasn't happy. But then I was supposed to do a show at the Theatre Project. I had some ideas. So *Paraffin* was something that got pushed out of

the void. I felt like I had nothing. Then I was, sort of, I have to make a piece. I started to get into the making of it. Then it became a piece.

Was that a liberating experience?

Paraffin was a good ensemble piece, I had a part in it, so I was able to transmute through other peoples' bodies and minds, so that was really helpful.

Then another transformation happened. I went to do my artistic residency. This was 2010. In Czechoslovakia. Tabor. This was three hours from Prague. I was given the time and space to really face myself by myself, and the place was so supportive. I took walks every morning. I just wanted to be around the city. I did two dance studies there. One study was in the river. It was a strong current. I was descending. I was sitting on a chair. There was a pool underneath. I was coming down to a ledge above the pool. I knew the pool was really shallow. There was no danger. I was really stuck on this ledge. I had a hard time going down there. I didn't want to show fear. I was kind of dancing, thinking, 'I have to go I have to go,' and it was really cold, and then, finally, I decided, I'm going to go, one two three. And then, one two three, and I dived in. I was floating. Then I was sinking. I had to swim. And I was cold, so I had to get out of the water. That experience was so strong.

A metaphor for life?

A metaphor for life! So I did the studies, and that was a piece where I was really accepting my fear, so I felt that I made one step forward. I came back. Then I did *Kaspar*.

Which I didn't see.

Yeah. Based on Handke. This is a play about a person who owned one sentence. All the prompts are feeding the language into this person, and this person starts speaking really fluently at the end. But he's completely destroyed. This is something... this is my next phase, it's language.

That's interesting. I have a little kid. For a long time, he was speaking in neologisms, making mistakes, but I kept thinking, don't speak a whole sentence! Because I like the way you're talking.

Yeah.

But there's this time before you think in sentences when you're actually making something. It starts to take shape. You're putting one word after the other. You know some rules, but you don't know exactly where it's going to head while you're doing it. Is that what you mean by structural improvisation?

It comes in different units. In short pieces, I'm not choreographing everything. So if I have a 15 minute piece, I have, maybe, six different sections. Each section, there is some kind of narrative, or space. Sometimes a mood. So I go one-two-three. That's going to be the motif of this place.

And then the next place may be ‘fish swimming in the sky’ or something. Then I’d be improvising that. Then this next space would be all about letters. Then this next space is all about vertical, or horizontal. Then I’ve made the structure. Then I try it out.

That’s a small piece.

And for a big piece, say, *Improbable Encounter*, actually there is a dramaturgy. Later on I did a piece called *Absence*. Now, this was like a play. But the narratives are rather abstract. So I write a scenario, with characters. So it progresses. It’s just that they’re not speaking. They’re dancing or moving. And this might be the influence of the Japanese director, [Ota Shogo](#). He came out in the era where Japan was going through this era of modernization. He was in the era of Suzuki.

Violin schools, with a specific training method?

But Shogo had his own theatre company. I don’t know how much you know about the Japanese theatre scene, but it’s very typical that a theatre company has its own director/playwright, and the company has its own methodology. So there are 20-30 companies, and they have their own methodologies. So you can’t just direct someone else’s play, and put in your own choreography, because they’re trained.

So Ota Shogo did this play called [Water Station](#). It’s completely silent. It’s about an hour and fifteen minutes of silent theatre. But he wrote the script, all the lines. Actors memorize the lines. Then they go through this whole play, but they don’t say anything. Well, he had this Station Series of six plays [1981-1998]: *Wind Station*, *Earth Station*, and others.

With those plays, your body has to speak. When you step on to the stage, let’s say with a baby stroller, with another person, we have to know everything about this couple. It requires a lot of the actors, because they have to embody the character.

That had a big influence on me. I’ve really been drawn to what the body was saying.

And then you came up with your own methodology, which you call [Kibism](#). [The word, in Japanese, comes from the word *Kibi*, which means “strange beauty”]

I think my methodology is....[laughs] no methodology.

All right.

Because I like doing different things. At the Tsunami Theatre, I was doing scripted plays. The script becomes my partner or collaborator. I do things with musicians, and I tell them, let’s just do something, and we do it. When I make big pieces, sometimes I construct things, sometimes not. Then I worked with TK, Bulgarian. And I realized that I wanted to keep breaking all the rules.

Which seems to be what you did with *Thr3e Zisters*, your collaboration with Yury Urnov – (See [earlier article](#)) – which I saw a couple of days ago. I know there used to be a script for the *Thr3e Zisters* but I guess you and Yury worked together. And broke a lot of the rules.

Yury and I have been doing things together for awhile now. We taught an ensemble class together to explore the methodology of ensemble creation. Which was a completely crazy class, because we didn't prepare anything. We just focused on whatever was happening in the immediate space. We had three books. One was called "1000 Extra/Ordinary Objects." One was "101 things an architect has to know." The last was called "Questions." We would offer them a book – a page. And they would have to create a piece. So that was a source. [Laughs] I take it back. We actually prepared a lot. And we used this to create a short short piece.

And how did you put *Thr3e Zisters* together?

I was building this class in physical training with Checkhov's *Three Sisters* in mind. So Yury and I talked a little bit. I would ask him what sort of landscape he was seeing. He'd email me one sentence. I'd have it at the back of my mind. Then I'd let it seep into their projects. He sat in on my classes. I came to the rehearsals. So it was a weaving process. My training and what Yury was doing, and we put it together. As you might have seen, we both believe in the total theatre concept.

What's that?

I come from an Asian Theatre background. Text is not the primary focus. There are other elements, like music, chanting, costumes, all these things are equal. Yury seems to look at it the same way. So in that sense, there was no hierarchy. Things weaved together.

So he would call you up and say, I'm thinking of this song by Rammstein called Moscau, and I'm going to insert it into *Thr3e Zisters*?

Music was all Yury's selection. I know he was asking the actors to bring music in. And I was at the first meeting. He sat in my class. I was using all kinds of music – punk music, etc. The selection of music, though, is all his. But these things influence one another. The physical language came out of the class.

There are three sisters. Olga, Masha, Irina. Three very classic stage characters. And the production itself has zombies, death rock, and other things like that.

The three sisters were artifacts from the ground. They have to be cleaned to come to life. The water part [where the corpses are stripped and hosed down], I understood, was the cleaning part.

Cleaning and coming to life. So those concepts get woven together in this production.

Yes.

There are moments of real clarity in the production. A character would sit down and say, ‘I don’t know how it’s all going to come together. But I hope it will.’ And that seems to be the idea behind the original *Three Sisters*.

Yeah, in our early conversations about *Three Sisters*, Yury would say, there’s so much talking, you know, and what the hell’s going on here? So we were sort of facing the impossibility of Checkhov’s world and dynamiting it.

So then, when they come out of the grave, we’re washing them clean of the preconceptions that we have. The question becomes clearer: how are these conversations going to result in anything?

Yes, and that has to do with our use of language. The text itself is based on an old translation of Checkhov, by Constance Garnett.

The early translator of Russian classics into English.

So it’s not the polished language that we usually hear.

And you also insert word-for-word translations.

Yes. And we would discuss how each individual word comes out of the characters’ mouth. Which brings this back to the relationship between the body and the word coming out of the body. Which goes back to your baby. There is a negotiation process, when the word comes out. The body has to negotiate somehow.

Being a child is all about negotiating.

And this has something to do with the Japanese contemporary theatre world. You think back to post-World War II Japan. They had to deal with this conflict: of Western plays coming over, being in translation, and their own playwrighting being affected by the style of this translation. People are speaking on stage, calling themselves Barry and Robert, speaking in Japanese. So there’s a lot of conflict and disconnect that happens in the body. So this language-body space has been the central struggle that Japanese theatre has been dealing with. So I was really intrigued from that perspective by the question of how the *Three Sisters* should speak. So we tried to come up with a way of speaking from the body.

So maybe you can tell us a little bit about your upcoming show.

This is about an hour. It’s the length of some of the solo pieces I’ve played before. But this piece is different. For one thing, it isn’t too serious. I’m working very seriously to make it not serious. [Laughs].

I have collaborators. Juanita Rockwell, who’s been helping with dramaturgy, and Sarah Lloyd, who’s been helping with environmental design. That’s a really involved process. Because we don’t start like they do in theatre – you know, here’s the set, put it up. This set piece really grew.

Another difference is that I'm actually speaking on stage. This is something people aren't used to seeing me do. I'm being silly.

Have you ever spoken on stage before?

Yeah, way before. But I've been focusing on things through my body.

Another point is that this piece is a reflection of my ten years of work, and perhaps 20 years of my life, back and forth between here and Japan. It comes from a deep, serious place, but I want it to be funny.

You're looking back at 20 years of your life. Basically, when you started dancing until now?

You know, I take it back. 20 years is one segment. Maybe this is about something longer. Like 40 years.

So this is a memoir!

It's a memoir.

Did you start out wanting to do that?

No. I always think, like, you know, everything we do is personal, but with me, personal doesn't come to the front. To connect, you have to be universal. So I've always been hesitant about playing myself up front. Everyone does this identity thing. I was not interested in that at all. I was creating other characters as shells. Then I could be personal inside of that shell. But this piece isn't about me. But I am performing myself.

That's what a lot of writers wind up saying. They write a novel, someone says, 'that's you!'. Then they say well, it's not about me. So this is a big change.

It's a big shift. I have always thought that things I do aren't *about* anything. I always have to explain in blurbs, you know, for people who come to see it. But my pieces aren't really about anything. And this one isn't about anything. It's kind of looking through things and saying, let's see what's in there.

What's the title?

Kawatokawa. It means River/Skin in Japanese. River and skin are the same sounding word.

The last time I saw you in January, you were working on something else.

Modernity Stripped Bare at University of Maryland. I was working as a collaborator with four Japanese photographers and with an electronic musician, Yoko K.

That was interesting you mention that, because it was another important point. In one of those rehearsals, I was dancing, and there was this feeling of joy. She stopped and told me, you know, you're having so much fun, I'm just going to keep writing music like this.

It's interesting. When you think about it. I was forgetting this kind of joy.

What do you look for when you pick music for your pieces?

I'm looking for music that doesn't explain or define. I'm looking for music that does something more than conserve your feelings. It creates tensions between body and the mind, and with the audience. I try to use it to break catharsis.

You don't want it to move to the background.

Yes.

One other question. A lot of people come to modern dance pieces, and they leave not knowing what to say. What do you usually look for? You told me that something of yours was unsuccessful. What does a successful piece mean?

You know, I'm thinking about this a lot. For me, if the person is there, in this era, it's hard. My teacher once told me, there are many layers of air currents between you and me. There are invisible currents. I think when artists create pieces, you think that's what you want to create – these invisible currents. But is that really true? Is that really what I want to do? What's the personal connection? So with this piece, I selected everything based on my personal connection. Everything on the stage has a personal connection. I think this is kind of rare.

But it sounds like developing as an artist. You wind up with personal and intimate connections with the things you work with.

And another thing. I think that in a successful piece, a person has to be there differently. He has to be there so that he can be anywhere.

The premiere of Kawatokawa will be performed Thurs – Sun, May 24 – 27, 2012 at Theatre Project, 45 W. Preston Street, Baltimore, MD. [Details and](#)

DCTheatre Scene <https://dctheatrescene.com/2012/05/24/naoko-maeshiba-dancing-on-the-edge-of-theatre/>